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CUSTOMER SERVICE

Sales tactics

Irate customers

Follow up

Monitoring

Executive involvement

COMFORT!

NEED HELP?

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CUSTOMER SERVICE: THE REAL SOLUTION SELLING

By George Matyjewicz, PhD

“We are selling COMFORT!”

I originally wrote this article in my column in Gifts & Decorative Accessories in 2001 and looking at it now, it still applies, with some minor updates. What’s more, I’m seeing this process being used at some large companies.

Interesting to note that no matter how the economy turns, or how industry trends rise and fall, there is always one item that remains as most important for success – customer service. Yet, so many companies neglect this vital part of business.

Customer service is really nothing more than solution selling – meet the customer, listen to them, identify their needs, get a buy-in that you understand their needs, find a solution to satisfy those needs, present the solution, do a trial close, then close the account.

Let’s look at how we can apply those sales tactics to customer support via telephone:

1. **Greeting.** Introduce yourself by name and tell the customer what you expect to accomplish, e.g., “Hello. My name is George and I am here to answer your questions today.” Ask for the customer’s name and e-mail address (if an online issue) in case you get cut off.
2. **Listen.** Let your customer talk and tell you their problem. As an example, a lady calls and says “My name is Mary, and I went to your site, and can’t seem to access my account.”
3. **Identify their needs.** Take notes. Write down the issues that the customer states, so that you can repeat them back.
4. **Buy in.** When the customer has finished, read back the points discussed. Then ask for a buy in, i.e., “If we get you into your account, will we have solved your problem?”
5. **Solution.** Solve the problem, preferably while the customer is on the telephone. Explain, in detail, how to access the account.
6. **Trial close.** Ask if the customer is able to access her account.
7. **Close.** If the customer is able to access the account, ask “Have we solved your problem today?” When the customer says yes, you are both in agreement – the problem was stated and resolved. If you were in sales you would now ask for the check!

If this is an online issue, send the customer an e-mail as a follow up. If you can't solve the problem while the customer is on the telephone, when you do, be sure you send them an e-mail and ask them to tell you if the problem is solved. A typical follow up note would be:

Hello Mary:

I am happy to hear that you are now able to access your account and that we were able to solve your issue. If you have any other issues, you may want to try our "How do I..." section of our site at: http://www.yourcompany.com/how_do_i/

I will go ahead and close this case as resolved since the "account access problem" is now gone. If you should have any future difficulties with our site or our products or services, please let us know. We know you have a choice in doing business, and we thank you for choosing us.

Sincerely,

George

Customer Support Specialist

Satisfying our customers is our top priority. We welcome your comments and suggestions about how we can improve the support we provide you. Please email us at csrmanager@yourcompany.com. You can also contact my manager, Phyllis Mathews by emailing phyllism@yourcompany.com. For more information about Your Company, please visit <http://www.yourcompany.com/follow-support/>

Note the message at the end of the e-mail. It strongly states your position, as you solicit their comments – you are customer-oriented. It gives them the ability to contact your boss, either to praise you or to complain (which should alert management that additional training is required). And by directing them to a specific directory at your site, you are able to monitor how many people take your advice for further information.

Irate customers. How do you handle those real irate customers? You know the ones who call screaming and calling you every name in the book. The first thing you need to do is listen. What is the real issue? Is it poor delivery? Wrong product? Poor accounting? Many years ago a client got a very irate call from a customer who was very upset after receiving an invoice from them "Why did I get this blankety, blank invoice? I haven't done business with you in two years!" To which my client calmly replied "Oh? How come?" Which threw the customer completely off guard. To him, this invoice was the issue. My client knew he could solve that easily, but to him the issue was what had they done to lose this customer. PS: He got the customer back.

Follow up. One of the nicest things you can ever do is to follow up after a sale and after a customer support issue. It shows that you care. And don't believe that adage that lawyers live by in court - "don't ask a question where you are afraid to hear the answer." If you are afraid of the answer you might hear from your customer, you shouldn't be in business. Everything you do should satisfy the customer – the quality of the products/services, staff, convenience, responses – every detail.

Monitor customer support. With the last downturn in the economy, many companies cut back on staff. So, what do you do as a manager or business owner? Simple, have your managers, engineers and operations people handling the support calls. You will learn a lot – what do your customers really need. One CEO that I knew from a publicly-traded service company reported that call waiting times were down and customer problems were escalated up the chain of service much more quickly. We setup a dashboard so that he could watch their customer service call queue every day. There were always three, four, five calls waiting before we made these changes. After, more often than not, no calls were waiting and there was a customer service rep available.

Executive involvement is mandatory for success. I was once President of a global digital payment solution company based in the Caribbean and we had all executives take one day a week answering customer support calls and e-mails. It gave us all the ability to understand some of the issues customers face, and how to direct the resources to resolve those issues. It was quite surprising to our customers, when they discover they are talking to our President, or CFO, or COO or CTO. More importantly each of us learned what it took to satisfy our customers from a different perspective – technological, operations, accounting, product development and marketing. It was truly a win-win situation for all – us and our customers.

What are we all really selling?

COMFORT!

Making the customer feel comfortable doing business with us.

In the early part of the last century, retailers catered to customers personally. They went to market to purchase specific items for specific customers. As department stores and chains came on the scene, that level of personalization went away. Instead merchandise managers and buyers told the customers what they needed. It's time to go back to the "good old days" except with modern technologies.

What can you do in your brick and mortar store to satisfy customers and to make them want to come back? Have you tried asking them what you can do? While surveys may be a start, they are impersonal, and they slant the customer's opinions to respond to what you think they need. Instead, train your sales staff to ask the customer what they would like to see. Then have the staff member record that information in your computer system for analysis later. Numbers (surveys) are great for statisticians but not for personal service.

When a sales associate is waiting on a customer they could say: "I am looking for ways to advance my skills and to become a better employee and would like your help. What should I or the store do to make you feel more comfortable about shopping here and make you come back soon?"

That statement is very general, and gives the customer the opportunity to respond as they see fit, not in a manner that you suggested with a survey. It also makes it a more personal discussion, giving the customer the opportunity to help the associate, or to complain about the store or product selection, or management, etc. It's human nature to help somebody, and folks like to help a young associate succeed. The associate must listen and be prepared to ask more questions. AND most importantly, the sales associate has to have an open mind and NOT a predetermined agenda.

When the customer leaves, the associate should go to a computer and record the information gathered for analysis later. If the general responses show a pattern, i.e., the product selection is bad, or the store is messy, or specific products should be in the store, etc. then action can be taken to improve.

By the way, the owners and managers should also ask the same questions independently. Customers will tell management something different than what he/she tells a sales associate.

And, probably the most important issue – know your customer by name! It is so frustrating to shop at a store for years and never be acknowledged by anybody in the store. That is cold and impersonal, which means you lose the loyalty of customers. Keep in mind, you will lose 10% of your customers each year, without you doing anything wrong. Why add to that with poor service?

Finally, don't forget to say thank you. If you really want to go out of your way, you could learn to say thank you in other languages. At a retail discussion list I owned years ago, list members worldwide told us how to say thanks in their language. I was in a store in the Caribbean and on the front door they had taped a copy of "Welcome" in various languages and when you left the store, another sign that said "Thank You" in various languages. Very effective.

There is no magic to customer support. It is simple courtesy and caring for your customers, and your ability to help them. Customer service never goes out of style.

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About the author. George Matyjewicz, PhD is Global Strategist and Managing Principal at GAP Enterprises, LLC. His dissertation "Just In Time Payments And The New Global Currency For Conducting Business In A Global Economy" was compiled from 3+ decades experience in the business world. He was formerly President/General Manager of a global digital currency company with customers in 120 countries and Chief E-Commerce Officer for a global giftware company where selling the big ones was critical. He was a Principal/Partner at a top 50 U.S. CPA/Consulting firm. He is regularly published as an expert on global business, finance, technology and implementation.

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