



BY STAN POHMER

CUSTOMER SERVICE:

A MARKETING GIMMICK

Recent media attention to providing good customer service has not presented us with any information we didn't already know, yet so few businesses today heed even the basics. That means there's lots of room for you to stay competitive by becoming truly customer-centric.

Over the past few months, I've been bombarded with messages in business magazines and trade journals touting the employment of customer service strategies as a major means of differentiation from the competition. The gist of the message is that if you demonstrate good customer service, you will earn customer loyalty; customer service will drive customers to your door time after time, rather than to the grower down the street.

GET INTERACTIVE

Sounds great on paper and in theory — until you start to read the activities you should employ to demonstrate this service to your customers. They talk about things like:

- the 10-foot rule: greeting and acknowledging any customer within a 10-foot radius of an employee;
- qualifying the customer's needs by asking questions and listening before recommending a product that will satisfy their needs or solve their problem;
- wearing a company polo shirt to better identify you to the customer;
- using proper telephone etiquette; and
- suggesting additional product that will enhance use of the primary purchase item.

It's a sad commentary on the state of affairs in the industry that these activities should even be discussed as "new" customer service initiatives. It wasn't too many years ago that these kinds of things were the standard, rather than the exception or a means of differentiation! What caused the deterioration of the standards to the current levels isn't important (and would take volumes to explain!), but the recognition of the need to change our customer service focus is critical if we want to grow our sales and be competitive with the alternative choices consumers have.

Take another look at this list of activities. See anything in common? They're all transactional, meaning that each one requires some interaction between the employee and the

customer. Is this bad? Absolutely not! These interaction activities and many other examples that I haven't listed are all extremely important, but they fall far short of what is required for you to be perceived as truly customer-centric in the customer's mind. Some of the challenges you might face in implementing even these simple activities are: Do you have enough employees scheduled to allow these interactions? Have you provided the training needed and set consistent and measurable standards to benchmark your ability to meet your customers' expectations?

Another factor in the customer service formula is operational functions, yet we rarely look at these as being an integral part of customer service. For example, providing sufficient stock of the most-wanted items during the key selling periods; having the right information available to help buyers make good purchasing decisions; and providing guarantees and assurances that you will fairly and consistently stand behind the products you sell.


Focusing on and even successfully accomplishing any one of these transactional or operational elements individually, though important, only pays lip service to the goal of providing good customer service. Successful growers that customers rate high in providing outstanding customer service, the kind that sets the bar against which all others are compared, will tell you that customer service is not about activities — it is a core, fundamental attitude that drives everything a company does. It's part of the basic culture of the company, part of the mindset or conscience of every employee. And there's only one way to instill this vision into the company mission and into the employees' day-to-day activities: the everyday, long-term example and commitment of the management and leadership team. It's one thing to talk about becoming customer-centric, but it's something else to lead by example. Employees should see you demonstrate the importance and commitment day in and day out, in good times and in bad.

CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Customer service is not just doing a prescribed list of things and, when they are implemented, saying you have achieved your goal. It is a process or journey, constantly incorporating new ways of exceeding customers' expectations while still focusing on the base that has been laid out. One can never say that he has completed the process; we need to constantly seek new and improved opportunities to relate better to customers.

Unfortunately, many of us still think that the customer owes us something, that they must conform to our operational needs and our standards. Catching up to the relatively low customer service standards that exist today isn't a major challenge. But becoming truly customer-centric, where you can be positively differentiated, will require a major change in the way you think and in the core fabric of your organization.

Do yourself a favor. Visit the business that you, as a customer, feel is the most customer-centric — the one who does more things right and makes your experience more enjoyable than any of the others. Then, again through a customer's eyes, go back to your own operation and compare what you see, how you're treated and what the total experience is like. I believe that you'll quickly grasp the opportunities you can seize to improve your customers' experience.

Is customer service measurable? Is there a payback in sales, profit and loyalty? Can becoming customer-centric really differentiate you from your competitors and the category alternatives available to your consumer? The answer to each of these questions is emphatically, yes. But only if you stop giving lip service to customer service and commit to becoming customer-centric. 

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