

# Customer Service: Beyond Company Policy

By June Campbell

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There's more to customer service dealing with order fulfillment, returns, complaints and questions. Good customer service is based on respect and concern --- qualities that can't be spelled out in a company policy.

Consider:

The managers of two department stores frantically scrambled to do damage control following employee-actions that sparked public outrage.

In the first scenario, a sales person refused to call 911 when a mother requested help for her child who was experiencing a seizure. "It's not our policy to make phone calls for customers," said the staffer.

In the second incident, a sales person walked away wordlessly when a pregnant woman reported dizziness and asked for help. Other shoppers assisted after she collapsed. "An unfortunate incident," the manger told local journalists.

The media coverage of these two incidents could not have been good for business. That old saying "No such thing as bad publicity" isn't always true.

Meanwhile, in another department store in a different city, a shopper suffered an injury to her arm when a heavy box fell from a high-up shelf. The woman pointed out to a supervisor that the boxes were unstable in their present position. She suggested they be moved elsewhere before someone was seriously hurt. Several weeks later, the supervisor merely shrugged when the shopper returned and pointed out that the boxes had not been moved.

The above incidents all involved large, international chains. Is the situation any better with medium or small businesses?

We'd like to think so, but the answer is "Not always." In one example, a diner at a small mom-and-pop restaurant was dumped unceremoniously on the floor when a chair collapsed. The waiter snickered and walked away, leaving it to other customers to ask if the person was hurt.

Undoubtedly, it was not store policy to refuse assistance to customers experiencing medical emergencies. Undoubtedly, it was not company policy to stack merchandise in such a way that shoppers are at risk of injury, or to laugh at customers who are victims of damaged restaurant

chairs.

The problems occurred when employees were faced with situations that called for good judgment and independent decision making. In other words, they failed to display what most of us call "common sense."

And, as most of us know, common sense cannot be written into a customer service policy. However, you can do certain things that will increase the likelihood that your employees will make good judgments. Experts claim that small to medium businesses have an advantage over big business when it comes to offering customer service. Smaller size can mean a more personal atmosphere and better opportunities for communication between management and staff.

To make the most of that advantage, try the following:

1. Communicate your expectations to employees. Discuss emergency situations and how to handle them. Stress that emergency situations take precedence over company policy.
2. Make good hiring decisions then empower your employees to act independently when the situation warrants it. If you have hired good people and trained them well, you can trust them with a degree of independent activity. This will work to your advantage in a second area as well. An opinion survey demonstrated that the public resents waiting while staff persons seek approval from one or more supervisors before refunds, exchanges or complaints are handled.
3. Set a good example by showing respectful attitudes to persons both inside and outside of the company. If employees hear management jeering at delivery persons, customers or other staff members, the message received is that disrespect and lack of concern is acceptable. Employees who know that internal respect is the norm will extend that respect to customers and others.
4. Provide feedback to let employees know how they are doing. When you catch an employee showing "good common sense," compliment him/her and do so in front of other employees.
5. Reward employees for providing good customer service. Rewards can be informal (i.e. praise, mention at a staff meeting) or formal (i.e. a regular award for employees who provide exceptional customer service).
6. Avoid over-managing. Happy staff means happy customers. The more involved in your business the employee feels, the more effort he or she will put into satisfying the customers or clients.

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