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Customer service with a snarl

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Is the customer always right? Only 4 percent of Americans believe the cliché is always true, according to a recent survey. Here's the rest of the breakdown: 21 percent say often, 58 percent say sometimes, 14 percent say rarely, and a whopping 3 percent say never. What happened? "Rude is in, and mediocrity is the norm," says Susan Brooks, a Scottsdale-based customer service consultant and the author of "Serves You Right!" "Part of the problem is that as customers, we've become numb. We have compromised our expectations. We have not communicated our needs and desire, other than through anger. That reinforces the idea the mediocrity is OK."

Customer service has eroded over the past decade for a variety of reasons - low wages, lack of training, exponential growth, to name a few. Few companies have the blend of corporate culture, training and opportunities for advancement that makes employees surpass expectations.

"The environment today is increasingly becoming one of mistrust and acrimony between businesses and consumers," says Scott Broetzmann, president and CEO of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting.

THE BREAKDOWN

Consumers who were around in the 1960s and 1970s are probably feeling a little déjà vu. During the days of Ralph Nader and the emergence of consumer advocacy, regulations and safety standards helped

cultivate an atmosphere of mistrust between consumer and the business world.

That mistrust disappeared to a certain extent during the mid-'80s to mid'90s, when the marketplace became more consumerfriendly thanks to toll-free numbers, call centers and disciplines dedicated to customer service.

But after spending millions to create the technology and support it, corporations are now abusing it. ("In theory these are supposed to empower the consumer, but it's hard to be empowered when you can't even reach a human being," says Broetzmann.) Throw onto that privacy issues, corporate ethics problems (Enron, WorldCom) and the cost of customer service, and you get a regression.

"Is the customer always right?" says Broetzmann. "It's a reasonable question to ask. Where it got lost is in the economics of providing customer care. That old adage was a lot easier to practice four or five decades ago when you didn't spend billions of dollars on computer systems and contact centers."

'WHATEVER'

It's easy to blame wages for the decline in customer service. Why should the 17-yearold flipping burgers for minimum wage (about \$5.15 per hour) care about customers?

"You've made the choice to work there," says Brooks. "There are no accidents. You chose it, so be there."

Inspiring the people who work for them is the biggest challenge companies face, says Brooks.

Broetzmann says there's no relationship between wages and good customer service. Paying somebody more doesn't ensure that they'll do the job better.

Training is the key to overcome what Brooks calls the "whatever" attitude that is pervasive in the service industry. The "whatever" attitude is characterized by arrogance (I'm a warm body, so the company needs me) and apathy (this is just a job and I can always get another one).

"A leader who accepts that is shooting himself in the foot and sending the message that mediocrity is OK," says Brooks.

Training is where most companies make their first mistakes. More often than not, call centers operate on the assumption that they're going to be dealing with a difficult customer. Training usually covers three issues: The history of the company, the system and what employees can or cannot do over the phone, says Broetzmann.

The art of the apology or simple people skills aren't often included.

"Those things have very little to do with whether you can provide good customer service or not," says Broetzmann. "Knowing how to apologize, or provide a good explanation, or be responsive to a myriad of issues that somebody calls about are skills that many training programs are sorely lacking."

ONE WINNER

Salt River Project, which recently scored the highest rating for customer service by J.D. Power and Associates, is an example of a company that is bucking the trend. The utility company has a monopoly in many areas of the Valley, so it doesn't have to care about customers when they've got nowhere else to go.

But SRP's corporate culture dictates otherwise - customers should find dealing with the company rewarding, easy, pleasant and consistent.

"We want the customer to be able to hear the smile through the telephone," says Scott Trout, manager of residential customer services.

SRP hires for attitude: Employees must have a GED or high school diploma to work in the company's call center, which supports about 250 customer service agents. Training lasts 12 weeks, six of which are under the scrutiny of a quality coach whose purpose is to teach people skills.

Gilbert resident Lani Hill, who gets flood irrigation water from SRP, has noticed the effort.

"Every time I call to place my water order or to inquire about my customer account, the customer service reps are incredibly helpful and polite," says Hill. "They sound as if I'm doing them a favor by calling."

SRP pays customer service reps about \$13.08 per hour to start - more than double the minimum wage. But Trout says it's not the money but the opportunities to advance that keep employees motivated.

FEEDBACK

Gauging the quality of customer-employee interaction is another place where companies tend to fail, says

Broetzmann. Some count the number of calls, while others measure the length. In the restaurant business, quality is difficult to gauge because most customers don't complain - they simply go elsewhere. To amp up its service, Furio began a day-after-dining program to gauge customer satisfaction: The Scottsdale restaurant picks diners at random from the reservation book and contacts them about their experience.

"We look at every single comment," says Stephanie Eglin, director of marketing for Anthem Restaurants, which owns Furio. "When somebody gives negative feedback, the owner himself makes the call if he's able to. This type of endeavor is not costly, and we're able to gain a lot of valuable feedback."

TWO TO TANGO

Nearly 70 percent of Americans polled in 2005 by the Customer Care Alliance reported being upset or extremely upset with customer service they'd received.

But as in any relationship, it takes two to make it work. Consumers typically come into a situation ready to be let down, then rage when it happens.

"You get what you pay for," says Broetzmann. "If you're not going to respect the dignity of the people you're talking with, it's highly unlikely you're going to get what you want."

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