



DOES YOUR CUSTOMER SERVICE SUCK?

As a customer, I know what it's like to be on the customer's side of the counter. You want to turn over your hard earned money for goods or services. You are then confronted with attitude, rudeness and utter disregard for just how hard you have worked for your dollar. Either the service is slow and the quality of the goods are poor, or worse the company you are patronizing rigidly enforces poor policies for handling customer issues.

As a business owner I realize the cost of poor service. Poor service decreases impulse purchases, leads to a reduction in repeat business, causes lack of referrals and negatively impacts customer relationships. When you are trying to build a business in a competitive market each of these are critical to your success. In an environment where customers have a dozen or more purchase options it is imperative that great care be taken to build your business.

How are you doing at building your business with customer service? Consider how you would handle the following customer interactions:

(1) A customer purchased a \$10 item and now wants to return it. Your policy is no refunds. This is a customer who has shopped your establishment many times. Do you return the item or enforce the policy? If you must, gently remind the customer of your policy, but you should absolutely refund or exchange the product to the customer's satisfaction.

(2) When customers enter your business are they greeted warmly or ignored? At the very least do you make eye contact and smile? A warm and hearty "Hello" will fit almost any environment. Do this with each customer. A smile would be the icing on the cake.

(3) Do your employees say "Thank You" and smile after each customer purchase? Or do they simply hand the customer their bagged item and say "next." Thank You ... Its just two little words, and only eight characters long. Just say it. It goes a long way to build goodwill and customer relationships. It gives the perception that you are nice and friendly. Don't forget to smile.

(4) During customer interactions are you on the phone or talking with other employees? Or are you focused 100% on the customer? It is downright rude to be doing ANYTHING, other than focusing on your customer, during a transaction.

(5) A Customer comes into your establishment and is there incessantly reading product labels. Do you leave the customer there to fend for themselves or do you offer the customer your expert opinion on the products you offer. More often than not the customer will be left alone. Go help them. If they want to be left alone let them tell you so.

What do you think customers do when they encounter great customer service? They become advocates for you and help to build your business by referring others. They become loyal to you, completing like purchases exclusively at your establishment. Fantastic service is what makes customers want to shop with you despite a higher price or the inconvenience of distance. Even if you are providing a lesser quality product or service, fantastic customer service can help you compensate for it. It gives you an incredible, low cost competitive advantage.

To improve your customer's experience, start by changing yourself. Change your attitude when handling customer issues. Be friendly and liberal versus stern when implementing policy. This may require you to convince yourself that you can afford great service. Do the math and discover that it will cost you less to take care of that customer now and build a life long patron. Set the example by regularly chatting with customers and enthusiastically pitching in to solve hard problems.

Next challenge your employees by asking them to step up their game. Catch them providing great service and provide some simple verbal recognition. Constantly bring up and talk about how important it is to set yourself apart with great service. Create a bulletin board in your employee only area, and post positive comments from customers - if a customer verbally tells you something great, type it up and post it on the board. For employees that just don't get it try to understand why and help them with some training, coaching and counseling.

Starting with your next customer begin building that essential customer service foundation. Offer a friendly smile, a warm greeting, and a caring attitude. Engage in aimless small talk, genuinely go the extra mile and try to truly understand the other person.