
Handling Customers With Care

Customers are most often lost when they "*perceive*" vendor indifference. Here's a way to deal with their "*perceptions*."

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Concern Appreciation Reassurance Empathy



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As we move towards the 1990's there are ever increasing challenges facing service groups. These include new and more advanced computer applications, exploding competition from lower priced third party maintenance companies, and a growing requirement for service as a more significant profit center. All these will create even further demands on already stretched service departments.

The task is to maximize customer satisfaction without sacrificing profits. Paramount, of course, is not to lose any customers as a result of a major dissatisfaction.

Research by the Rockefeller Corporation probed the question of why customers change suppliers or vendors. They report that 68% change because they perceived an attitude of indifference on the part of the supplier or vendor. It is enlightening to observe that more customers are lost because they feel they are being treated with indifference than are lost due to price or technical performance.

At a recent AFSM meeting in Boston, William Thurston, Chairman of Gen Rad, said, "It is very critical to fix the customer, as well as to fix the equipment."

Two significant elements have been identified, that singly, or together, are the main sources that erode customer satisfaction. They are:

- the perception of an attitude of indifference
- a lack of trust or believability in the supplier

A perception of indifference does not mean the company representatives were, in fact, indifferent. It only means that they didn't *know how* to express that they cared. Any customer relations training program should address this common problem.

Since the opposite of indifference is to care, the word CARE can be used as an acronym:

C = concern
A = appreciation
R = reassurance
E = empathy

Concern: If you are concerned you ask questions such as "When did the system go down?", or "What have you tried so far?", or "Has this happened before?". The key is to ask a few questions even if you believe you don't need to know the answers. By asking, you are expressing your concern and showing that you care. Frequently you may learn something important and be glad you asked.

Appreciation: If you appreciate anything your customer has done, tell him. This is similar to the ONE MINUTE MANAGER concept. Here what you must do is to "catch your customer doing something right and tell them." Examples might be "Your Mr. Johnson was very helpful in pinpointing the source of the problem" or "Your operators have been most cooperative and are one of the most friendly groups I've worked with."

Reassurance: Keep your customer informed. Nothing is more reassuring than knowing what will happen next. Example might be "I'll be running a test routine on the system and should know within 30 minutes whether it's in the hardware or software" or "The problem is in the disk drive. We should have it up and running by noon."

Empathy: This means understanding how others feel and letting it be okay for them to feel that way. When a customer is very upset it is critical to let them "vent" their feelings. It may be valuable to say things like "I can imagine how upset you must be," or "I'm really sorry you've had so many problems today ... how can I best help you solve the problem?".

The second source of major customer dissatisfaction results from the customer's distrust of the company's representatives.

The elements that create trust are believability of presentation and keeping commitments. Even in the absence of concrete past evidence, there are people we trust upon first meeting. They just seem credible to us. If, in addition, they keep their word, a trusting relationship is created. On the other hand, there are people whom we instantly distrust and even if they keep their word, we are always on our guard.

Believability results not only from the words we say, but from our style of presentation as well. It can be demonstrated that a clear, straightforward, to the point, style is more credible than a lot of added verbiage, voice inflections, excuses, etc. When delivering bad news, remember that "what you add to your communication detracts from its believability." In other words, keep it simple and to the point. Communication credibility, particularly when delivering bad news, is like taking off an adhesive bandage. Don't do it slowly, one hair at a time. Just take it off. It is about not "beating around the bush." When you need to communicate something important - just say it straight.

Building trust should be included in customer relations training programs.

Most important of all traits of people we trust, is the knowledge that they will keep their word. Many people in service organizations break their word to customers without ever realizing they gave their word in the first place. The trust bond gets broken over a common problem of loose communications. The difference between the statement "I'll try and be there Tuesday morning" and "I will be there Tuesday morning" is the difference between trying (which is not a promise) and a commitment (which is a promise). Commitments are binary events that have two states, "I will," or "I won't." "Trying" is not a commitment. It is really saying, "I may do it, or I may not."

The service person may not be sure of his schedule and feel it best to hedge a little bit by saying "I'll try and be there Tuesday morning." Unfortunately, in life, we frequently get charged with a commitment whether we actually made one or not. If you don't show up Tuesday morning and you don't call, the chances are that the customer will be upset. He may even say "You said you would be here." Your excuse of "I only said I'd try" would only make him more angry. A better approach would be to say "I will be there Tuesday morning. If I get delayed, I will call you by 8:00 A.M."

The erosion of trust frequently occurs with a series of broken half promises of "I'll try." There is a profound impact on customer satisfaction that occurs when service representatives learn to express that they CARE; become straight and clear (credible) in their communications; and always keep their word.

These essential traits are needed today and will be essential for service success in the years to come.