



[DR. SHIRLEY SAYS...]

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Reprinted from the June/July 2005 issue of BIC

Customer service: Road map to success

As markets become more sophisticated and customers more demanding, competition between businesses is becoming stiffer. Whether it's Tad's Air Conditioning & Heating company, the corner service station, an industrial cleaning service or environmental consulting firm — competition is fierce.

In today's economy, the customer is king, and most have adopted the attitude, "If I or my company choose to spend money with you, you have to earn it." The result is that in virtually every industry, a multitude of businesses offering similar products and services are now zealously competing on price, quality, quantity and just about anything else they can offer.

So what differentiates one organization from another? How does a company attract customers? More importantly, how does it hold on to them? Ultimately, there is one major area in which a business can distinguish itself, offer added value and gain a competitive edge — superior customer service.

Customer service can pay off handsomely. It does require though that everyone in the organization be involved. Whatever the size or nature of the business, whatever your role in the company, you are involved in customer service. How you react will have an effect on everything your company is trying to achieve because everyone is, indeed, an ambassador for the organization.

Management guru Peter Drucker once said, "The purpose of a business is to retain customers." So, where do we start?

Following are seven customer service tips that can help ensure your organization is providing superior customer service that will pretty much guarantee a high retention rate:

➤ Know your customer. Understand what it is about your company that makes customers come to you instead of your competition. Identify your strengths and build upon them.

➤ Know your competition. Know what your competition is doing at all times. Are they doing something new or different? Are they doing something better than you? How can you do something better than them? Always ask yourself these questions. Keep your business on top when it comes to quality of products and service.

➤ Retain your customers. It can cost five to 10 times more to acquire a new customer than it does to keep an existing one. Keep your customers delighted. Treat them like gold. Remember, every customer you lose is a customer gained by your competition.

➤ Create a positive first impression. The first contact your customers have with your organization is critical. Take measures to make sure that first contact is a magic moment instead of a tragic moment. In these days of shrinking profit margins, little things can make a big difference. Mother Teresa put it very well when she said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."

➤ Approach complaints with a

positive attitude. When you're dealing with customers on an ongoing basis, you'll undoubtedly receive your fair share of complaints. So keep in mind Al Capone's motto, "Don't take it personally, it's just business." After that, it's simply a question of approaching the problem with the right attitude to ensure customer satisfaction.

➤ Sharpen your customer service skills. Customer service training is one of the most valuable tools you can give yourself or — as a manager — your staff. The skills mastered will enable everyone to become more productive, enjoy their job more, increase their value to the company, and improve customer service at all levels.

➤ Measure customer satisfaction. Continuously monitor your business. Never sit back and relax. Offer new products or services as needs require. Always ask the customer what you can do better. That information is the vital link between your business and your customers, and can help provide the kind of service satisfaction that builds customers for life.

In any business today, the superior customer service commitment must be renewed every day. We have to tend to it, we have to feed it, we have to care about it, and we have to live it. When we do, that commitment translates into delighted customers, repeat business, referrals and increased profits.

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