



A Take It or Leave It Attitude Begins at the Top Management at the Root of Poor Customer Service

By Abe Walking Bear Sanchez

Editor's comment: The provision of excellent customer service is a way in which companies can achieve significant differentiation. However, too often, companies are inwardly focused and thus unable to deliver on what they promise. How long before this is changed?

I'm a coward, I admit it. I've done better of late but in the past I've skipped dental appointments after getting as far as the parking lot. Dealing with large companies can also be a pain.

"We stress the importance of good customer service," said a senior VP for a large corporation. Our conversation was the culmination of several problems with an order I'd placed with his company. I had placed my order in advance and was told that there would be no problem with it being filled by my requested date. In turn, relying on the commitment, I made plans.

In the past dealing with this company had been a hassle, but they were the sole source for what I needed. Delivery time was to be a week prior to my need and was met, but I only received part of my order and that was wrong.

I was never notified of the change to my order, even though the company knew it couldn't deliver as promised. As to the missing item, I was told in no uncertain terms that it had been shipped and if there was a problem it must be my fault. Of course, as it turned out the missing item had not been shipped.

The Mega Big Mind Set

In trying to get things straightened out I kept running into what I call the Mega Big Mind Set. First of all no one I talked with ever said "I'm sorry Sir that there's been a problem", it wasn't until weeks later, when I contacted a senior VP, that I heard an unsolicited apology.

Trying to find the right person to talk to at Mega Big can be a struggle. You explain what happened and they refer you on to someone who makes you go through the explanation again and then refers you on. It's like trying to get a firm hold on Jell-O.



Finally you get hold of someone who can fix the problem but not before they tell you all about how Mega Big does things. You didn't care when the other three Mega Biggers told you how they do things and now you care even less, but you listen in hope it'll be the last time.

We all make errors, it's the human thing to do, and companies, even Mega Bigs, are just a collection of people. When we make an error, the best thing we can do is to apologize and then make things right. Mega Big finally got my order right and even agreed to issue a credit to compensate for the problem, whether or not they screw up the credit remains to be seen.

Why and the Future?

Being a business consultant/trainer I was curious about Mega Big's customer service training or lack of it. I called back the service representative who had fixed the problem and asked why: (1) No one had apologized? (2) I had been passed around? (3) Everyone I talked to felt it necessary to tell me about

Mega Bib's way of doing things? and finally I asked what had been done to identify the source and avoid the problem in the future? As you may have guessed, I was referred to someone else, someone who happened to be out on vacation. I left a message and then a week later a second message; I'm still waiting.

Avoiding Holes

Life and business are similar, it's kind of like walking down a road and stepping into a hole (bad habits, bad marriages, bad business decisions, change we're not prepared for) if we're lucky it's not a huge hole and we're able to climb out. Telling your children to look out for holes is for the most part a waste of breath.

In business we should have a little more control. When a glitch or a problem is identified we should be able to fix the process so as to avoid stepping into the same hole again and again. We need to fill holes or put a rope around them.

It's OK to screw up, it's not OK not to learn from it. We pay the tuition, why not get the education?

TQM from the Back of the Parade

I tell clients that after talking with a dozen of their customers with problems, I can get a pretty good handle on where there exists, throughout their organization, Areas of Opportunity for Improvement. If you want to know where you can improve on internal efficiency listen to customers with problems, boy, will they tell you.

Golden Rules

- Apologize ... Whenever a customer says he's having problem say "I'm sorry sir that you're having a problem; let me get some information so we can fix things". Customers with problems, even of their own making, want someone to help them, to be on their side.

- Become a Customer Advocate...Customers' problems are your opportunity to be a hero. Make the problem yours. Don't look for information, which justifies sluffing the customer off to someone else.

- Follow Through ... Stay with the problem until it's fixed, then fill that hole or put a rope around it so you don't continue to step in it.

- Make The Customer Whole...Fixing the problem is not enough; you have to show you're sorry. Be generous.

In Closing

Stressing the importance of good customer service is a good beginning, but it's only a beginning. Once you've

established the expectation (the vision thing) you need to provide guidelines based on the major components involved; for example: Initial Contact, Internal Process, Customer Up-date, Resolution and Process Improvement. The guideline (policy) for Initial Contact might read, "When a customer calls with a problem say 'I'm sorry' and then get all the facts."

Once you have the guidelines in place you need the step by step how-tos leading to fulfillment of the expectation. Lastly and most important MONITOR.

Put in place a mechanism whereby you know problems are being fixed and that the process is changed to avoid future problems.

Mega Bigs, sole source providers and government agencies are notorious providers of poor customer service. They fixate on their needs and problems and think of customers as being incidental, and in the past they could get away with it. Fortunately things are changing and even Mega Bigs will change or fall by the wayside.

Biography

Abe WalkingBear Sanchez is an International Speaker / Trainer on the subject of cash flow / sales enhancement and business knowledge organization and use. Founder and President of www.armg-usa.com, Abe also sits on the board of www.BestBizways.com Inc.

A hard hitting and fast paced speaker, Abe brings life and energy to critical business functions whose true potential has yet to be realized by most companies. TEC (The Executive Committee), "Inc." Magazine Annual Business Conference, CU (Denver), CSU (Ft. Collins), IBM, NASFT, PEI, BCFM, RAB, STAFDA, WIMA, ISD, Pet Industry Distributors Assn., Rain Bird, Winroc, Johnstone Supply, Able Distributing, Evergreen Marketing Group, Southern Wholesalers Assn., Touchstone/2000 Software are but a few of the groups, schools, companies and associations for whom Abe has conducted programs.

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