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The service a customer expects and what they actually receive can be two totally different things. I have noticed recently, that more companies are marketing that they offer great customer service but in reality what they are delivering is merely the efficient services of a team of "clerks" or at best, order-takers.

I define the outdated word "clerk" as someone who completes the transactional part of the sale as quickly as possible and is on to the next customer. Their communication skills are poor at best and the need for those who are efficient at multitasking is high on the priority list.

Schedules have been trimmed so much that the time required to actually build a relationship with a customer is almost non-existent. I often wonder where the time needed to actually "politely wait on a customer" fits into the daily priority list?

That question was very apparent to me the other day. I had just taken the last picture on my "old style" 35 mm camera and needed to take the film in to my "favorite" pharmacy to get developed. That routine now sounds rather prehistoric in the scheme of digital cameras and fancy color printers.

My camera uses a special type of film that can only be developed in one hour at certain stores. I wanted the film developed in a hurry as it was for my daughter who was leaving town and she wanted to take copies of some of the pictures with her. I drove to my "favorite" pharmacy where I know they can process them quickly because they just added a special machine to handle my type of film.

As I approached the front door of my "favorite" pharmacy, which by the way has only three letters for a name, I noted a new "sign" that I had not seen before. It said "We Strive for Five; If our employees don't score a "Perfect Five" feel free to ask to see a manager." I assumed, before entering the store, that the employees must have been through some type of customer service "training" program and that the customers were allowed to be the judge of whether the employees were putting to use what they learned.

I approached the photo counter and started to fill out the envelope for my film and heard the following words from a sales associate I had yet to make eye contact with. "We are really busy and won't be able to get to your film today and someone called off for tomorrow so I don't think tomorrow

is a good possibility, why don't you take them to the grocery store across the street? "

Well, how is that for striving for customer service?

The sales associate then glared at me over her "half-eye" bifocals and I responded by looking her square in the eye and said, "I will wait until the pictures are ready because I don't have any other choice. You see, the store across the street doesn't process this type of film and my only other choice is Wal-Mart and they are twenty-five minutes away!!"

She still looked rather miffed that I was still standing there and she quipped as she took my envelope, "Well, I can't promise they will be done tomorrow but you can try after 3 p.m."

I think this employee failed the training program.

What I expected when I came in and what I actually received was a huge disconnect. She certainly didn't make the connection between good customer service and her need to let me know how overworked she was! Big mistake!

I look at good customer service like a light switch. You can turn it off or on and but it is all about the energy flowing between two sources that is required to make a positive connection.

So I am going to re-write their training program and call it, "Strive for a POSITIVE 5"!

1. POSITIVELY Greet me! A greeting doesn't even have to be verbal! An acceptable greeting in today's workplace can be a head nod or a smile or just eye contact! It can also be a social approach or a merchandise approach. It just requires that the associate make a quick decision on how they will "plug in" to start the energy flowing! The social approach can be something as simple as, "What brings you in on such a gorgeous day?" The merchandise approach could be, "I see you have a roll of film that needs developing. Do you need that in one hour or would you like to save a little money and have it send out?" Oh, I feel a little spark!

2. POSITIVELY speak to me! 90% of unhappy customers leave a place of business because of inattentive, impolite employees. And almost all of them never tell anyone in management, they tell everyone else they know. The way to avoid that is to start the connection in a positive way. Make eye contact first before you start the conversation. Find out why I am there in the first place before you start to tell me how bad your day is. You see, the customer doesn't really care about YOU; they want to know how YOU are going to solve their problem. That's where the "plug" comes in!

3. POSITIVELY listen to me! Plug in to what I am saying and really listen to me. Be able to repeat back my needs, wants or even my problem so that I know you are really listening. Practice listening with both ears and both eyes. Good listening skills can outwardly show how much respect you have for the other person you are speaking to. I have many choices of where else I can go, so make me feel like you care and you want to help make the connection!

4. POSITIVELY inform me! Share your knowledge of your product and services with me. Customers keep coming back based on the trust they have built with you. They know that they can expect prompt, efficient and knowledgeable service. When you have a new system or new products, it helps to inform the customer. When an employee shares valuable knowledge, an "I understand" light bulb goes on in the customer's eyes!

5. POSITIVELY invite me back! If a customer likes the connection they have with a business they will come back. But if that energy is powerful, the customer will become that business's

cheerleader! It takes so little time to say, "Thank you for shopping with us today" but those words make a big positive connection in the customers' mind.

I have the feeling that my "favorite" pharmacy spent a lot of time and money training their associates on the "rules" of customer service and not on the importance of making a connection where the positive energy is what truly keeps the customer coming back.

Unplug the negative energy and make sure your employees are positively plugged into their customers!

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