



THE FOUR GREAT MYTHS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, "Customers are not dependent on us, we are dependent on them". In the last ten years, customer service has finally become a major focus for many organizations, as they wake up to the fact that retaining customers can be just, if not more profitable, than trying to win new ones. However, despite the many books, tapes and seminars around the subject of customer service, many myths still abound. As I work with organizations both in the UK and internationally, four particular myths reoccur.

Myth 1 - 'No News Is Good News'

I remember wanting to buy a cot mobile for a friend's baby from a well-known store. As the last remaining one was on display, I decided to ask for some discount as it was clearly 'shop soiled'. The store manager, whilst dismantling the mobile from the cot replied, "look, do you want this or not, because I'm not prepared to give you any discount". Stunned by this response (and coming from the store manager especially), I decided, perhaps not surprisingly, not to make a purchase. As I left the store I remarked to a friend, "do you know, I've a good mind to write to the store's head office and complain". The question is, did I? No. Why not? Like thousands of other customers, my reasons were simple; hassle, inconvenience and most importantly; would my complaint make any difference anyway? This particular organization has remained oblivious to the poor service I received. However, I have told many of my friends (and literally thousands of people attending my seminars and talks) and never shopped at that store again! So what can we learn from this experience? Although no organization likes to receive complaints, at least by complaining, a customer is giving you the opportunity to put things right. In fact, handling a customer complaint well, can actually cement a greater loyalty from that customer in the future. Without clear communication and feedback, we may be nearer to losing our customer than we realize. So beware of 'nice customers', the ones who never complain but tell their friends and never come back. No news is not necessarily good news.

Myth 2 - 'Organizations Know What Customers Want'

I spend a great deal of my time in hotels. One of the perks I enjoy about staying in hotels is the brilliant breakfasts they provide. I love the wide selection of fruit and cereal and cooked food that I can help myself to. Recently however, whilst staying in a hotel in London, the attempts of the staff to provide what they considered to be great service left me disappointed. Despite all the food being laid out buffet style, I was told I could not help myself, but a waiter would take my order. "But I'd rather help myself" I protested. The hotel staff insisted however, that a waiter would get the food for me. Far from listening to what I wanted, the hotel assumed they knew what great service was, but failed to find out their customer's perspective on the matter. Whilst we must always be exploring ways to improve our service, it is important to remember that it is the customer's perception of what great service looks like that counts and not ours.



Myth 3 - 'The Customer Is Always Right'

Actually the customer is not always right. On some occasions, a minority of customers are arrogant, rude and even hostile. So, they might not always be right, but they are always the customer. This fact however, is not an invitation to passively roll over submissively at the first sign of an angry customer. An organization should do their utmost to help their customers - but not at any cost. Staff can become demoralized and disheartened when in order to appease a dissatisfied customer, they are continually undermined by those senior to them. If for business reasons, an organization does back down to an unreasonable request, staff need to have the reasons for this explained and be given guidelines should the situation arise in the future. Training also needs to be given to staff on how to handle and deal with difficult and angry customer. Failure to do so can lead to poor performance, increased stress levels and increased staff turnover.

Myth 4 - 'Customer Service Is Just Common Sense'

Certainly, if this were the case, organizations would no longer require the services that I and others provide and people everywhere would be receiving the level of service they expect. The reality is that what can seem like common sense to one person, can appear to be rocket science to another. So why does delivering great service seem so natural to some people, but quite alien to others? Recent research, particularly by Daniel Goleman, has identified a range of 'intelligences' that people may possess, one of which is 'interpersonal' i.e. the ability to deal with, empathize and understand other people. This skill is crucial in dealing with customers and explains to some extent why some people find handling customers easier than others do. Lacking the necessary interpersonal skills, coupled with some peoples lack of self awareness, explains why common sense is rarely common practice for some people. Remember, never to belittle common sense. As an American proverb so aptly puts it, 'common sense is genius dressed up in working clothes'. Now, by avoiding these four common myths of customer service and by developing a customer service culture throughout the whole organization, perhaps I'll be finding myself less busy in the future! Which reminds me, sales training or presentation coaching anyone?