

Knowledge tree

The key to quality customer service is to know — and think — like your customers. **By Pamela Schuck**

There isn't a business today that can succeed without knowing who its customers are, what and how they think, why they are customers and what will make them take their business elsewhere.

This may sound like expensive market research, but at the service level, it is as simple as knowing and being able to relate to the customer. And the expertise to do this is already in place.

Everyone is an experienced customer. You are a customer every day, every hour, when you turn on the lights, use water, listen to the radio, grab that on-the-go breakfast thing or start your car. Take those experiences and relate them to your business. What prompts you to decide if you have a good or bad experience? **What makes you happy as a customer** and what doesn't?

It's irritating to compete for the attention of the service provider who is on a personal call. Apply that to your business. Because you know how irritating it is to be ignored, make it your company's goal to provide responsiveness and caring when working with customers.

Knowing your customers means listening to, understanding and responding to their evolving needs and constantly shifting expectations. It is important to remember that your customers' needs change and evolve all of the time.

A new customer's needs may be much different than an experienced customer's. A new customer requires more attention and an explanation of how your process works.

Existing customer may simply need check-ups to show them your business respects their loyalty.

When you think of your competitors, have you ever considered which is your service excellence competition? Customers who experience superior service expect to have that experience with everyone they do business with. You compete with any service provider who **excels at providing a quality service experience**, including Disney or that corner grocery store that knows your customer's first name, their kids and what sports they play.

If you examine your personal customer service inventories, your list would most assuredly fall into the five ways customers evaluate a service experience.

■ **Reliability** — Your ability to provide what is promised, dependably and accurately, including personal, organizational, indirect or expected promises. Make sure you know how your customer perceives your promises. If you promise to call in a few minutes with information, what constitutes a few minutes? Does your customer think five minutes while you think 30?

■ **Responsiveness** — Your willingness to help your customers. Evaluate your turnaround time in answering questions, providing information and solving problems.

Do you set and meet deadlines? Do you treat your customers as intrusions or give a perception of apathy?

■ **Assurance** — The knowledge and courtesy you

show your customer. Don't blame the customers for what they don't know. You must be the expert.

You and all of your employees are responsible for product knowledge, company knowledge, good listening skills and problem solving skills.

■ **Empathy** — The degree of caring and individual attention you show your customer. You must be genuine in your concern and care. Treat each one as an individual with unique needs, different attitudes, expectations and emotions.

■ **Tangibles** — Physical facilities, equipment, self, work areas and service systems. Evaluate barriers, requirements, procedures and policies. Take pride in your workplace and install pride in your employees.

The bottom line is that if you and your staff really observe and listen, your customers will tell you what they need and want from you. Just take the time to really know your customers and build a relationship.

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