

Know What You're Talking About!

By Anne M. Obarski

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My husband loves toys. Not kids toys, but what I call "big boy" toys. His favorite stores are Best Buy and Circuit City! He could get lost for hours playing in the video camera department. "Look honey, look at this great itty-bitty, size of a pea, camera!" The smaller the better! I have no idea why, but these little technology wonders fascinate him. I think he has a fantasy of living a life as a "secret agent". I can see him talking to watches and taking pictures with a camera disguised as a pen!

There we were one day, shopping for the world's smallest video camera. Actually, it was the second time we were doing that. We misplaced the first one we had! My husband was thrilled that this new one was also a digital camera! What an upgrade!

The associate who waited on us seemed very knowledgeable about the video camera and the type of printer we needed to be able to print the digital pictures. He explained all of the features and assured us that we would be able to print the pictures by using my laptop and the new color printer we were going to buy. I should have known when he said, "This camera just came out and I'm pretty sure it will work with this new printer and your current laptop." Hmmm. Pretty sure, huh?

Let me just say, that six weeks later, after dozens of phone calls to the Sharp camera company and the company who made my lap top, we were finally able to download all 96 pictures we had been storing. To do that, however, we made another visit to a different store to purchase a "digital media reader" that allowed my computer to finally see the pictures that were stored on a little disc the size of a postage stamp! The associate who helped us in that store knew exactly what he was talking about and had us out the door with the item we needed in less than ten minutes!

A knowledgeable staff, no matter what kind of business you are in, is your most valuable asset! Period! Customers like to do business with people who know what they are talking about. That skill reflects a company's ability to initially train their employees and to provide on-going training.

Providing quality training for all employees should be a priority for any business. Mystery shopper, James of Portage, WI says, " There is nothing more frustrating for a shopper, than to be passed along from one employee to the next, because they don't have a complete understanding of their own products."

These are the three ways, I believe, employees can gain the trust of the customer.

1. Product Knowledge: An employee should have a working knowledge of the inventory of the store. . They should know what the products are used for, offer information regarding similar

products, and be able to explain the features and benefits to a customer and above all, know the pricing. That sounds so simple. But mystery shopper Natalie from Munhall, PA says, " I can not tell you how many times an employee has said the following to me when I asked about a product. "I am not exactly sure what this product is used for and I have no idea how much it costs". What is even worse, says shopper Leigh Ann, from Conroe, TX, is "When employees don't even know if they stock a particular item, and are unwilling to do what it takes to find out."

2. Procedure Knowledge: This is basic store operations training. It is usually thought of as simple cash register training. How to handle returns exchanges charges, special orders and so on. Customers expect that when an employee is behind a counter, they have been trained to handle any sales situation. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. It is important to train each associate about all of the possibilities that could come up within a register transaction. When a customer makes a purchase, the cash wrap area is the last place they will remember on their way out of the store. Make it a pleasant, easy, experience.

3. Practical Knowledge: Employees should be allowed to make common sense decisions. The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain teaches their employees to take ownership of a problem. They are encouraged to make a decision in the best interest of the customer and do it as quickly as possible. It is always frustrating to be in line and have the associate page a manager to their register to answer a question that probably has a very simple answer. Frankly, the associate more than likely knows the answer, but is calling the manger to "just make sure." Common sense and efficiency is what the customer will remember when it comes to having their problems solved.

Customers expect to deal with knowledgeable employees. They expect them to know what they are talking about. I think customers create little "bank accounts" in their minds for every business they deal with. Each time they have a positive experience they deposit "positive experiences" into that account.

Those deposits increase the trust and confidence they have in a business. As the "bank account" increases, the customer is likely to recommend this business based on all of the good experiences they have had.

However, each time they have a negative experience I think they make a huge withdrawal. Then they share those negative experiences with other people who could or did do business with that company. The negative stories they share usually center around an employee who lacked either product, procedure or practical knowledge.

I want my customers to make positive deposits in their mental bank accounts. I don't want to fill out withdrawal slips. I want them to refer potential customers to me based on the good experiences they have had.

As country singer, Bonnie Raitt says, "Let's give'em somethin' to talk about!" Let's make that "Somethin' positive to talk about."

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye on Retail Performance". She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are performance, profit and people 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 www.merchandisconcepts.com or <mailto:anne@merchandisconcepts.com>

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