

# Superior Service



*It requires a strategy and plan.*

By John Tschohl

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All too often, service is not a priority for management. Instead of focusing on *people*—on their customers—they focus on *numbers*. What they don't realize is that, if they would pay attention to their customers' needs and do whatever they can to fill those needs, the numbers will improve.

To increase sales and profits, organizations must provide the type of service that will gain—and retain—customers. That doesn't mean advertising that “the customer is king,” or that “the customer is always right.” Those are mere words. Customers will decide for themselves what kind of service you really provide.

You must act, not profess. You must make *customer service* a priority and do whatever it takes to provide your customers with what they need and want and to do so quickly, enthusiastically, and accurately. To ensure that service becomes a driving force in your organization, you also should develop a plan—much as you would for any other goal, personal or professional. For example, if you decide that you would like to retire at 55, you must develop a plan that will get you there—and then work that plan.

Before developing a *Customer Service Plan*, take these steps:

**Understand what your business is.** Regardless of what you are selling—whether it's life insurance, automobiles, or printing—you are in the customer service business. You must build everything you do around the customer experience.

**Identify the elements of superior customer service and eliminate the obstacles that prevent you from providing it.** How can you make it easy for people to do business with you? Are your hours convenient? Are your employees well trained? Is someone in the organization available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to answer customers' questions and to help solve their problems?

**Identify your customers' needs and wants.** If you don't know who it is you are trying to satisfy and what their needs are, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to meet them. Gather information you need to set goals that will include average revenue per customer and the market share you want to achieve.

**Compare your organization and how you operate to role models outside your industry (benchmarks, best practices).** Look at the best of the best and model your behavior after those businesses. What do they do that you aren't doing?

**Put your money where your mouth is.** Create a service guarantee that gives customers peace of mind. Northeast Delta Dental did just that by guaranteeing that it will provide its customers with certain services within certain time frames. For example, if it does not send a member identity card within 15 calendar days after the enrollment form is completed, it will pay that member \$50.

**Track your progress.** Use mystery shoppers and surveys to evaluate how you are doing and to assess the impact of your focus on customer service. Look at your sales and market share before you implemented the plan and compare it with where you are every six months afterwards.

**Drive the program.** Provide continuous training that will instill in all employees an enthusiasm for—and commitment to—customer service. Reinforce the focus on service by rewarding high-performing employees and enforcing and reinforcing service standards.

**Make a commitment.** Creating a customer service culture takes time. If you aren't committed, you will fail. Dell built its business on customer service; but, after Michael Dell stepped down as CEO in 2004, the stock dropped 25 percent, because his successor was not committed to providing the customer with the best experience possible.

When you know what is important to your customers, and when you realize the shortcomings of your current service, you're ready to write a *Service Plan*. Planning, drafting, and implementing the *Service Plan* requires management commitment, a long-term strategy, and continual effort to improve service. It will take some work, but the rewards will be well worth the effort. **SSE**



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