

WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT



good service

by **Monica Humbard**

Experts offer advice on increasing shoppers' loyalty and satisfaction.

Just 46 percent of those polled in a 2005 nationwide study conducted by the **Customer Care Alliance** considered the service they received in the past year acceptable. When asked if customer care had gotten better or worse during the past year, 23 percent believed it was better, but 33 percent said it was worse.

Is the increase in unhappy customers a reflection of declining service or higher expectations from customers? **Dave Anderson**, a sales and leadership trainer/speaker and president of **Dave Anderson's LearnToLead** in Agoura Hills, Calif., thinks it is a combination of both. He says that while reduced training budgets and sloppier hiring practices are decreasing the quality of service, customers are more stressed because of technology, such as cell phones and e-mail.

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Also crediting both for the increase in dissatisfaction is **Scott M. Broetzmann**, president of the survey research and consulting firm **Customer Care Measurement & Consulting (CCMC)** and one of the authors of the Customer Care Alliance study, which was conducted in collaboration with the Center for Services Leadership at the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University. However, he places more of the blame on businesses because they raise customers' expectations by claiming to have good customer service, when few actually deliver.

build customer relations

So how does your company improve its customer service? **Debbie Loche**, floral buyer/merchandiser for **Roche Bros.**, a supermarket chain located throughout the Greater Boston, Mass., area, says one of the keys is to encourage employees to build relationships with customers.

To accomplish this, Roche Bros. staffs all but two of its floral departments with full-time designers. When a floral department is staffed full time, she says, employees get to know customers and their product preferences.

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Because floral is such an impulse purchase, Ms. Loche says, floral sales increase if a knowledgeable associate is available to customers to answer their questions and suggest sales. When employees build relationships with customers, the result is a friendly atmosphere in the department for both customers and employees.

empower employees

While a full-time staff is a great solution for building stronger customer relations, not all supermarket chains can afford the labor. Mr. Anderson says that if a business is short staffed, employees need to be more empowered to make decisions on the spot. Today's busy customers don't have time

to wait for an associate to locate a superior and bring back a response.

Mr. Anderson cites a study by the Marriott International, Inc. hotel chain, which revealed that customers who had problems quickly resolved became more loyal than those who had no problems at all. According to the survey, 89 percent of those who had no problems would come back again, 69 percent of those who had unresolved problems would return and 94 percent of those who had problems resolved immediately would return.

With proper training and feedback, Mr. Anderson says, employees at every level can be given the latitude to make important and timely decisions that will ultimately build customer loyalty. For example, he says, The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain gives all employees—from the chambermaids to the bellmen—the authority and a budget of up to \$2,000 to handle customers' problems on the spot.

As a result, he says, the chain has a lower employee turnover than any other. "The chambermaid feels like the CEO of the sixth floor," he says. "If you don't let employees solve problems, you are communicating distrust. You can't develop people you don't trust."

customer service training

While empowering the front line is important, you must train your staff to know how to implement their power properly. Therefore, you must clearly define expectations for different situations and put them into writing. Mr. Anderson suggests outlining expectations when interviewing potential employees and then restating them in training sessions.

Undoubtedly, proper training ensures better customer service. However, some companies scrimp in this area because of the costs. Mr. Broetzmann says retail businesses need to consider customer-handling practices a necessity and plan for their costs as they would for other business practices.

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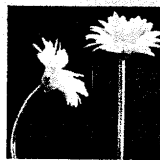
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