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Are You in the Business of Customer Service?

If Not, Maybe You Shouldn't be in Business

By Roberta Chinsky Matuson

Is it me or does it feel like customer service is out of fashion? Here's an example. The other day I received an Ann Taylor charge card in the mail. Before being able to use the card, I was required to call a toll free number to activate the card. After pounding in the twelve digits or so on the card and providing the expiration date, I was then transferred to a customer service representative who proceeded to ask me the same questions. Please tell me why I just wasted five minutes trying to find the digits on my phone if she was going to take the information down as well. If that weren't bad enough, she then began a script that started with, "Are you interested in..." Me: "Please stop. I'm not interested in purchasing any protection services." She: "I'm still required to ask you. Are you interested in..." Me: "I told you, I'm not interested in the insurance, so why are you asking me?" Her: "I have to ask you this or I could lose my job."

This had me wondering if she was trying to protect me or was she trying to protect her job? I think we both know the answer to that question. In the interest of full disclosure, in a recent posting on Fast Company expert blog, The Management Escalator, I talked about an exceptional experience I had while shopping at Ann Taylor. I'm thinking I may have to retract my posting, as this experience has tainted my opinion of the company.

Is it your employees or your process?

We are anxious to share tales of terrible customer service with anyone and everyone who will stand still long enough to listen. The blame is usually placed on the person we are interacting with, but is it really their fault? For example, if a hostess tries to seat you near the bathroom because she's been told to spread the customers out so a single waitperson isn't slammed, is it her fault you can practically have your meal served in the restroom or is the process to blame? I'd say it's the process. If there is a more suitable table open then you must empower this employee to make a decision that is in the best interest of your customer.

But what if you don't trust that your employees will know how to



If you are not in the business of customer service then you best re-evaluate why you are in business. This holds true for both business owners and employees. I was speaking with a prospect this morning whose going to have a "watershed year" courtesy of some big name companies who have become known for their service failures. You see, people want value these days and that means that superior service is the new expectation. Anything less and you risk losing your customers to someone who is willing and able to provide an outstanding experience.

The bar has also been raised for those of you who are working inside companies. Getting a report back to your internal customer within the hour is now the expectation. And Lord help you if they find you are playing on Facebook while your deadline has passed.

Now is the time to step up your game. Consider getting the help you need so you can rapidly achieve your goals and become the employee or leader you know you can be. Call us today to learn more about our coaching services for those interested in enhancing personal effectiveness and reaching

seat customers so they feel like valued guests? You change the situation by replacing them with people who have the ability to think on their feet. You should provide training and reward those employees who consistently do the right things.

Here is a simple solution to the problem described above: Train the hostess so she knows that tables near the restroom and kitchen should be the last seat filled. Even better, suggest that prior to walking the customer to an undesirable table, give them the option of waiting for a seat in a more favorable location.

Speaking of process and training, there is such a thing as too much. Last week, my husband took our twelve-year old son and his friends to the Olive Garden for a birthday celebration. Upon arrival, the line was out the door. But that didn't dismay my husband since he was told the wait would be no more than thirty-minutes. Forty minutes later, and an even longer line, my husband overheard the hostess telling families the wait would be between twenty-five and thirty minutes. My husband gently suggested to the hostess that perhaps she could try to be more accurate (code word for ditching the company line) so that families with young children could properly assess if they could endure the wait.

My favorite restaurants (and the one's I return to most) don't necessarily have the best food in town, but they are honest with me when it comes to wait times. Now I know that it's difficult to project exactly how long it will take to turn a table over, but I'd rather be called to my table 10 minutes earlier than anticipated, than to be kept waiting longer than promised.

Here's how one establishment manages to put processes into place that satisfy both the needs of the customer and the restaurant. We recently had dinner on a busy Saturday evening at the Popponeset Inn on Cape Cod. As we were finishing our meal, the host came over and asked us if we wanted to play "*Let's Make a Deal*". He then offered us the option of trading our beachside table for complimentary desserts in the bar. With two kids in tow, that was certainly an offer that we couldn't pass up. But it wasn't so much the deal that caught my attention. It was the way the message was delivered. He did it with humor and grace. It was obvious to me that the host was trying to create a win-win situation for us and the guests who were waiting for a table. He was the perfect hire for this position and he had the disposition to prove it.

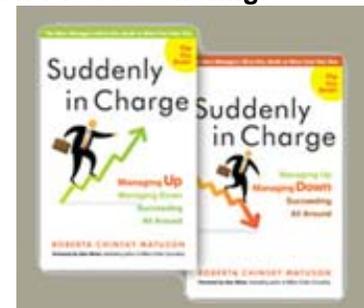
Training by osmosis

How many times have you walked into a new job and knew exactly what you needed to know in order to be an asset to the firm? For most of us, that number is zero. The servers at McDonald's get more training than the average employee. Yet business owners are shocked when customers complain about an ill-equipped employee or it appears a new employee may not work out.

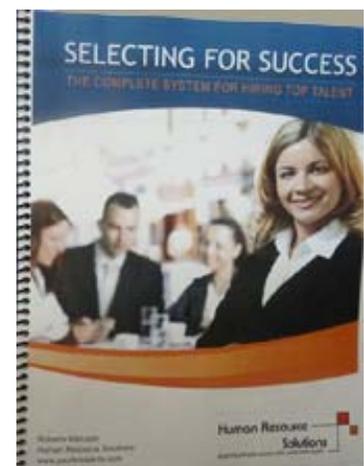
their full potential.

- Roberta

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From our Blog Rolls

Many organizations hope training will happen by osmosis and are sadly disappointed when learning does not take place. A strategy to create a customer-focused workplace must include training from day one.

How might your service ratings and profitability dramatically increase if you invested the time to train and onboard every new employee? I suspect two things would happen. First, the employees would immediately become productive and secondly, they would feel like they were working for a firm that valued their presence. My goodness. Why wouldn't you do this?

Every business today is in the business of customer service. Believe me, ticking me off when I'm already upset about a problem or even worse, when I'm hungry, is not going to do anything to strengthen our relationship. Find a better way and help customers like me become advocates for your company.

As the economy improves, businesses will be scrambling to reclaim their piece of the customer pie. Wouldn't it be easier to keep what you already have on your plate, rather than hunting for crumbs? The time to bring customer service back is **now**, before your customers decide to cut you completely out of their diet.

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Recent Testimonials:

About nine years ago, it occurred to me that I was a walking employee handbook and that our policies tended to be influenced by the mood I was in at the time a staff member asked about a particular issue. It was then that we decided we needed an employee handbook.

We put together a team of five staff members from various departments to create our handbook. After about two months and many hours of meeting, we had not made any progress what so ever. We needed help!

Roberta Matuson was our answer. She met with us, developed a plan, and walked us through the process to record our policies and procedures. She helped identify areas where policies were non-existent. She then developed and produced our employee handbook. We still use it today.

Whenever a question or situation has arisen over the last nine years —we simply refer to the handbook—it has not failed us. Thank you

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Roberta will be in Washington, DC this month to present a workshop on **Communicating Across the Generations** to the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. She will also be facilitating a **Suddenly in Charge Roundtable** for the Northeast Human Resource Association and is scheduled to present **Winning Outcomes** for members of the Employer's Association of the NorthEast.

Please **click here** to see Roberta's new speaker web page. We are currently booking dates for 2010 keynotes and presentations. To ensure you get the date you need, don't delay. Give us a call today or **e-mail** us to lock in a date.

Roberta!

Tim Slattery, CEO
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Media Sightings

"How to Fill a Job That Nobody Wants" *Inc.com*, Sept. 8, 2010
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"How to Find a Better Job in a Murky Market" *SmartMoney*, August 7, 2010
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"Six Jobs That Will Earn Extra Money for Holiday Spending" *AOL Jobs*, Sept. 24, 2010
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"Can You Come Back From Long term Unemployment?" *Career Stallion Blog*, Sept. 26, 2010
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"Seven Best Excuses for Calling in Sick" *Yahoo*, Sept. 15, 2010
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