



The Keys to Quality Service

Over the years it has become clear that creating a customer-focused organization goes way beyond "fixing those people out there" and includes every individual and every process at all levels of the organization. Companies committed to becoming more customer focused cannot depend on training alone to accomplish their goal. They should also explore the following six key areas of quality service.

- **Top-down commitment**
- **Measurement and feedback**
- **Education and training**
- **Customer-friendly systems**
- **Quality service standards**
- **Recognition of service excellence**

Top-down commitment

Most top retail managers agree that Quality Service is an important element in business success. But their commitment to service is really in direct proportion with the degree to which they "walk what they talk" when it comes to service excellence.

In the final analysis, it isn't what managers say but the actions they take that provides staff with an indication of what is really considered important and valued within the organization.

The old saying "fish stinks from the head down" aptly describes how top management sets the service standards within their organization. There is no faster way for managers to cripple a quality improvement effort than by promoting service excellence with their words and expressing mediocrity in their actions.

Effective managers can show their commitment to quality service by taking a roll-up-your-sleeves approach; jumping in when it comes to dealing with customers; making a point of knowing the service level customers are receiving; and by modeling excellent service skills when interacting with employees and customers.

Measurement and feedback

A while ago, in a management consultation, during a discussion of measurement and feedback a recommendation that the company do a customer survey was made. At this suggestion, one manager cautioned the group saying, "This is a bad time to survey our customers -- they're mad at us right now!"



Many companies operate on the mistaken assumption that they know what their customers want. One of the first and most important steps in improving service excellence is to understand what your customers need and expect, and how well you are meeting or exceeding those expectations.

You should take the pulse of your customers before administering any quality service improvement program. To get accurate feedback, use methods such as telephone interviews, mail surveys, face-to-face interviews, complaint analysis, lost-customer surveys and focus groups. Once the data has been gathered and analyzed it is important that the results and conclusions be effectively communicated to the people who are in the best position to effect a change and to those who participated in the surveys. This confirms that their feedback was heard and outlines any changes that are being considered or have been made.

Education and training

There is often a misconception within the managements of some companies that training will solve all the problems. "Train those people" and the wheels of the organization will start or keep running smoothly. This is rarely the case. The enthusiasm generated by participants in a training program is fragile and easily destroyed by the environment that they return to.

Although the areas of education and training often serve distinct and separate purposes, they both contribute to the staff's awareness of the importance of service.

In this context education is any ongoing process that highlights how service improvement relates to specific jobs, processes and desired results. It can take the form of newsletters, weekly meetings, videos, etc.

Service training, on the other hand, means the more formalized, classroom-style approach that strives to build skills and awareness in specific areas such as:

- Customer service skills for frontline staff
- Customer service skills for backroom staff
- Orientation for new hires
- Service management skills for all managers
- Quality problem-solving skills

Customer-friendly systems

This area is probably more overwhelming than any other to organizations involved in becoming customer focused. Part of the problem lies in the tangled web of procedures and policies that make up the systems and form the processes for the way an individual company does business.



Systems, while obviously indispensable, can help or hurt the customer and staff depending on how they are designed. The two key problems are usually:

1. Systems that are set up with the objective of protecting the company from having the employees or customers take advantage of them.
2. Systems that are inherited -- the way the company has always done business -- and whose validity or effectiveness is not questioned. A participant in one of our workshops put it perfectly when she said, "In our company adhering to the procedures and policies overrides common sense."

While there are a multitude of systems within any company, the key systems to be examined in becoming a more customer-focused company include:

- Sales/ordering systems
- Supply/logistics systems
- Accounting/payment systems
- After-sales service systems
- Complaint procedures
- Crisis/contingency systems
- Telephone/computer systems

Experience has shown that examining and changing inward-focused systems, i.e., those that work favorably for the company but unfavorably for the customer, becomes the foundation on which a successful service improvement process rests. Consequently, until the fundamental service problems caused by the system itself are resolved, any progress in quality service improvement is limited.

Quality service standards

Friendliness, courtesy, responsiveness, accuracy, etc., are all worthy goals, but how do you achieve them when they mean different things to different people? For example, if you ask five of your staff to define "being friendly to a customer," you will more than likely receive five responses that differ to some degree.

The solution to achieving service consistency is developing specific, objective and measurable service standards that translate service qualities into specific behaviors and actions. Service standards allow objective evaluation of staff performance and help ensure consistency in treatment of customers. Some basic standards might be:

- Answering the phone within three rings
- Returning all customer calls within 2 hours
- Following up with customers weekly concerning all pending orders



Recognition of service excellence

Creating an environment of recognition for service excellence is clearly important yet often overlooked. The three areas to consider are:

1. A formal recognition program. This type of program provides rewards for the individual or team that best fulfills the specified service criteria. The rewards given vary depending on the level of excellence.
2. Informal recognition. This is a more casual and spontaneous acknowledgment of staff that is expressed directly to an employee by a manager or supervisor.
3. Salary and advancement. In the final analysis all of your employees have to see some personal benefit to increasing their sensitivity toward customers. If these benefits are not in some way central to advancement in the organization, then the gospel of service just becomes hot air.