



Above the Fold

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From the Field

Understanding Customer Satisfaction

Organizations enjoying positive reputations in their fields have long appreciated the importance of customer service. Given the close connection between customer service and public relations, the Russell Public Affairs Group has asked two respected professionals to offer their perspectives on this aspect of the field, based on their experience in helping organizations understand customer satisfaction and improve customer service.

Evaluate Your Business' Customer Service

by Courtney Plotnik

Over the past 20 years, I've been on the front line of customer service: I was an ice-cream scooper, a bag girl at a PGA level golf course, a waitress, a salon hair washer, and a customer service representative for a dental HMO's incoming call center.

For some reason I have always been drawn to customer service jobs. I suppose I am a helpful personality — and luckily for me this is a trait that companies need in those serving in customer-facing roles. But, of course, there is more to customer service than just being helpful.

In addition, managers must listen to their front line staff to adjust company policies in order to truly enhance the customers' experience — and the company's bottom line. Too often there is one-way communication from the manager down to the front line staff. Not only is this bad for staff morale, it also halts the information flow captured by the front line that should be flowing up to the manager, who can then adapt company activities appropriately — which can make or break the sale.

Warren Blanding's book, *Customer Service Operations: The Complete Guide*, published by the American Management Association, emphasizes the importance of coordinating the lines of communication among departments within a company. More specifically, the information technology systems must accurately capture the data generated from a customer service interaction. The data can then be analyzed by the marketing and communications departments and presented to the management for company policy review.



National Customer Service Week is October 2-8, 2006. Your business may choose to honor this milestone by setting certain customer service goals for October and measuring your progress. Also during that week, you may consider offering creative rewards to your front line representatives and your customers.

With so many industries becoming oligopolies — banks as well as electronics, office supply, pet and grocery stores — prices will increasingly become competitive, making customer service the ultimate differentiating factor.

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Major "musts" in customer service include:

- Proceed with a hiring process to determine if the applicant passes the "helpful" trait test
- Train and test your front line representatives on your company's products and services
- Listen to and act upon your customers' complaints
- Understand reasons for customer return and attrition
- Streamline your incoming call system
- Train representatives and managers on how to deal with difficult situations and empower them to make decisions