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Gleanings

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Customer Service: Really?

Organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, frequently tout customer service as one of their chief priorities. As noble as this sounds and as much as we want it to be true, is it really true? To test this claim, consider some illustrations from my own experience, which I suspect is not significantly different from yours.

I have noticed that for-profit organizations seek to eliminate obstacles that discourage sales. Most companies offer a toll-free telephone number. When you call the number, your wait will probably be a few seconds. This makes buying from most companies relatively easy and pleasant.

But often things change after you become a customer and need service. For example, most companies don't offer a toll-free number for customer service; hence, you will probably be put into a queue when you call. Wait times in the queue vary. I have experienced wait times as short as a minute and as long as thirty minutes. Clearly, the message is that if you need support, you are not as important as someone who makes a purchase.

My widowed mother recently experienced a frustrating customer service adventure courtesy of the IRS. In June she received a notice from the IRS that she should receive her tax rebate by early July and if she didn't, she was to call a certain number. She didn't receive the check. Repeated attempts to call the number failed; each time the number was busy with no option to leave a message. Even when she made a personal visit to a local IRS office, they were unable to help and merely gave her the same phone number that she had been unsuccessfully trying to call. Sadly, we were not surprised at poor service from the IRS because it is a government agency.

Poor customer service is also frequently the reality for non-government agencies. A few years ago, I had an experience with Sprint that illustrated this point. When I walked into a local Sprint store seeking information about my wireless service plan, I was placed into a queue and told to take a number. The wait time was around fifteen minutes. While I was waiting, a lady came in and was helped immediately—she didn't have to take a number and wait in the queue. Curious, I asked the store manager about this situation. He explained that she was not yet a customer; hence, she received priority service. Established customers had to wait in line.

Nonprofits, including churches, are also guilty of poor customer service. For example, in the church world, church members are the "customers." I have found that many pastors and church staff frequently fail to timely respond to church members' communications. And, in some cases, they don't respond at all.

When organizations respond to customers' efforts to get support with no sense of urgency, customers naturally feel devalued. Furthermore, customer service practices, such as those noted above, create ill will with customers.

This is true of every type of organization because all organizations are in the service business. This includes businesses, schools, professionals, government agencies, and nonprofits.

In my personal experience, poor customer service seems to be the norm; however, there are a few exceptions. When these exceptions happen, it is an unexpected breath of fresh air.

Recently when we took my wife's car in for service, my wife and I enjoyed a very pleasant experience with Rachel Ritchie, a service advisor at Sewell Cadillac. My wife's car lease was nearly up. Rachel, without consideration to her own commission, assessed the situation and recommended the level of service that was most cost effective for us. Over the years I have used a number of service advisors and, with few exceptions, I have found that service advisors usually put their own commissions ahead of my interest. But Rachel clearly did not—my compliments to her. Needless to say, Rachel's selfless actions endeared her to us and reflected well on her organization. This is what good customer service will do.

Other organizations that value and practice a high level of customer service are, for example, EMC and Southwest Airlines.

EMC is so committed to outstanding customer service that they have eliminated any profit requirement from the customer service effort. Furthermore, unlike most companies, they do not shield their technical people from customer service, but view customer service as the responsibility of everyone in the organization. And EMC assumes that a customer's problem is EMC's problem until it is solved, even if the problem does not belong to them.

Southwest Airlines practices a philosophy known as "customers second." This philosophy is rooted in the company's desire to provide outstanding customer service. By treating their workers well, Southwest experiences the results of the principle of sowing and reaping. They sow good will into their workers and harvest workers who sow good will into customers.

What produces such exceptional customer service at Sewell Cadillac, EMC, and Southwest Airlines? I believe it is the practice of biblical principles. If your organization wants to deliver truly outstanding customer service, it must practice biblical principles. After all, the only principles that work in God's universe are God's principles.

The key principle of excellent customer service is the Golden Rule (Galatians 5:14). Always put yourself in the shoes of your customers and your workers. Treat them the way that you would like to be treated.

Another key principle is to go the extra mile (Matthew 5:41). When a customer seeks service, assume the best about the customer and advocate for the customer to help them solve the problem.

Remember that the principle of sowing and reaping really works (Galatians 6:7). When you sow good will into your customers and workers, you will reap a good harvest.

If your organization practices these principles, you will deliver outstanding customer service. One of the ways to validate that your organization has succeeded in delivering world-class customer service is by verifying that your customers are making buying decisions with customer service in mind. This is the ultimate compliment for any organization.

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