

CUSTOMER-FOCUS: Taking Ownership!

By David H. McNair

Life's Twist and Turns

No matter what industry you work in, or what company you work for, there will be problems. Sure...some are caused by the company. Some by the customer, some by acts of God, and some by you. It's one of those darn facts of life. And as trite as the phrase may be, I've always loved the message...*it's not the cards you're dealt, it's how you play them that counts.* Like so many trite phrases, we know them, but we don't live them. And why not?

I heard a someone speak recently to a group of employees, and he talked about his years as a marriage counselor. One of the first things he would ask his couples is, "So how does your marriage work? How do you divide responsibilities and decision making. Give it to me in percentages." He'd ask them to write it down and not confer. "Just be honest," he'd implore. Invariably people would come back with some split like 25/75, 60/40, 50/50 and that gave him a good indication of his work ahead.

In all of his years, he never once had an individual give him what he professed to be the right answer. The right answer (or the goal to strive for anyway) is 100/100. You see if each individual in a marriage would treat all situations as if they were 100% responsible, then most of your time would be spent thanking the other for taking care of things that you really felt *you* should have done. What a concept! Just imagine...*those aren't my dishes in the sink, but I'll clean them up anyway. The lawn is getting a little shaggy, I better mow it. The dog needs a bath, come on Fido!*

The trick here is, are both partners giving 100%? To truly embrace 100%, you adopt it with no questions asked, no scorecard kept, no trial period established. You see it's a way of life. It's deciding that you can control the situation before you, and you are the one to make it right. Is this simplistic? Yes. You can come up with thousands of "*yeh, but's.*" Can you do everything? No. Can you be taken advantage of? Yes. More importantly... does this philosophy provide for better outcomes and a happier existence than blaming others? YES, YES, YES!

Your turn

Now take this 100% ownership philosophy into your work experience and, most specifically, the customer care context. Pretend you are a bank teller. A customer just walked in and said their ATM card was eaten in the machine. You could:

- a) tell them that they need to fill out a new application and mail it into the customer care center three states away.
- b) tell them to go to the other side of the bank and wait for the next available personal banker.
- c) tell them they probably will save some money by not using their ATM anyway.

- d) OR (after showing appropriate empathy for their pain-in-the-neck loss) pick up the phone or complete the application on their behalf. You further let them know not only when to expect a new ATM card, but what options they have in the interim.

Why is it that “d” is selected so rarely in real life?

Not Whose Job?

To the benefit of the employee – those of us trying to do right by the customer – two real things do stand in our way. First, most companies aren’t structured for 100% ownership. By this I mean if you spent time making sure that each and every customer was helped to the best of your ability, would you be getting done the specific items covered in your job description? You might not handle the expected volume of contacts or calls.

Furthermore, there is someone being paid by the company to do just this task, so why should I? After all, it’s not my job! IT’S NOT MY JOB! If we all took a vote on the most irritating phrases in the human language – *it’s not my job* has to rank in the top five. It’s right in there with, *that’s not what you ordered*, and *I told you so*.

Secondly, you may not have had the proper training to perform certain tasks. These boundaries have merit, but there is still ground that can be paved. For example, don’t bother with the fact that you can’t help the customer. Instead, explain who can help them and provide the proper introduction. From a customer’s perspective, think of the difference in being *redirected or passed off* versus being personally introduced with a recap of your needs to the person that can provide the help you need. By doing this, you are taking ownership.

A few ways you can take ownership...

1. How are you handling the caller who’s been transferred twice already?
2. Do you actively look for people that appear lost or in need of assistance?
3. Are you detecting an uncertainty in a customer’s voice that indicates they don’t fully understand?
4. When you are busy, do you acknowledge the presence of a customer who is waiting and let them know when someone will be available?
5. Do you follow-up with a customer to make sure that their needs were met, even if by another team member?

Taking ownership is really about leaving the customer in a better condition than when the contact was first established. If the customer was frustrated, did you help calm him down and provide a solution? If they were simply transacting basic business, did you do something extra to build a relationship with them?

