

# 5 Questions You Must Ask about Your Customer Service!

By Anne M. Obarski

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And the one that will separate big moments from big mistakes!

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"The grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. Actually fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greener where it is watered." Robert Fulghum

This summer has been particularly wet in the east coast area of the United States. It actually hasn't even felt like summer. No sun, no heat, just lots of humidity. My grass has never looked greener and I haven't had to struggle with a hose to water it the whole summer. I just sit back and enjoy, under an umbrella of course. Big moment!

Somehow my lawn reminds me of how some companies look at their businesses. As long as everything is going fine and looks good from the outside, then don't change anything. But at the first sign of a problem, they scramble to see how quickly they can "water it" and fix it. Big mistake!

Here is a case in point. We are having a wedding in our family in a few short weeks. Everything, for the moment, is going as planned. I have been told not to hold my breath. As my face is starting to turn blue, I would like to share this story.

Like any normal mother of the bride, I have purchased a dress in a color that a normal pair of shoes or purse will not match. I have also found that this is a sick game that bridal party dress manufacturers play so that you are forced to buy the dreaded, uncomfortable, dyeable shoes.

After much searching I found the perfect pair that I am praying will be kind to my feet after 6 hours of standing and pictures and crazy line dances at the reception. I also found a purse to match and knew that the last stop was at the shoe repair shop in my neighborhood to have them miraculously dye the shoes and purse the exact color of the dress. No problem, piece of cake.

I drive into the parking lot where the shoe repair is located. I spy the sales associate having a conversation with the local barber out in front of the store. I gingerly carry the box containing my new shoes and my purse and a piece of material which is the color of my dress. I have everything they need to make their job easy.

Just as I was about to place my items on the desk, I feel someone's eyes piercing through the back

of my head and I feel their hot breathe on my shoulder as I hear these words screamed into my ears, "WE DON'T DO DYEING, WE HAVEN'T DONE IT FOR TWO YEARS!"

Now, at this point we have not even made eye contact. I slowly turn around and I find myself repeating the question to her! I said, "You DON'T do dyeing?" She now takes her level of yelling to a new decibel. "I SAID, WE DON'T DO DYEING AND HAVEN'T DONE IT FOR TWO YEARS."

I got her point! I then said what any normal customer would say. I said, "Well, do you know who does?" She looked straight at me with her piercing, beady eyes and said, again, "WE DON'T DO DYEING AND I DON'T KNOW WHO DOES." Big mistake!

I calmly retrieved my items from the desk and proceeded out the door and when I got in my car, I started doing what any normal shopper would do. I replayed the whole scenario again in the car, with me saying everything I should have said to her in the store.

This store has been in business for probably 30 years. They have always done my shoe repairs. They have never been overly friendly, but they have been efficient and done the work professionally. They used to be the one everyone referred any type of shoe repair OR dyeing job to because they were nice to deal with.

So how did they go from being nice to treating a customer so rudely?

I'm not sure. I will tell you that after making a few phone calls I got the referral I was looking for. You see, that is really all I wanted her to do was to tell me where she would go if she was in the same situation.

I made the 25 minute drive to the shoe repair shop that had been recommended. I walked in and saw an old, yellowed picture of three men working in the shop. They all looked alike and I surmised that they were fathers and sons. The youngest man, probably in his late fifties greeted me when I came in and I recognized him to be one of the "youngest" men from the picture. He said, "I thought everyone got married in June, I see you are lucky with a fall wedding! I will have these shoes and your purse ready in ten days, you don't have to call, just come, because they will be ready. You will be a beautiful mother of the bride!" Big moment!

Customers develop a mental "report card" of companies based on how they are treated. Customers come back and refer others to companies based on how they were treated.

If your business is so good that you can rest on your laurels, then you don't need to read on. For those of you who want to focus on the "big moments" ask yourself the following questions.

1. Are your customers greeted with respect? So many sales associates look at customers as an interruption to their work instead of a reason for it. I once heard a store president say to a new hire, "Until your name is on the front of the building, you will treat each and every customer with respect everyday."
2. Are your employees creating a "relationship" with their customers? The sales associate from the first store had seen me come in her store a number of times in the past years. She saw what I had in my hands and could have made a simple assumption. "Wow, looks like there is going to be a special occasion!" That would have started a pleasant conversation. She could have continued, "I bet those items need to be dyed, don't they?" "We used to do that but it just got too difficult to do with all of the colors of dye we needed to carry. I am so sorry to tell you we won't be able to help you with this."

3. Are your employees a resource for your customers? Companies have learned that they can't be everything to everyone, but that they can make a lot more friends if they know who to refer people to. When she told me she couldn't dye my shoes she should have said, "I have the perfect person to dye those special items. I go to him myself and I have always been thrilled with their professional work. Here is his card, it is just a short drive away, and by the way, tell him Silvia sends a big hug."

4. Are your employees inviting your customers back? If you don't think you have competition, just look in the old fashioned Yellow Pages or go on the internet and search for your type of business. It should be a very humbling experience. Customers don't have to come back to do business with you. They do it because they want to and because maybe, an employee has asked them to.

5. Are your employees thanking your customers even if they didn't buy? What would it have taken for the first woman to have simply said,

"I'm sorry we don't offer that service anymore, but I am sure you remember we do the best shoe and zipper repair of anyone in the area. I hope you will come back to see us again, and would you please bring some of the wedding pictures the next time to come?"

Customer service is made up of Big Mistakes and Big Moments and we improve our business by learning from the first ones and multiplying the last ones. What one question separates your business from just being successful to being the resource that your customer depends on you for? Did anyone see the watering can?

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