

Mom Said So! Four Keys to Customer Service

By Anne M. Obarski

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In any good book store you can find countless books on customer service. Most of them start by encouraging you to smile at the customer. Next, how to approach the customer within 3 seconds of them breathing in your store. Followed by a comment on how cute their children are. Finally addressing the correct way to say, "HOW may I help you?" I too, used to teach some of these ideas. Until recently when it became very clear to me that customers do business with companies where they get what they expect. Shoppers are savvy. They know the opening and closing sales lines better than we do. It all boils down to 4 cornerstones that will strongly support any business. Get out your mortar and trowel if you want to build a strong customer following.

1. Trust - People like to do business with people they trust. That trust is built through personal experience as well as recommendations of others. I believe that from now on, trust will be the number one way that companies will build and retain their customer base. I recently saw an early morning national news show that had a segment concerning stores that were selling items past their expiration date. Many were food items but a large number were over the counter medicines for children. A big red flag went up in my mind when they mentioned the name of the chain of stores. I don't do much business with that chain but I already made up my mind that I would not do business with a company that could not adhere to important guidelines, especially where children are involved.

2. Knowledgeable- People like to do business with people who know what they are talking about. I love to listen to my pastors' sermons on Sundays because he always uses wonderful stories to drive home a point. Recently he told a story about his numerous visits to a fancy coffee shop. It seems that two days in a row he went to the same coffee shop ordered the same "special" coffee and was charged differently each day. He asked the sales person why the price wasn't the same as the day before. The sales person looked blankly at him and said, "you got vanilla in it today". Pastor Ken retorted, "But I got vanilla in it yesterday and it is called a Vanilla Cappuccino!" Rather flustered, he pointed to the sign and said, "the sign lists all of the ingredients and vanilla is one of them!" The young man came out from behind the counter, squinted and slowly read each word of the description of the drink out loud. Then he said, "I guess the vanilla is free!" Somehow this irritated my poor pastor and he asked to speak to the manager. His comment to her was, "you really should train your people better!" Most of us have been on one side or the other of this scenario. The customer may have a point yet the manager wears so many hats that it is hard to make sure that training is done effectively. Bottom line, the customer doesn't really care about training, they want the sales associate to be knowledgeable and they want to get exactly what they pay for, period.

3. Efficient- People want to do business where they don't waste time. It amazes me how little patience people have. My son works for McDonalds. It is his first real job, the kind where he gets a real paycheck and not money from mom's wallet. His favorite position is drive through. He likes to see the different cars that come through and he likes the deadline of getting the food ready before the next car pulls up. One of his first days on the job, a disgruntled customer pulled up to the window and remarked, "I thought this was fast food?" He continued, "I'm not yelling at you, but you should tell your manager that people shouldn't have to wait so long." My son said he was sorry, gave him his food, and with his best McDonalds smile said, "have a nice day"! I am not sure I would have been so nice. I probably would have quipped, "this is convenience food so you don't have to get out of that cushy car of yours". Ah, but that would only add fuel to the fire. This customer was in a hurry and that is why you go through the drive through. Give the customer what they want when they want it, as often as you can, period.

4. Friendly- People like to do business with friendly faces. Many of my stories come from my frequent trips to the supermarket. Unfortunately, we pay so much for food and receive such poor service. I have spent hundreds of dollars on groceries and not once have had any eye contact with the clerk and more often than not, I catch the ongoing saga of the bagger and their lack of hours, lack of a breaks, lack of a personal life and lack of knowing the difference between paper and plastic.etc.

Debbie Fields once said that she hires nice people, not people who have to be told to be nice. I will agree that sometimes being nice, in retail, takes the patience of a saint. I met one of those saints recently. I was shopping with my mother who wanted a pair of plain black shoes. Mom is 84 and is as spry as any 60 year- old I know. She knows what she wants and is willing to pay to get it and she remembers the days of great customer service. Mom and I had hit about every store in the mall and ended our search at Dillard's department store. The young lady who waited on us was the ideal sales associate. She was perky and friendly but knowledgeable and kind to my mom, when many sales associates avoid the elderly. She brought out boxes of shoes and even put them on her feet, which is a rarity these days. Just like Cinderella, we found the perfect pair for her. Mom's eyes lit up like a little kid. "These fit like a pair of slippers!" "I'll take them", she said with a big grin! After the girl rang up the sale, mom told her how wonderful she was to help her. Before I knew it, mom was giving this stranger a big hug and plopped one of those sloppy mom kisses on this young girls' cheek. I was so embarrassed! My Mom just kissed a sales associate!!!! The girl blushed a little and sheepishly said; "you are the kind of customers that make my day"! This girl didn't have to be told to be friendly, she just was. Period.

That day I experienced the 4 cornerstones of customer service from my mom and the sales associate in the shoe department at Dillard's. A knowledgeable, efficient and friendly sales associate got a customer for life. Trust me. And again I learned another life lesson from my mom!

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 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.merchandiseconcepts.com or <mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com>

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