

3 Keys to Building a Winning Customer Service Strategy

By Anne M. Obarski

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Anne M. Obarski
anne@merchandiseconcepts.com

Merchandise Concepts <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com>

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January is a time for resolutions to be made. It is also a month when resolutions are broken. Did you make a resolution to eat better, lose weight, exercise more, get more rest, take vitamins, answer email only once a day, etc? It is mid-January. Have you kept your resolutions? The question might be how serious were you in making a change and did you develop a strategy to reach your goal?

I live in a sports crazed town. Pittsburgh is home to the Pittsburgh Steelers, The Penguins, The Pirates and even a soccer team. I follow the teams and get caught up in the yearly "possibilities" of a big winning year.

I watched our good football team pull together throughout the season to accomplish some amazing comebacks. It wasn't just the quarterback, or "The Bus" or any one player that made it a successful season. It was everyone working together with a strategy. The definition of the word strategy is a line of attack, a plan or a policy. I know that the coach had a strategy for the season and each game and he probably is already working on one for next year.

2002 is over. Many of us are thrilled. The media had their field day with predicting how business would be affected dependent upon consumer spending. The numbers are not all in, but from what I can see, customers spent during the holidays and they are spending today.

Have you made resolutions for your business this year or have you developed strategies? What is your plan of attack? What are your new policies?

Customer service strategies should be top on your list. How will you meet and exceed your customer's expectations and keep them coming back and spending throughout 2003?

Here are three keys to improve your customer service strategies.

Key 1: Review your training principles and how you teach them.

Sales guru, Jeffrey Gitomer says, "Principles are what you live by; policies are what you live with. Do you have written customer principles to guide your employees and your business by?" What are your "non-negotiables"? These are the performance skills you expect from your employees. They are the areas you can test and hold your employees accountable for during their review process.

Key 2: Review your strategy for scheduling employees.

What procedure do you use to schedule employees? What type of coverage do you want during the peak hours of operation and do you have a strategy in place when your employees become swamped. Do you know what your conversion ratio is on a daily basis, that is, how many customers walk through your doors and how many actually purchase something?

Key 3: Advantages of installing customer service automation systems.

Simply put, "This is a system that simply and easily facilitates getting the customer together with the service-giver where and when service is needed" says Marge Laney, President of Alert Technologies, Houston, Texas. Marge says that, "Customer-service automations is, by definition, automation of a customer-service plan or strategy." Here is how it works. A customer goes to a fitting room to try on clothes. Once in the fitting room, the customer realizes that she would like a different size or style. She presses a button on the inside of the fitting room that automatically sets off a signal on a wearable device (i.e., radios, cell phones, pda's, or pager) that the sales associate wears, or an audible chime device. The associate responds to the page and uses their selling skills to not only bring back to the fitting room what the customer requests but possibly other items to go with what they already have.

What are the advantages to this system? The retailer just raised the bar on giving good customer service. The associate responded to the customers needs efficiently and effectively used their selling skills to build the relationship with the customer in an area where one of the highest buying decisions is made, in the fitting room.

It also helps the associates manage their time on the floor and helps reduce shrinkage as the customer is aware that the employee can appear when called, either to their fitting room or one next door.

So what if you don't have fitting rooms? Marge offers a wrap desk pager system that works just as efficiently. If a customer walks up to a wrap desk and does not see an associate, they can press the button on the wrap desk terminal and that sends a page to the associate to let them know where a customer needs help. Voila, the associate appears and the customer is not left walking the store looking for someone to complete their sale.

This type of automation is fabulous. However, it will only work with a strategy. If you don't have automation, what is your current customer service strategy? Do your employees check on people in the fitting rooms? Are there enough employees on the floor to handle during a "lunch hour" rush? Have you ever found your customers "looking" for a sales associate? If a sales associate is busy with a transaction, how do they handle a customer who may need help elsewhere?

Why do some retailers make it so hard for customers to buy from them? Simply, there is not a well developed strategy in place to effectively and efficiently make that transaction an easy one.

The customer is saying, "Help me, I want to buy from you." What is your strategy to make that happen and raise the bar of service-expectation among your customers? That should be your strategic goal for 2003!

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye" on Performance. She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are people, performance, profit focused and she helps leaders see their businesses through their customers' eyes. Anne's mystery shoppers have secretly "snooped" over 2000 stores searching for excellence in customer service. Reach Anne at <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com> or <mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com>. For high resolution photo of Anne, please visit, <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com/annepphoto.html>

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