

## **At Your Service:** *Gaining the Competitive Edge*

by Mimi Donaldson

More time is spent in stressful work. We have less time for leisure. Standards are changing. Aging baby boomers want to enjoy work; they demand service. The ever-growing demand for more customer service focuses us on gaining the edge. Smart entrepreneurs treat customers more than right. And managers need to become "trainers" of customer service.

Top people seem to already have an edge in grasping the "rapport-building service" mentality. We discovered long ago that people often don't "buy" on the basis of need, and people don't "sell" based on their breadth of product knowledge. People "buy" people; the buyer buys you. All of us have bought at least one item we don't need, and we bought it out of the "relationship" we developed over a two-to-ten minute period with the salesperson.

Women often more easily grasp the "go-the-extra-step-service" approach, as they've had to go many extra steps to achieve quasi-equal footing with men in the workplace. We know how to nurture, and the concept of "taking care" of the customer comes naturally. The "basics" of good customer service training, however, are not gender-based. Managers can coach customer service representatives to answer the phone, channel potential buyers to salespeople, answer questions and handle complaints and calm agitated customers. They must handle huge volumes of calls and be compassionate while being efficient! Most people view this is an impossible task. It's not.

Here are the 5 basic steps of servicing a customer with grace and control:

1. **Be clear on your purpose.** What do you want the customer to do, think, or feel after your communication with them? Managers are smart to coach people to "write it down!" In the "do" column, you may list: "pay, renew, expand the order, and fill out the form correctly; tell friends to buy; give us repeat business; not call my boss; never again call to complain." In the "think" column may be: "think we're an excellent company; I'm a capable, intelligent, professional person; think our product is worth the investment." In the "feel" column may be: "feel taken care of; feel they're in capable hands; feel satisfied and confident in their decision to buy; feel trust in our company and in me." When people are clear on their purpose and write it down in their own words, their focus improves. It's also the necessary step to provide focus for the next four steps.
2. **Be appropriate.** Appropriate is one of the best words in the English language. The dictionary definition is "proper, fit, and suited to a given purpose." In I Ching, the Book of Changes, a source of oracular wisdom in Chinese philosophy for three thousand years, a most important concept is Li, which means "conduct". An excerpt: "One's purpose will be achieved if one behaves with decorum. Pleasant manners succeed even with irritable people." To the manager or entrepreneur who is a service person, this means that every word uttered, every action performed must be suited to the purpose they defined in Step

#1. Logic prevails as people start examining their behavior. If your purpose is that this customer come back, would you be rude to him to prove your point? Of course not. If your purpose is having the customer think your company is professional, would you answer her query as to the whereabouts of a salesperson, "Oh, she's around here somewhere - we never know where she is." Ridiculous. These comments defeat your purpose. They're not suited to your given purpose, so they're not appropriate. But how do you stop these sentences before they come out of your mouth? This leads us to the next step.

3. **Know your "hot buttons" and don't get sucked in.** Certain words or phrases used by customers push our buttons. Examples: "What are you gals doing over there anyway?" "It's your fault." "Let me speak to the man who knows something or who owns the company." "You must have lost my payment." "Why is your product so expensive?" Be aware of what your "hot buttons" are. Make a list; read it over; desensitize yourself, so the next time you hear one of them, you do not have to lash back with a defensive remark, or a "yeah, but." Instead, you can ...
4. **Push the "pause button" to gain control.** Our "pause button" separates us from the animals. My cat, Linguini, is a stimulus-response machine. When he hears the sound of the electric can opener, his response is consistent and predictable. He will come running, and howl incessantly until the stimulus is removed - until the sound of the can opener stops. Linguini has no pause button. He can't pause at the kitchen door and before he expends all that energy, check to see if it's my tuna fish or his. He doesn't know the difference. (I do. It's about a buck thirty-three.) Some customers you know act like stimulus-response machines. Their upsets are consistent and predictable. But your reaction doesn't have to be. When you are aware of your hot buttons and one gets pushed, you can pause - very briefly - and choose the appropriate response. One appropriate response -- suited to your given purpose and efficient at the same time -- is described in the final step of customer service.
5. **Give the customer 6-second empathy.** Using empathy is demonstrating with words that you understand what the customer is saying and how they are feeling. It is a statement that is calming, comforting, positive, and specific. A good one takes only six seconds. "I understand how frustrating it is not to get the information when you want it." 6 seconds. "I understand how easy it is to get impatient with that machine." 6 seconds. "It sounds like you're very upset. I see you need our full cooperation." 6 seconds. A sincerely empathetic statement can defuse a hostile customer. It also gives you time to think of the response you can make which will satisfy your customer (i.e. achieve your purpose) while staying within the boundaries of your company's policy. These five steps have proven effective for thousands of people and will prove effective for you.