

Customer SERVICE

Where is the Dissscccconnect?



By Trish Brock

Ask most dealers about customer service and chances are they'll tell you it's a top priority. They never offer any less than "the best," you'll hear, particularly when compared to their larger competition.

But every time I hear a dealer talking about their wonderful service levels, I wonder what those claims are based on. Are they genuinely customer-driven or are they little more than bragging during the sales process?

Various reasons contribute to the gap between how companies perceive their offered services and how their customers experience them.

Consider:

1 How is great customer service defined in your company? And how do you know if that is what you are giving your customers? How do you measure your service? And how is this information shared with your team?

2 How tuned-in are you to your clients? Are you giving them what they want or only what you think they want? Sure, you or your staff talk with them regularly, but are the conversations usually about their current order or resolving a problem? Do you dictate solutions or ask customers what they really want?

3 How are customer problems or complaints handled? Are your frontline people trained to handle various personalities? Can your customer service people make decisions and resolve issues quickly?

4 What is your process for gauging your customers' level of happiness? Are you asking the right questions? And is your company listening, or are there explanations (excuses!) when information is shared that is less than favorable? How do you leverage the good news and how do you identify opportunities for improvement?

5 If great customer service is a priority, do you have all of the tools, mechanisms and most importantly, the right attitudes in place to deliver it? How are your people hired and trained? Do you have the right technology? How do you motivate and reward your staff? How well do you communicate internally as well as with your customers?

■ As an owner, meet regularly with your top 10-20 clients. In addition to showing your appreciation for their business, they can be your greatest teachers for areas of increased value.

■ Interview new customers. Understand their expectations and get fresh perspectives on what these customers value.

■ Know your percentage of lost customers. If you lost 10% of your revenue to theft, swift action would take place. How do you treat a 10% customer loss?

■ Get a reality check on your assumptions. Make sure your customer feedback contains information your customers want to share with you, not just short answers to your questions. Better yet, have an independent market assessment done to see if your customers perceive your business the same way you do.

■ Create a customer advisory board to help you define and create extraordinary customer service.

■ Host regular "lunch-and-learns" where your customers lunch and *you* learn.

These are just a few ideas to make your company name synonymous with service. Learning more about your customers' needs and desires will allow you to better connect, win and retain your customers through superior, extraordinary customer service. **ID**

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To get you thinking about your own marketplace and the challenges you face, here are some ideas that might refresh your approach to great customer service:

■ At your weekly company meetings, ask each employee to share an example of how they serviced a customer well in the previous week. Learning from others and discussing what the company values will increase everyone's attention to service.

■ Encourage your frontline people to contribute ideas on how they can better serve your customers. Listen to them and bonus great ideas.

■ Train and continuously coach your staff. Great "people skills" will service your customers (and you) better.

■ Embrace diversity. Your staff should mirror your customer base in gender, race and age, putting you in a better position to identify with your customers and their needs.