

Why do we make customer service so difficult?

By DR. LARRY COLE

WRITER'S NOTE: I began drafting this article while staying at a hotel on Super Bowl Sunday. While that was a few months ago, I thought I'd share some events leading up to the game that are as relevant today as they were back in February.

Wanting to watch the game, I called the front desk and asked "which channel is the game on?" The response? "I don't know." Hmmm, I wonder if I was going to be the only guest who would want to find the one channel out of the 200 + channels available. No anticipation of customers' needs.

Not having lunch and wanting to watch the game, I ate an early dinner. The hostess seated me and said Ryan would be my waiter. When he approached, I proudly greeted Ryan to which he responded, "My name is Jed. Ryan took off today." Now the hostess desk was about 30 feet from where Jed worked and she didn't know that Ryan was not working. Why did she not know? Employees need the necessary product knowledge.

The answer to the question posed by this article's title is that people think they are in the customer service business, but they are kidding themselves. They are not thinking.

Excellent customer service is the feeling generated for the customer because the delivery exceeded their expectations.

Now here is the kicker: Many organizations assume/expect their employees to *know* how to deliver excellent customer service. You know the consequence of the "ass-u-me" formula.

Let's go to an Outback Restaurant in Baton Rouge, La. Evidently the wait staff was instructed to respond with "my pleasure" upon being told "Thank you." My waitress said "my pleasure" more times than I wanted to hear. I played a game with her and thanked her multiple times after which I heard her robotic-like response. Not only was it annoying, it was terrible. Their staff training should address multiple ways you can tell a customer "my pleasure."

Now, let's move on to the equipment industry. I walked into the men's public restroom at a dealership. It looked as though



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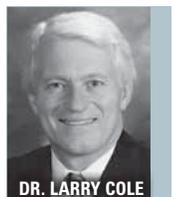
it had not seen an attendant in weeks. (I wondered if they pay better attention to the details in the shop?)

I listened to the store manager explain how a simple comment made to a customer lead to the loss of one of the dealership's best customers. The customer's equipment needed repair one Saturday afternoon during the harvest and was told that he would have to wait until Monday because the service department had already logged a 70-hour week and the technicians were tired.

Perhaps you've heard the old cliché that "trust is like paper, once crumpled it will never be perfect." As a psychologist, I know of multiple incidents where a husband or wife had an extra-marital affair and eventually used that experience to establish a better relationship that existed prior to the affair. So, it appears trust *can* be repaired.

So I ask you, "What is your strategy should your best customer walk away from you?" If you have a customer service culture, your employees and you know the answer and would immediately spring into action. If your employees and you don't know the answer to the question, alarm bells should go off and it should tell you a story.

The bottom line is you're either implementing management systems to improve customer service or you're not.



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Here are a few of my experiences:

- Employees have different interpretations of the dealership's customer service target.
- Different stores answer the telephone differently and some without getting their customers' names.
- Parts people answer the phone sounding like a computer robot instead of a person.
- Specials are offered to help customers save money and improve their operating efficiency but no one offers them. To make matters worse, there is no way to keep score to determine whether specials are being offered and/or sold.

Speaking of keeping score, I'm leaving the restaurant to watch the Super Bowl. I thanked the waiter for his service to which he replied "No problem." I was relieved to hear that since I didn't intend to be a problem. Why didn't he just thank me for coming to the restaurant? I told him I was in town for a couple days. Why didn't he ask me to return to the restaurant and tell me that he looked forward to seeing me again?

Puttin' on the Ritz

Now let's visit the Ritz-Carlton in Atlanta, Ga. The Ritz-Carlton is famous for its customer service culture. My wife and I checked into our room and within minutes the house attendant knocked on the door, introduced herself and welcomed us to the hotel. She asked if everything was fine with

the room. Knowing about their culture, I mentioned the TV wasn't working. She said, "Let me see if I can fix it and, if not, it will be replaced within 30 minutes." I then admitted we had not tried the TV and that I was testing the hotel's customer service. I asked, "Why are you so good?"

The housekeeper said, "At the beginning of each shift we have a customer service meeting to discuss two items. First, what happened yesterday that we can learn from to help us be better today? Second, we discuss one of our customer service principles and how we are going to implement that principle today."

That shift meeting is part of the Ritz-Carlton customer service system. It happens at the beginning of every shift. Not when the supervisor thinks about it or feels it should happen. Ritz-Carlton is "ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." Who are you?

What is the Ritz-Carlton experience telling you? It has a system to continuously improve customer service. Do you? Remember, telling everyone that you are customer service focused is not a system. Words are cheap. But what are you doing to systemically improve customer service? You might try puttin' on the Ritz. **WED**

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