

Customer Service – I just don't get it by David McNair

I admit it. I often find myself in the drive thru of the nearest fast-food burger joint. Not proud of this mind you, but it beats going without lunch on a hectic day (or maybe not). So why should I expect this day to be any different? After a 10 minute wait, the drink is not diet, the fries were left out and the burger has onions AGAIN!

Fact is – we all talk a good game of customer service. Fact is – few of us do a really fine job of providing it. The latest study from the American Consumer Satisfaction Index (compiled by the National Quality Research Center at the Univ. of Michigan) confirms our poor national statistics for yet another quarter. So what is so tough about this service thing? A few reasons for us all to consider...

We think about *customer service* all backwards. Just the phrase *customer service* implies that it is something we give...something that we do to, or for, the customer. And we provide it with a “one size fits all” mentality. In any Advertising 101 course you are taught to speak in terms of the *customer benefit*. Some of you may remember the old sneakers' ad – the shoes that make you run faster and jump higher. The ad didn't say that they have more cushion and yet they're lighter. They talked in terms of the benefits. Then why don't we refer to our goal as *customer delight*? Isn't that what we want the customer to experience? Does that not suggest a benefit to them? Speaking personally, I'd expect a lot more if I called a *Customer Delight Center* as opposed to a *Customer Service Center*. Service has become an overused and under qualified word. Just imagine walking up to the *Customer Delight* counter at your local retailer. Would you not expect to walk away with a smile? It certainly implies that you should expect a little extra – and the employees might feel compelled to give that little extra as well.

All this hoopla over *customer loyalty*. Please don't misunderstand me. *Customer Loyalty* is a good thing to try and achieve, but isn't it self-serving in its motivation. After all, businesses want *customer loyalty* because that drives sales up and costs down. Nothing wrong there, but again, if we approached our businesses for the benefit to the customer – loyalty becomes the natural fallout. In a marriage, do you plan your actions to build *spousal loyalty* or do you simply try to treat him or her in a manner that's appreciated – and loyalty is the hopeful outcome. We truly make this pursuit of customer loyalty more difficult than it has to be.

One-dimensional customer service. And all the time we business-speak about service, our businesses have policies and procedures that are contradictory to *customer delight*. For example, “I'd like the entrée dish as an appetizer tonight,” she says to the waiter. “Sorry, can't do that ma'am. No way to charge for it,” he programmatically replies. In so many ways, this same absurdness of policy and “can't do's” exists in most all of our businesses. Look for them. If you can't find them, ask a few of your customers and they will readily point them out. In fact, just ask your sales personnel or front-line associates who deal with your customers. I bet they can tell you too.

A wronged customer can be recovered. We know this simple fact, yet we don't supply our workforce with the tools to do it. Think about it. You've just waited in line at the fast-food hut for 10 to 15 minutes. In other words, they've just blown their primary mission which is to provide food fast. How often were you offered a free drink or fries? Every now and then it happens, but not nearly enough. Let's consider another setting. You're copier machine has broken down for the umpteenth time this month. Even the repair technician is embarrassed to show his face. Did the copier company or leasing agent provide you with a certificate for free copies at Kinkos or American Speedy? Did they offer you a loaner unit until yours has demonstrated its competency? The ideas for creative recovery are endless, yet most do nothing at all. The very least they could do was drop a bottle of Excedrin on your desk so that you could deal with the pain more humanely.

How well do we measure our customer service/delight? I am continually astounded by the lack of customer service measures in the general business world. Just ask top management at most companies what their key performance indicators are, and they are usually financial yardsticks such as sales, revenue per employee, margins, etc. Again, these are good things – but where's the balance? A good rule to follow is that for every two to three key indicators in running a business, a measure of *customer delight* should be part of the mix. Without this, a signal is sent to the entire organization that screams self-service not customer service.

You see, it's all about the *Total Customer Experience*. As Chris Andrews, Executive Director of the South Carolina Aquarium so understandably states it, "You're my customer from the time you enter our 'zone of visitation.' It's our billboards, our parking, your approach to the facility, the lines, the wait, the benches, the signage, etc. Then it's our people, our exhibits and even the view. Until you leave our 'zone of visitation,' we are making an impact on your aquarium experience!" Now there is a guy who gets it.