

Good Old Fashioned Customer Service

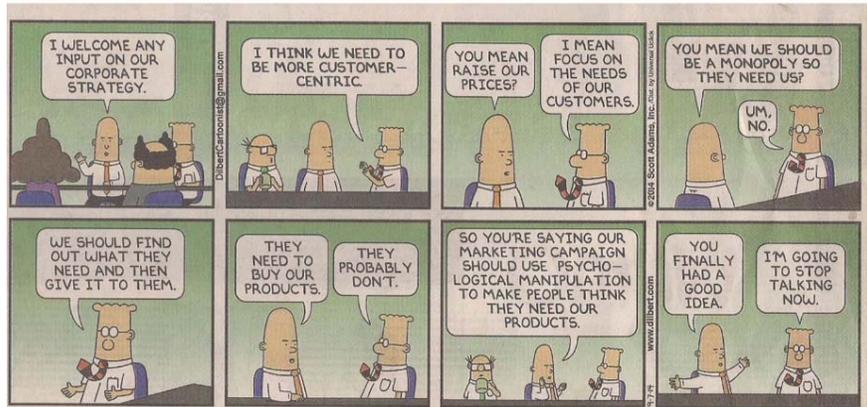
What ever happened to good old fashioned customer service? Some say that it is a thing of the past, but I hope that is not the case. It's bad enough when you have trouble getting good service in a fast food restaurant chain, a coffee shop or in a department store, but it is starting to become more prevalent in business to business service and sales as well.

I have been noticing lately that otherwise good business and technical people are missing the boat when it comes to customer service. With all the skills and talent that they have, they have somehow forgotten that the secret to their bottom line is a happy, satisfied customer. Without that, all the skill and talent in the world won't help you a bit.

So what is good customer service? Start by listening to what the customer wants. If you don't know what your customer want, you have no chance of providing it for them. Ask questions to make sure that you understand your customer's needs. Write things down. Make suggestions based on your experience, but keep in mind that your goal is to satisfy your customer's dream for the project, not your own. This is where many people seem to drop the ball. They start off listening to what the customer wants, but then somehow veer off into what they think the final project should be. Then they follow this by trying to convince the customer to get on board with their plan. Wrong. This is your customer's dream project, not yours. You have only been asked to make that dream come true.

Somewhere along the way, people have gotten the idea in their heads that their bottom line is to convince people to buy whatever they are selling. Of course you want people to buy what you are selling; but wouldn't it be easier if you were actually selling what they need? I have included a Dilbert cartoon that demonstrates this theory of customer service. Unfortunately, this cartoon hits far too close to home to be funny. As business people we need to work harder to give the customer what they want, rather than just convince them to buy what we are selling.

Don't let this become your definition of customer service.



Now I understand that sometimes a customer may have an idea that you don't think is practical. In that case, explain to them why you don't think their idea will work. However, if they are convinced that they want the job done a certain way, then you have two choices. Either do the job the way the customer wants, or tell them that you can't help them and wish them well. Simple as that. I have also learned not to say that anything is impossible, because using the word impossible, you leave the door open for someone to prove you wrong. Just think of how many things we do today that were "impossible" 100 years ago, or 50, or 10. It is better just to say that you are unable to help them, apologize and wish them

well. Better to turn down a job than to end up with an unhappy customer. Most of the time people will appreciate your honesty. It is always best to hold on to your integrity. This will create a better reputation for you and generate more long term sales than the idea of selling at all costs.

Once you know what the customer wants, come up with a price and a timeline, and stick to it. Work out clearly everything you are expected to do and give a reasonable price range and time period to get the job done. Nothing will alienate your customer faster than prices and timelines that are constantly changing. If it turns out that the job ends up being more work than you thought, eat the cost and consider it a lesson learned. It's just part of business. By the same token, be quite clear about what you are doing for the price. If the customer starts adding projects, feel free to renegotiate. But make it clear that these are extra projects for extra costs, don't just spring the new bill on the customer. That way, at the end of the project, both you and your customer come out winner.

We all want to succeed in our business. We wouldn't get into it if we didn't. Let me leave you with this quote attributed to Zig Ziglar. "If you want to achieve your goals, help others achieve their goals." This is the bottom line of good customer service and good business. By helping others you will build a reputation as someone people want to do business with and that will make you truly successful.

