

Ask SCORE...

Counselors to Naples Area Small Businesses

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Got business questions?

Ask SCORE

By: Gray Poehler, Business Counselor

CUSTOMER SERVICE IS CRITICAL TO BUSINESS SUCCESS

QUESTION: *I am starting my business and will have a number of employees interacting with our customers. These will be mostly young and part time employees. I can give them the technical training that they need but what other skills should they have before dealing with my customers?*

Frank P., Estero

ANSWER: *Frank, First of all, remember that your employees are the face of your business! Next, remember that you only get one chance to make a good first impression on the patron. So, in addition to the technical training, you should be sure to give them training in customer service.*

What is customer service? Is it “I know it when I see it,” or “Treat people like you would want to be treated”? How about “Going the extra mile to satisfy the customer, even if you think they are wrong”? Remember the adage “the customer is always right” refers to their opinions, not yours. Always give the impression you understand how they feel, even if you are unable to resolve their problem.

There have been many studies on this subject. There are also annual awards for the best customer service. For example, Wachovia Corporation has been recognized for giving the best customer service among financial institutions. Ritz Carleton Hotels has been held out as the standard for customer service in the hospitality industry. Likewise, Nordstroms has been recognized in the retailing industry.

Perhaps we should get even more basic in order to answer your question. Lets talk about typical everyday events such as going to a fast food restaurant, the “big box” retailer, and the local convenience store.

I walk up to a fast food counter and begin to give my order. The employee is asked a question by a coworker and responds; ignoring me for the time being. The employee then walks away to help the coworker. In about 30 seconds she comes back and takes my order, not saying she was sorry I had to wait. What is going on here? Should I have been ignored for 30 seconds? Should the coworker have interrupted my server while she had a customer? Could my server have said excuse me a moment while I help this other employee? Should I have a problem with this anyway? What is the big deal about 30 seconds?

Let's take another example. I go to a "big box" electronics store to get service on my computer. The "techie" looks at computer and says the problem is either 1 or 2. He asks if I have a service warranty. I cant remember so he sends me to the "customer service" counter (ten steps away) so the customer service person can look me up in their computer. While she is doing this, another employee approaches and engages her in conversation. I have to wait until they finish their conversation. Then the phone rings and she answers it while the other customer service person just stands there! I wait some more.

Finally, I go to the convenience store to purchase a couple of items. I put them on the counter. The cashier rings it up, however I have to ask how much I owe as she just stands there. I give her the money, she takes it, all the while talking to another employee standing nearby. She doesn't say thank you, she doesn't make eye contact, and she doesn't offer to put the items in a bag. I am basically left to fend for myself.

Do I want to go back to any of these places? Not really. I didn't feel appreciated at any of them.

So, in answer to your question, your employees need training in how to deal with customers. You need to give them basic examples of everyday situations and show them how to react. When with a customer, this is where your complete attention should be directed. Other employees should not interrupt; but if necessary to interrupt, then permission should be asked of the customer. Phones should be answered by someone other than the front line person. Or, if it is necessary for the front line person to answer the phone, they should answer by saying they are with a customer, put the caller on hold, or promptly call them back once your transaction is concluded.

Your service level can make the difference between attracting and retaining customers or missing this golden opportunity. Make customer service as high a priority as the technical training and it will pay off with more business and ensure long term customer loyalty. One last thing...when hiring, take the time to assess the applicants people skills. Are they friendly, talkative, smiling, good listeners and continually make eye contact when speaking and listening? These "people skills" are something that can be developed but it helps if they come naturally to the individual.

The Naples Chapter of SCORE, Counselors to America's Small Business, offers FREE business counseling. There you will find over forty experienced and dedicated volunteers from all walks of business life. Just call 239-430-0081 or visit www.scorenaples.org and click on "Request counseling now as a first time client." The SCORE business office is located at 900 Goodlette Road North, in the Fifth Third branch bank building. Office hours are 9:00 am to Noon, Monday through Friday.

If you would like an answer to your question, please fill out the form located at www.scorenaples.org/askscore. A counselor will contact you within 48 hours. Please include your name, email address and a contact phone number.