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Getting Lost Customers Back

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Opportunities for service recovery are numerous. If you are close to the customer and discover a problem, it's your chance to go beyond the call-of-duty and win a customer for life.

Too many executives think employees are born with good customer service skills. It's important to develop a process that allows employees some latitude in serving the customer that also includes specifically defined steps that must be followed in providing service recovery. Doing so requires decision making and rule breaking—exactly what the employee has been conditioned against. Workers have been taught that it's not their job to alter the routine. Even if they'd like to help the customer, they are frustrated by the fact that they are not able to do it. Worse yet, they don't know how.

Empowerment is the backbone of service recovery. I have stated in my books and in my seminars that it's impossible to be a service leader, to be customer centric and focus on a service strategy without empowering employees. My definition of empowerment is giving employees the authority to do whatever it takes, on the spot, to take care of a customer to that customer's satisfaction—not to the organization's satisfaction.

Tips for Providing Awesome Service Recovery:

- Act Quickly...The employee at the point of contact best implements service recovery. Avoid moving problems and complaints up the chain of command.
- Take Responsibility...Don't place blame, make excuses or lie to cover a mistake. Sincerely apologize and thank the customer for pointing out the problem.
- Be Empowered...give those who work with customers the authority to do whatever it takes to ensure customer loyalty.
- Compensate...Give the customer something of value. Every organization has something of value it can give to a customer who has experienced a problem.

Service Recovery. The surest way to recover from service mishaps is for workers on the front line to identify and solve the customer's problem.

1. Responding to their needs calmly and emphatically can serve as the key to getting more cooperation from emotionally agitated people. How an issue is handled becomes the actual issue.
2. Empathy is powerful. If a customer expresses anger and you fail to react to it they feel like they aren't getting through, that you're not listening. Think about how you would feel in a similar situation.
3. Ask Questions. Once you have an understanding of the situation, try to avoid making excuses or defending your actions (or those of your team or organization). Ask what you can do to make things right. You need to show the customer that, as an employee and as the face of your organization, you are invested in solving the problem.
4. Suggest Alternatives. Solicit what the customer wants from you. You want to keep moving the situation along in a productive way. After the person expresses what he or she wants, decide what you're able to do and say so. Think outside the box. You can stay within your organization's guidelines and still come up with an alternative. They will view it as a sign of respect and an indication that you are listening to their specific concerns.
5. Apologize. Say "I'm sorry". Apologizing without laying blame will better position you to act in a manner that your customer perceives to be in their best interest.
6. Solve the problem. Take everything you have learned about the situation in preparation for this final step. At this time both you and your customer share a strong desire to find a solution. If you need help while you are solving the problem, find it. Regardless of how a problem is solved, getting it done quickly is necessary in bringing this customer back. Then, provide the customer your contact information if they have any questions or lingering problems.

In my book *Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service* I wrote—Service is defined by listing its function—maintaining old customers, attracting new customers, and leaving all customers with an impression of the company that induces them to do business with the company again. Expressed in terms of attitude, service is:

- Thoughtfulness
- Courtesy
- Integrity
- Helpfulness
- Efficiency
- Availability
- Friendliness
- Knowledge
- Professionalism

"You are your brand...Act like it. Every customer experience either weakens or strengthens that brand" John Tschohl

John Tschohl is a professional speaker, trainer, and consultant. He is the President and founder of Service Quality Institute (the global leader in customer service) with operations in over 40 countries. John is a self-made millionaire traveling and speaking more than 50 times each year. He is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on service strategy, success, empowerment and customer service in the world. John's monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge. He can also be reached on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.