



# Improving Customer Service

*These days it is all about the total customer experience.*

**T**here's just no excuse for bad customer service. I spend about one hour a day correcting orders, chasing down return refunds, calling my insurance company for the millionth time, challenging an incorrect charge, returning merchandise that is wrong or damaged, etc. I resend information and wait interminably on the phone, listening to insipid music, only to have to tell the "customer care person" all the same information I told the last person. Bad customer service prompts me to find another provider. Bad customer service wastes my time, and ironically, it wastes the vendor's/supplier's time too. Yet it happens all the time.

What these companies fail to realize is, we have all become customer service experts — we know what defines a good experience and we certainly know when it is absent. As Americans (we are the consuming champions of the world) we buy goods and services every day. We hire lawyers, order dinner to go, install new software, take out loans, lease trucks, etc. Each one of those transactions has a concurrent customer experience. As we consume all these goods and services we keep a pretty active mental scorecard of the service component of the purchase.

Some companies have brilliant reputations for customer service. They make it their business to exceed their customers' expectations. Other companies — such as every phone company on the planet, the airlines and banks — are the companies we love to hate. Any company that makes me wait, that obliges me to repeat the same information over and over, that doesn't seem to have a clue who I am, why I am calling and what to do about it, deserves and gets my unmitigated scorn.

## What is customer service?

Once upon a time, answering the phone in a cheerful voice, having product in stock and delivering the goods or services in a timely fashion was enough customer service to make most everybody happy. No more. Plain old Customer Service version 1.1 just isn't good enough anymore. These days it is all about the total customer experience. To be sure, you still want a cheery, helpful person answering the phone,

you want to have material in stock and short delivery times, but you need to do so much more. Your customers, just like you, have had brilliant customer experiences with some companies, and now they have come to expect it, from all the companies with which they do business — consumer or industrial.

I am not so sure I agree with Tom Friedman that the world is flat — but I do know that the world is getting disturbingly small. The rules for the industrial market are converging with those of the consumer market at an ever-accelerating speed. The expectations we once held only for Mercedes Benz, The Ritz Carlton and FedEx we now hold for all businesses — including PVF supply houses.

## So what do your customers want?

Excellent customer relationships have interactions that are painless, transparent and personal.

- Make your company "easy" to deal with.
- Don't waste the customer's time; better yet, save him some time.
- Never, ever make the customer repeat information.
- Don't make the customer wait.
- Ensure the interaction is tailored to the customer.
- Anticipate the customer's needs.

## MasterCard is beginning to "get it"

MasterCard is in the process of implementing a detailed phone answering protocol for their elite cardholders. This protocol demonstrates how seriously they are (finally) taking customer service. They have set times for each step of a customer call. The phone must be answered by the third ring. First level help desk must resolve the question in less than two minutes. If resolution is not possible, the call is sent to the next level within two minutes; the first agent remains on line until the call is properly transferred; transfer should take less than 30 seconds, etc.

All this can be measured at the end of the month: 98% of all calls are answered within three rings, 78% of all calls were resolved by first level service person, etc. MasterCard has heard the customer loud and clear. We hate to sit on hold forever, have our call passed from

here to there, and repeat our name, address and card number to each party.

## How do you do it?

You probably have a pretty good idea of what the customer needs, wants, expects. Now the question is, how do you give your customers the excellent customer service experience? In order to give brilliant customer service you need information. Those data have to be readily available. Yes, we are talking about some kind of sophisticated database into which you have put all your customer info. Without access to the customer's buying patterns, their last order, their delivery needs, you will have a very hard time answering their questions and delivering any kind of service in a short period of time. With the data in hand you can do the following:

■ **Make your company "easy" to deal with.** Answer the phone quickly, route the call to the right inside salesperson who has the company's profile on the screen. The order process will go much easier. The billing and shipping address are known (and can be verified). Past orders show buying trends.

■ **Don't waste the customer's time**—better yet, save him some time. A quick scan of the latest transactions may show some buying patterns that can be simplified. Bundling orders, setting up a delivery schedule or slightly increasing order size may cut the total number of invoices, drop-offs and stock-outs. Consider online ordering. Many of your customers order the same stuff week after week — why call anyone at all? Make reordering super easy online.

■ **Never, ever make the customer repeat information.** You have the customer in your database. Unless they move, get bought out or something else drastic happens, you don't need to ask for this information. You also have a pretty good idea what the customer wants. They shouldn't have to fax over complicated request sheets for stuff they have bought before.

■ **Don't make the customer wait.** This should be so obvious from your own buying experiences. Don't make the caller

wait for you either on the phone or by the phone to deliver a quote. If you don't have the answer, tell them you will find out and get back to them by a given time. Then make sure you call them back.

■ **Ensure the interaction is tailored to the customer.** In the database you should have all the customer's information: name, title, company. In the notes area whoever last spoke with the client should have written a few brief comments about the conversation, so that you know he has recently been promoted or has taken over all pipe purchasing or the company has acquired another.

■ **Anticipate the customer's needs.** You may have more information about the customer's buying habits than he does! That said, it should be easy for you to know which customers would be interested in trailers for off-site inventory, or which would like EDI or any of the other services you offer.

Lastly, like it or not, your Web site is a big part of the customer experience. And all the above rules must be applied to your site. The Web site should be easy to navigate and have all the information your customer needs at the ready. Every page should have at minimum your 1-800 number and a contact e-mail address. Adding a FAQs page isn't a bad idea. Start considering an online shopping catalog. It is already part of the required customer experience for most companies. Don't kid yourself: It is coming to PVF-land, faster than you think.<<

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