

# Customer Service — A Penny Saved Could Be a Customer Lost

By Betty J. Trout

Ever since Tom Peters and Nancy Austin published *In Search of Excellence* some 15 years ago, companies of all sizes and cultures have been looking for ways to upgrade and improve the customer service they deliver.

Whenever a customer needs assistance—be it help at your local bank, or answers from a pharmacist—it's an opportunity to provide customer service. But all too often, these opportunities become frustrations for everyone involved. The teller is going on a break or your pharmacist won't make eye contact with you. Even though everyone talks about customer service and how important it is, the sad fact remains that with few exceptions, customer service today is as bad as it's ever been.

## Speaking volumes about your culture

How a company delivers service speaks volumes about its culture of customer vision and focus. Customer service is an opportunity for your customers to learn about your service level, and it's an opportunity for your associates to demonstrate the service your sales reps brag about.

So why are so few companies able to deliver high quality service on a consistent basis? And what can we in the office products industry learn from how others handle the customer service function? How can we make sure our associates are doing what we want them to do?

For most small to mid-sized businesses, the "glamor" department is sales. After all, it's the sales reps who bring customers to us and who help generate inventory turns and profits. That's why most dealerships focus a great deal of emphasis on getting and keeping professional, productive sales reps. Our livelihood depends on their sales efforts, and once they successfully win an account, we guard it selfishly, not wanting to jeopardize or disappoint our new relationship.

But if the sales department is impor-

tant, customer service is no less so. In the office products industry, customer service is everyone who answers questions, writes orders, handles problems, helps educate customers about products and quotes prices.

Your customer service people are ultimately the ones who do the most to build a relationship with your accounts. They are in touch with customers on an ongoing basis, frequently two or three a times a week, and, we all hope, in a way that is beneficial to both sides.

But therein lies the inconsistency. When our sales reps gain new customers, we hand them off to our customer service department. The day to day maintenance of these prized accounts is the responsibility of people who already overworked and under a great deal of stress.

All too often, we fail to provide them with any clear instructions about how the account should be taken care of, or what service level the customer was accustomed to. Yet we expect these associates to take care of that most precious of commodities—our customers—so that they will not only stay with us, but buy more!

In other words, once sales brings the customers to us, we expect customer service to keep them coming back. They're expected to put out fires, recognize everyone's voice, and complete vast quantities of paperwork, all with a smile on their face and a song in their voice. And amazingly, most of them do an adequate job in spite of the lack of resources.

The point is this: Is account maintenance any *less* important than winning these accounts in the first place? Can we say unequivocally that our customer service associates are any less critical to our operations than our sales reps?

Customer service associates' jobs should be as important as any at your dealership. No, they don't bring in customers, but they keep customers coming back! Customer service people touch the customer more often, learn their person-

alities, voices and buying habits. Yet, some operate without benefit of even rudimentary training or benchmarks and objective criteria with which to measure themselves.



Betty J. Trout

## Training—an investment that pays

Employees don't learn new ideas in their sleep. They don't develop innovative ways to deliver service when left to their own devices. It's up to dealer management to provide opportunities for associates to discuss customer situations, role play scenarios, learn about customer expectations and get excited about their jobs all over again.

There are many components that make up an end-user's decision to change suppliers. But all other things being equal, the level of service you provide represents a critical factor that just may be the difference between keeping or losing an account in the future. And putting it simply, it's far too important a factor to leave it to chance.

A customer service department where no training is offered (whether product, skills, or interpersonal training) can expect predictable results. Service will become stagnant, and turnover and burnout will loom on the horizon.

No group, regardless of how clever, upbeat or willing and able its associates may be, can compete head to head with a company whose associates are well trained. It's no contest.

Training for your customer service associates may not seem profitable. It may seem expensive given the level of employee and involve negotiating a logistical nightmare just to schedule.

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You can't take your customer service people off the phones during working hours and weekends are out. But there are creative solutions to this dilemma. I know of one dealer who trained his customer service reps on a Friday while the sales reps manned the phones. It was an eye-opening experience for both groups and it worked!

Another dealer divided his customer service staff into two groups and trained half one day and the other half the next. Both groups had a busy day at only half-strength on the phones, but the full day they enjoyed in a training program more than made up for it.

In ideal situations, associates are well-versed on policies, procedures, and the preferred process for handling customers. They have a departmental mission and everyone understands how the department fits into the overall organization and what purpose it serves.

They are compensated fairly and have opportunities to participate in spiffs and promotions that directly reward them for their efforts. They are continually monitored and coached through recording and mystery shopping. And they seem genuinely interested in customers. Most importantly, they're professional.

All of this is possible, but it doesn't happen without an investment in your people. This investment will pay huge dividends that can be measured in good attitudes and happy customers. I know of no better payoff. ▲

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Betty J. Trout is an original partner of the Graytrout Group consulting firm. She specializes in customer service, interpersonal skills, telemarketing and negotiation consulting and training. Her firm facilitates programs for numerous dealers around the country, including programs in call center skills, negotiation, teamwork, change management and customer service. She may be contacted at the Graytrout Group (Phone: 706-864-0804; E-mail: [btrout@hemc.net](mailto:btrout@hemc.net), or on the Internet at [www.graytrout.com](http://www.graytrout.com).

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