



SkillSharpener Web Extra

To deliver exceptional service, know what customers expect

“Every time a customer or client calls or enters your business, that customer has an expectation,” says Michael Levine, author of *Broken Windows, Broken Business*, which argues that making a company more customer-centric must start by fixing the small things.

When a customer’s expectation is met, Levine says, the customer will walk away satisfied, though perhaps not overwhelmed. “On the other hand, if the expectation is not met, or if the employees taking care of the customer are not helpful or courteous,” Levine says, “then the customer will walk away with a negative impression of your business, and you may have lost a customer for life.”

The problem, Levine suggests, is that more often than not, companies do not even know what their customers’ expectations are, and they often fail to meet even minimal customer expectations. Complicating the problem is the fact that most managers and executives are too far removed from what’s going on at the front lines of customer service to know whether or not customer expectations are being met.

Understanding your customers’ expectations

What should managers know about customer expectations? Levine offers these seven questions to help you examine and analyze customer expectations at your company — and to help you to meet them and even exceed them once you know what they are.

What do our customers have a right to expect when they contact our business? “Obviously this varies in terms of specifics from business to

business, but there are some generalities that apply,” says Levine. “In fact, you might start with the golden rule — simply treating customers the way that you would expect to be treated if you were a customer.” For instance: “Everyone who contacts any business deserves to be treated with respect and courtesy, to be spoken to as an intelligent human being, to be served as promptly as physically possible, and to be sure that the person serving his or her needs is dedicated to the same goals as the customer. That is, if the customer has a problem, the employee serving that customer must consider it his problem until it is successfully resolved,” Levine says.

Are we currently providing what customers should logically expect? This question can be answered best with the implementation of something like a mystery shopper, says Levine. “A person who calls or walks into your business unrecognized, presents himself or herself as a customer, goes through every aspect of customer service, and then reports in detail on the experience can be invaluable to the successful business,” he says. It can’t be something that’s announced or expected, Levine says, because employees will be on their best behavior and you won’t get an accurate picture of what’s going on. And you can’t always rely on supervisors for this type of review because they can sometimes be too sympathetic or will try to justify employees’ behavior.



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The manager’s companion to Customer Communicator

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Are customer expectations being met by every employee — even those who don't come into direct contact with customers? "Often the worst broken windows are people — including behind-the-scenes employees who just do not get the idea of what you are trying to accomplish with customers, who can't 'get with the program,' and who can't push themselves beyond mediocre standards of performance," Levine says. Behind-the-scenes employees need to understand customer expectations and be ready to contribute what it takes to meet them just as much as frontline customer service people."

Are there ways in which we can exceed customer expectations for our business? "There are very few businesses that are doing everything they possibly can to make the customer's experience as rewarding and satisfying as it can be," Levine says. In fact, Levine says he believes in a Rudy Giuliani approach to customer expectations — that is, to underpromise and overdeliver. To go beyond your competitors, he suggests, "Think outside the box and consider what you can do that your competitors and others in related industries are not doing — and if it has a benefit to customers, try it."

How can our company go "above and beyond" customer expectations and remain profitable? If you focus on the small details, there is very little cost involved in meeting customer expectations, Levine argues. "How much does it cost for each employee to smile? How much does it cost for an employee to take a sense of responsibility for each problem that he or she is presented? In most cases, there is little or no cost in doing things the right way and getting noticed for it."

Are reps and other employees motivated to find ways to exceed customers' expectations? Your mystery shopper program, call monitoring and other efforts will tell you if employees are doing what you

hope they are doing — meeting customer expectations, if not going above and beyond the call of duty. "But motivation is another story," Levine says. "Do reps and other employees see a reward in doing things the right way? Are they being recognized for their extra effort?"

How am I encouraging reps to exceed customers' expectations? Managers have to be a part of the program too, and provide a model for reps and other employees. "Make yourself visible," Levine says. "Make sure employees know this is a companywide effort that starts at the top and includes every person in the organization down to the person who empties the wastebaskets. It's imperative that managers get the message out and that employees understand your customer service goals, and the benefits of exceeding customer expectations."

Leverage your perspective as manager

This last item is particularly important, says Levine. "As a manager, you must go above and beyond in order for your employees to understand the importance of the concept," he says.

If you are using a mystery shopper to collect information about how your company is doing, you should also be going out to the customer service center or into other parts of your company to collect information about what's going on yourself. "Then compare notes and formulate a strategy," says Levine.

In addition, "ask your employees for suggestions," he says, "but don't rely on them to the exclusion of your own ideas. A manager is in the best position of anyone to be innovative, creative, and open to ideas from all sides."

Contact: Michael Levine, www.lcoonline.com. *Broken Windows, Broken Business* is available from Warner Business Books, www.twbookmark.com. ■



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