

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

Customer Service Environments: We're Not in Kansas Anymore

We've all heard the expression, "Customer service just isn't what it used to be!" The growing proof is evident to anyone who's been a customer lately, and that's most of us. Remember when flying first class really meant "first class"? Can you recall the last time a grocery clerk gathered your bags and happily loaded them into your car? How about the gas station attendants who cleaned your windshield while they filled your gas tank *and then asked if they could check the oil*? Do you remember the last time a retail associate seemed truly committed to "enhancing your shopping experience"? Dorothy was right. Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore! Exceptional service used to be the bedrock of customer relationships. Why did it change?

There are many reasons why customer service environments have changed. Technology has replaced the human voice. Self service is cheaper than an attendant. The global economy has changed where corporations choose to invest their money. And our culture has moved toward the impersonal end of the spectrum. Many Main Street businesses that knew their customers by name either merged with or were bulldozed by corporate giants.

Here's the good news: Companies that know how to deliver excellent customer service stand out in the crowd like the guy on stilts at a Fourth of July parade. Good customer service is rare; excellent customer service, rarer still.

- Customers **take note** of companies that treat them as if they appreciate their business.
- Customers **are interested in learning more** about companies that put the customer's needs first.
- Customers **want to do business with** companies that promote and ensure a customer focused environment because it's embedded in their business models.

Today's business owners manage multiple service environments that exist on several fronts, both actual and virtual. The proactive management of these environments is an important step toward establishing your company as a customer-centric organization. To be truly competitive in today's marketplace, your company should project a welcoming message that assures customers their business is sought after and appreciated.

So where do you begin? Start by focusing on the first details a customer will notice. Sixty seconds or less: that's how long it takes for most of us to form an impression – positive or negative – of the environment around us. Real space, cyber space, phone space, any space. Review the scenarios below and compare them to how your company is promoting a positive service environment to your current and future customers.

A customer walks in to your place of business unexpectedly:

- What will his impression be of your place of business? Is the environment professional? Does it appear to take itself seriously?
- What will the customer notice during those first moments while she is "in your house"? Does the environment reflect the mission of the organization?
- What lasting visual impressions will the customer retain once the visit is over?

A customer calls your company:

- What will her impression be of the individual who answers her call? Is the voice on the phone welcoming? Engaged? Informed? Focused on providing information?
- Will the customer be made to feel as if his call is important to the organization?
- Will proactive steps be taken to track down the individual or the information that the customer seeks? Is the customer given an estimated time of a return response?

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A customer visits your company web site:

- What will the customer's impression be of the web site and the information presented? Does the site reflect the culture and mission of your company? Is the impression generic or does it reflect a "real company" feel?
- How does your web site compare to your competitors' efforts? What does your web site have that makes visitors want to return?
- Is your company information up-to-date? Are there service providers listed that no longer work for your company? Is any contact information missing from your site?
- Is the site easy to navigate? Do visitors want to spend time there and read about your organization and the services it provides?

A group of your customers receive direct mail advertising a service from your company:

- What will their impression be of the ad presentation? Do the visuals and layout of the ad engage the recipient? *Will the customer enjoy looking at it? Will they want to read the copy?*
- Were the customers' names spelled correctly? Were the addresses up-to-date?
- Is the service relevant to the customer's needs? Will the ad copy provide the customer with information that is in line with their needs?
- How about timing? Was the delivery managed in such a way that the customer has time to respond to an offer or an advertised event?

A customer-centric organization designs itself around the needs of the customer, rather than around the product that it provides and sells. What type of customer service environments are you presenting to your customers?

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Melissa McDaniel at 301-662-2400 or via email: melissa@mksh.com.

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