

# Walk the talk

Service excellence starts at the top with management commitment.  
By Pamela Schuck

**I**t's an all-too-common problem: Feedback that your service to customers should be better.

That means it's time for a commitment to improve your service standards. Service excellence is not just a competitive edge. In many industries, it is *the* competitive edge.

Service can be, and often is, the new standard by which customers judge an organization's performance. An increase in customer satisfaction can yield a measurable rise in profits. If your service is just OK — that is, no complaints — it isn't going to give you the competitive edge you are looking for. Remember, your competition is always just over your shoulder. Stumble, and it could seize that edge of service excellence and take your customers with it.

So where do you start?

If you're like most companies, you'll try the front line, with the people who have face-to-face (or phone-to-phone) contact with the customer. This is a mistake. Instead, start with management. Quality service is orientation of all resources and people in a company toward customer satisfaction.

Management commitment is especially important. Management needs to embrace and develop the service culture because it should lead and motivate all employees. If your management doesn't commit, your employees will know it.

To maintain management commitment, hold regular executive sessions. Work to avoid management isolation. Make it clear that quality service is expected and even demanded. Commitment must be real and honest.

All too often, management tends to be reluctant in committing to service as a strategy for improvement and business growth. But remember this: When customers are presented with a choice between companies, and those companies offer comparable quality product and pricing, the distinct difference of service quality becomes the deciding factor in where they take their business.

With that in mind, it is critical to give your customers the service perception of a company that induces them to do business with the company again.

To do that, your management team will need to identify and implement long-term strategies such as continually evaluating the organizational environment, policies and procedures, management responsiveness to employees and responsiveness to customers. You want a whole organization

approach focused on consideration of the successful customer experience. Ensuring your customers' wants and needs are represented in decision-making planning and meetings does this.

You will need to motivate and teach customer service skills. Examine and correct anything that gets in the way of



superior employee performance. Understand that many employees today do not know service skills, and it is your responsibility to teach them. Only then can you hold them accountable. Be sure to reward high-performing service employees.

Your goal is to develop a service initiative that sets service standards that are practiced by everyone. Another goal is to see service as the product. You must really know that quality service can only be achieved through long-term commitment; it is not just a passing phase.

Walk the talk — with a team made up of everyone in the organization.

Pam Schuck (pschuck@strivetraining.com) is president of STRIV=E Training, which specializes in motivating customer service excellence for businesses. She can be reached at (330) 273-8790