

How 'A' Players Meet Customer Expectations - By Dr. Rick Johnson

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It's not enough to achieve some or even most of your customers' expectations-your objective is to meet them all. Yet, this can be quite a challenge during peak times when the counter is backed up, the phone keeps ringing and you are short personnel in will-call.

Defining an 'A' player is not difficult, if we focus on meeting customer expectations and striving for service excellence. These objectives require specific skill sets. Remember, one of the key factors of success is building relationship equity. Good relationships set the stage for the development of 'A' player habits. Anything that could harm the relationship, misrepresent a product or aggressively push items a customer doesn't want might damage the relationship and ultimately lose the customer.

It's much easier to help a customer buy something than it is to sell him something. I can almost read your thoughts, 'What exactly does that mean?' Well, it means helping a customer buy is all about helping him figure out what he really needs and what will give him the best value. You gain his trust by offering him choices and letting him decide. Of course, you can make recommendations. In fact, determining his or her needs, problems and issues is part of the big picture service formula and becoming a total solution provider. That is what being an 'A' Player is all about.

The 'A' Player Profile

The customer always comes first in his or her mind.

He or she understands and can explain the difference between price and cost.

He or she understands value propositions and can sell based on value overcoming price objections.

Listens carefully and asks questions to really understand customer needs.

Confidently embraces suggestive selling by offering additional products to complement or enhance an order.

Service excellence is a top priority.

Knows the top 20 customers

Willingly pitches in to help other personnel maintain overall service excellence.

Takes calculated risk in the interest of relationship equity. Isn't afraid to think outside the box when servicing customers (e.g.-buying product from the competition).

Maintains a very low error rate.

Proactively seeks sales growth and margin improvements through new customer development and penetration, increasing existing customer share of spend.

How the 'A' Player Focuses on Service Excellence

The actual tasks performed by customer service personnel vary widely from one company to the next. Job responsibilities depend upon industry experience, product knowledge and company size. The smaller the firm, the greater the tendency for customer service personnel to 'wear numerous hats.' The larger the company, the greater the potential for specialization where counter sales handle customer walk-in traffic and follow-up with others handling inbound calls, purchasing, mailings, quotes or providing technical support, for example. No matter the level of specialization or lack of it, every inbound call and customer contact is an opportunity to enhance your sales relationship and prove you deserve a customer's business.

Actual Tips from 'A' Player Customer Service People

#1: Pay Attention to the Relationship Details

The problem with customers is: they're just like us! They like dealing with people who are pleasant and smiling. Customer service personnel who appear to enjoy their jobs and who make customers want to deal with them achieve greater success. The perfectly processed and delivered order experience can be marred by a less than enthusiastic attitude. Even though customer service personnel handle many calls and walk-ins each day, every contact should demonstrate an energetic and positive 'can do' attitude. Personnel attitudes can be discerned from customer remarks. For example, one customer says, "They do a good job handling orders, but they make me feel like I've just interrupted something important or that I'm asking for the impossible whenever I walk in."

Don't underestimate the power of your tone of voice or facial expression. Like it or not, we judge others and customers judge us this way. Do you sound harried, bored, bothered or too busy to care? Or does your voice, your face and your body language project an attitude that encourages customers to build a relationship with you?

#2 Quality Products and Quality Service Begin with Quality Thinking

Service excellence is built around a series of 'moments of truth' that your customers experience during their interaction with you. Every person in the organization, even those you may not think of as customer service personnel, has the ability to make a positive impact on service excellence. From the way the telephone is answered, use of voice mail, error-free orders, accurate billings, realistic promises made and kept, to the integrity of the information you provide?these are all moments of truth affecting service excellence. You, however, are on the front line and the first level of 'offense.' You are the customer's primary contact, and customers expect you to help them do business with your company and make it a pleasant experience. They also want you to solve problems and coordinate with other people and departments.

"What's the reason for the price difference between this order and my last one?"

"Who should I talk with about a billing problem?"

"How should I handle this return?"

"Do you have a catalog you can mail me?"

"Can you send me a sample of that?"

"Can I get freight paid on that order?"

These are all questions you're expected to answer. Quality thinking means focusing on the customer's needs and making sure those needs are met.

#3 Take Care of Your Customers and They Will Take Care of You

You've probably heard of the KISS principle: keep it simple stupid. As funny as it may sound, it's really just good business practice. When customers find it easy to do business with you, they keep coming back for more because people do business with people they like. Consider why you select the suppliers with whom you do business. Why do you go to one bank versus another? Why do you have your car serviced by one dealer versus another who may be closer to you? Why do you prefer a certain restaurant? Why do you select a particular dentist or doctor or favorite retailer? Chances are your selection criteria parallel that of your customers. You probably like the people or know you can depend on their thorough service. Or, perhaps you enjoy the fact they recognize you and remember your name and make you feel important, or you consider them to be professionals who know their business, understand your needs and take care of them. There's no secret to what keeps customers coming back for more, thereby contributing to the growth and profitability of your company. If you don't provide service excellence, if you don't build relationship equity, if you really don't sincerely care about your customers' needs, rest assured someone else will. In essence, Not caring means you will lose that customer.

#4: Do It Right the First Time

What's the cost of an order entry error? What does it cost the company for a return goods authorization because the customer got the wrong product? What does an order pricing error cost? What is the real opportunity cost of a lost customer due to poor quality or lack of service excellence? Each time an order is handled more than once, handling costs increase through what is called cost-redundancy, i.e., doing the same task over again. Mistakes mean corrections are necessary, work is duplicated, a credit may need to be issued, another delivery must be made, the wrong product must be returned, and the customer is generally annoyed if not angry. Errors can lead to the ultimate loss for a company: a lost customer.

Remember this guiding principle: It's not a travesty to lose an order. But, it's never OK to lose a customer.

The real loss to the company is not just the value of the order in question. It's the life-long value the customer represents to the company, presuming repeat business with the customer is maintained. Oftentimes, situations or errors that cause accounts to become inactive go unnoticed for some time by the company. No one realizes the customer is unhappy. In fact, sometimes no one notices that the customer is gone and no one works to get the customer back. As a matter of fact, most unhappy customers don't complain, with only about five percent of dissatisfied customers actually aggressively voicing their dissatisfaction with the company. The majority of the customers may identify the problem, but say nothing about their total dissatisfaction with the company. Eventually, this frustration builds to the point that the customer just goes elsewhere. Not only do they leave, but on average, the dissatisfied customer will tell up to 20 others about his or her negative experiences with your company. Don't fail to recognize that negative word-of-mouth is more influential than advertising.

#5 Always Give Customers More Than They Expect to Get (The "WOW" Factor)

How do you define your competitive advantage? What is it? What's the difference between your company and your competition? 'A' Player customer service personnel can answer that question distinctly without a second thought. However, many counter personnel reply: "We're about the same. We all have about the same products. Sometimes we have something in stock that the competition doesn't, so that's one difference."

Your primary competitive advantage lies in the hands of your customer service employees. You must recognize that and be proactive in leveraging it. If what you are selling is really good but your employees don't focus on service excellence eventually you will lose because the competition that recognizes the role the employees play in customer loyalty and retention will take your business.

Nowadays, customer service personnel must be problem solvers able to generate solutions for customers in their time of need. Therefore, they must possess a great deal of knowledge about your customers' business. They must actually define what those needs are because the customer may not know, nor take the time to explain if they do know. Customers expect you to have the knowledge and intelligence to comprehend and analyze their problems and provide solutions. Customers will listen and buy from the customer service people that understand their "pain" and take it away.'

Check out Rick's new CD and Workbook -- Real World Leadership Kit --- 'Learning to Lead So Others Will Follow'

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