

# WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT



## good service

by **Monica Humbard**

Experts offer advice on increasing shoppers' loyalty and satisfaction.

**J**ust 46 percent of those polled in a 2005 nationwide study conducted by the **Customer Care Alliance** considered the service they received in the past year acceptable. When asked if customer care had gotten better or worse during the past year, 23 percent believed it was better, but 33 percent said it was worse.

Is the increase in unhappy customers a reflection of declining service or higher expectations from customers? **Dave Anderson**, a sales and leadership trainer/speaker and president of **Dave Anderson's LearnToLead** in Agoura Hills, Calif., thinks it is a combination of both. He says that while reduced training budgets and sloppier hiring practices are decreasing the quality of service, customers are more stressed because of technology, such as cell phones and e-mail.

### Is the increase in unhappy customers a reflection of declining service or higher expectations from customers?

Also crediting both for the increase in dissatisfaction is **Scott M. Broetzmann**, president of the survey research and consulting firm **Customer Care Measurement & Consulting (CCMC)** and one of the authors of the Customer Care Alliance study, which was conducted in collaboration with the Center for Services Leadership at the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University. However, he places more of the blame on businesses because they raise customers' expectations by claiming to have good customer service, when few actually deliver.

### build customer relations

So how does your company improve its customer service? **Debbie Loche**, floral buyer/merchandiser for **Roche Bros.**, a supermarket chain located throughout the Greater Boston, Mass., area, says one of the keys is to encourage employees to build relationships with customers.

To accomplish this, Roche Bros. staffs all but two of its floral departments with full-time designers. When a floral department is staffed full time, she says, employees get to know customers and their product preferences.

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### Strategies for improving customer service

#### PRESENTATION

#### GREETING CUSTOMERS

#### HANDLING COMPLAINTS

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Because floral is such an impulse purchase, Ms. Loche says, floral sales increase if a knowledgeable associate is available to customers to answer their questions and suggest sales. When employees build relationships with customers, the result is a friendly atmosphere in the department for both customers and employees.

### empower employees

While a full-time staff is a great solution for building stronger customer relations, not all supermarket chains can afford the labor. Mr. Anderson says that if a business is short staffed, employees need to be more empowered to make decisions on the spot. Today's busy customers don't have time

to wait for an associate to locate a superior and bring back a response.

Mr. Anderson cites a study by the Marriott International, Inc. hotel chain, which revealed that customers who had problems quickly resolved became more loyal than those who had no problems at all. According to the survey, 89 percent of those who had no problems would come back again, 69 percent of those who had unresolved problems would return and 94 percent of those who had problems resolved immediately would return.

With proper training and feedback, Mr. Anderson says, employees at every level can be given the latitude to make important and timely decisions that will ultimately build customer loyalty. For example, he says, The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain gives all employees—from the chambermaids to the bellmen—the authority and a budget of up to \$2,000 to handle customers' problems on the spot.

As a result, he says, the chain has a lower employee turnover than any other. "The chambermaid feels like the CEO of the sixth floor," he says. "If you don't let employees solve problems, you are communicating distrust. You can't develop people you don't trust."

### customer service training

While empowering the front line is important, you must train your staff to know how to implement their power properly. Therefore, you must clearly define expectations for different situations and put them into writing. Mr. Anderson suggests outlining expectations when interviewing potential employees and then restating them in training sessions.

Undoubtedly, proper training ensures better customer service. However, some companies scrimp in this area because of the costs. Mr. Broetzmann says retail businesses need to consider customer-handling practices a necessity and plan for their costs as they would for other business practices.

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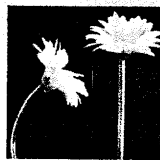
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Training programs must cover policies, systems and corporate history and culture, but they also should include effective methods for approaching day-to-day situations and problems. Through practice and feedback, Mr. Broetzmann says, employees will begin to think creatively on their feet and then become comfortable interacting with customers and solving problems. He points out that these are acquired skills, like hitting a baseball.

Roche Bros. has its own in-house training for all employees, which Ms. Loche calls "customer-relationship oriented." At the core of the program are the company's "Golden Principles." The first 10 are general for all store employees and include: "Smile all the time" and "When customers ask for a product, take them to it."

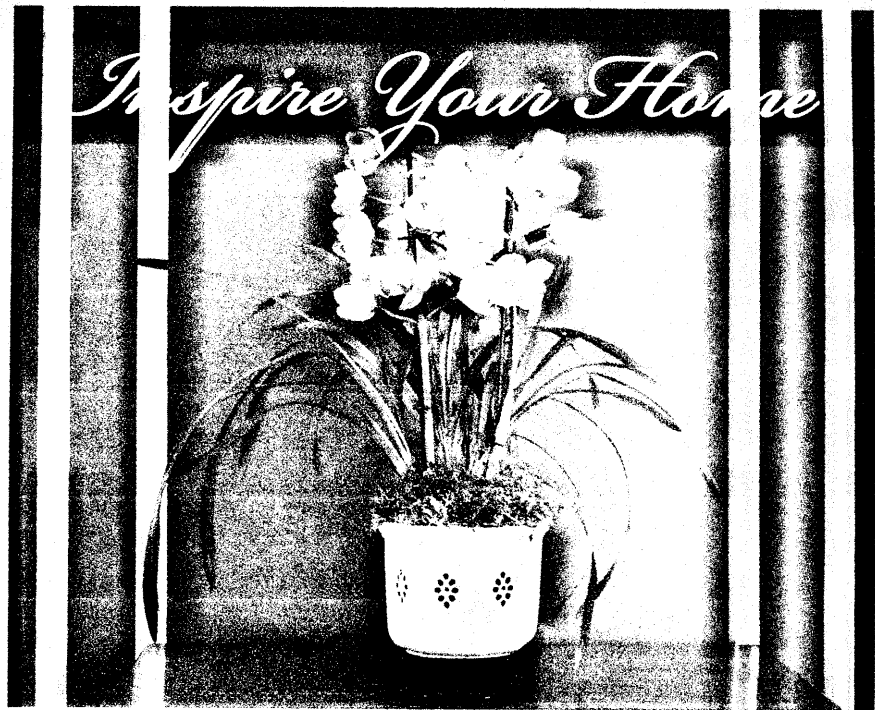
The second half of the "Golden Principles" are specific for each store department. For the floral department, the principles include:

- When a customer requests a product that isn't available, write down the request, communicate it to management and follow up with the customer.
- When answering the phone, say your name, and never leave a customer on hold.
- Assist customers with selecting their flowers.
- Inquire as to whether customers are shopping for special occasions.
- When a customer mentions a personal celebration, congratulate him or her.
- Thank every customer for his or her purchases.

One of Ms. Loche's most common customer service problems is getting less experienced floral associates to approach customers. Some are afraid they won't know the answers to customers' questions, so they stay behind the counter. To help, Roche Bros. trains employees to not guess at answers but instead to tell the customers they will get back with them.

If associates are properly trained about customer service, Mr. Anderson

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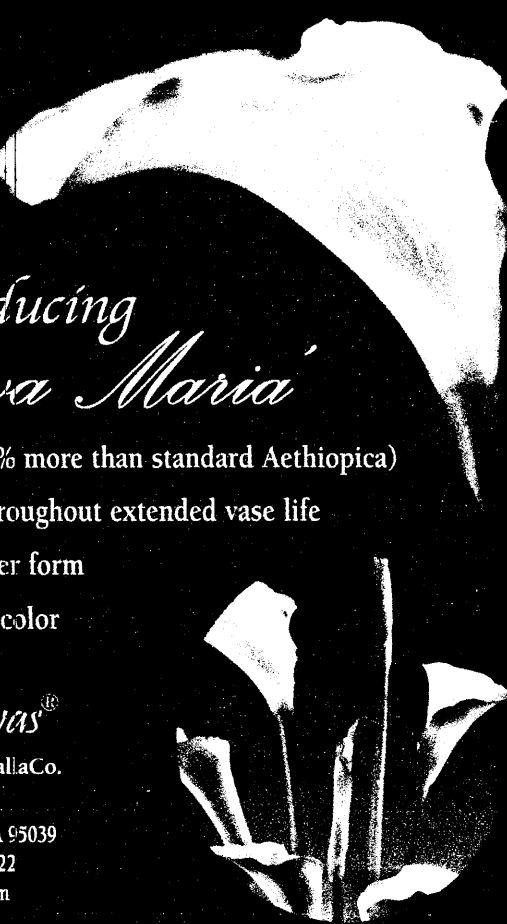
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says, some problems can be avoided. "We have to focus on what we can control," he says.

### hire the right people

Training classes are important, but you can't train for attitude. Mr. Anderson encourages managers to hire nice individuals who enjoy their work and like meeting other people.

When interviewing, he suggests, ask questions that will reveal more than work experience, including what they liked or did not like about their last jobs. If a candidate for a sales position didn't like approaching new people in a previous job, the position is probably not for him or her.

Mr. Anderson also recommends personality tests. While he admits they are not perfect, he says the tests dig into the hearts and minds of those taking them. One characteristic they can identify is empathy. He suggests searching for someone who scores high on this characteristic. "You can't teach empathy," he says.

Personality tests may dip into your budget, but Mr. Anderson points out that the costs of hiring the wrong person can be much higher.

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