

Bridging the gap in service - The competitive advantage

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In the competitive world we live in today, the “splash-n-dash” technique in service has fallen by the wayside. The swimming pool industry is overwhelmed with too many suppliers chasing too few spending customers which has resulted in a death spiral for the service industry. No longer can we skip the small stuff; no longer can we put off until tomorrow. Today’s consumers are looking for precision, quality, and that little something extra that will convince them they have the right service company taking care of their needs and their money is being well spent.

The critical component in all of this is the customer service strategy at point-of-delivery. In order to make customers happy, we must first be sure the service employees are happy. Unmotivated employees make lousy representatives, but a highly enthusiastic employee will provide the strategic edge that may ultimately close the deal. Therefore, company leaders should make it a priority to ensure that the troops are well fed, watered and enthused.

There has been much said about the phrase “under-promise and over-deliver” which may lead companies to assume that they know what their customers want and that the customer will be grateful if we exceed their expectations. This is not the case in today’s market; so as a default, keep to your word, do what you say you would do and do it when you said you would do it with no hassle for the customer. In other words, tell the customer exactly what they need up front so there will be no surprises later on. Have the faith and confidence in your product and services and stand behind them. Your word is your bond.

So, how do we provide this exceptional service? The following suggestions may give some insight and lead to the answer.

1. Always take your customer seriously. Even if they are wrong, they are always right. The customer is right about how they feel and is right in that they can tell their spouse, their friends and their next-door neighbor that your company is incompetent.
2. Communicate with the customer. If something unexpected has gone wrong, say so. It is insulting to the customer's intelligence if you lie about the situation. They do not expect you to be perfect but they expect you to be honest and truthful if you screw up.
3. When things go wrong, don't make excuses. Customer complaints are a given. The customers are generally used to flawless service so responding is a chance for you to show how special your company is by responding to these complaints. Complaints are a hidden gift when you get right down to it, treat them as such.
4. Stay on top of the complaints. Follow up on them immediately and if you cannot, at least acknowledge the complaint as promptly as possible. Follow-ups are probably the single most important element in service. Customers, in general, do not mind waiting for the problem to be corrected, but they do mind their problem being ignored.

5. Show respect. This should go without saying. Treat the customer as you would want to be treated. Respect, like love, has to be given before it can be received.
6. Listen to what your customer has to say. Do not assume that you know exactly what the customer wants; your opinion is not in the forefront of their mind. Taking the time and the trouble to get to know your customer and listening to them will help to show the quality of your service and add to the value of the sale in the long term.
7. Have knowledge of what is in front of you. The last thing you want is to portray ignorance in front of your customer. It is vital that all employees who deal with the customers be knowledgeable about the products and services your company provides along with knowing the who, what, where and when with each problem that may arise.

To sum things up, honesty, integrity, reliability and knowledge are the strategic edges that will help make your company successful. Without emphasis on these qualities, it will be difficult to sustain your competitive advantage.