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Customer service: Hard but essential

Today, I would like to talk about a passion of mine — customer service.

Customer service is a particularly important topic for a sales column as salespeople are generally the primary, and sometimes the only, contact between the buying and selling firm.

Each time the salesperson comes into contact with an existing or potential customer he or she has the opportunity to enhance or destroy the relationship between these two organizations.

Jan Carlzon of Scandinavian Airlines called these crucial interactions “moments of truth” as they can lead to success or failure for the enterprise.

Why focus on delivering quality service to your customers? Obviously it’s a nice thing to do. We all like to receive quality service in our own interactions — at the car dealership, dentist or health club, so it only seems right that we should try to give our customers good service. But there are sound business reasons for delivering quality customer service.

First, it often allows us to sell more to our existing customers. Research has shown that customers tend to be more profitable the longer we keep them. If they like our products and services, they will often come back to buy more — often without as much selling effort required as in the initial sales contacts.

Of course, the reverse is true. Poor service tends to result in lost customers and sales. Further, happy customers tend to tell others about their experiences, which tends to bring us new customers, while unhappy customers have the opposite effect.

Finally, delivering quality service tends to help isolate us from price competition.

For example, I personally love it when the employees at the coffee shop remember my name. It’s a wonderful example of quality customer service.

Personally, I’ve never experienced or heard an example of poor service from Lands’ End, LL Bean, Nordstrom, Franklin Covey, Levinger, or the Ritz Carlton.

On the other hand, I could certainly share some examples of poor customer service. If delivering quality service is such a good business strategy, why do we find so many companies falling short in this area? Perhaps the greatest reason for a failure to deliver a quality customer experience lies in the fact that it is simply hard. It is often suggested that customer service lies in the “eye of the customer.” We all have different ideas of what constitutes quality service and it’s simply hard to make everyone happy.

For example, I personally love it when the employees remember my name at the coffee shop. For me, the ideal coffee shop experience would be much like the atmosphere in “Cheers.” In other words, I would love to have all the employees say “Dr. Dave” when I walk into the shop. However, some of you might find the same experience unnerving.

It’s obviously a challenge to meet or exceed everyone’s expectations, especially given the fact everyone wants something slightly different. To stress how difficult delivering quality service can be, consider the customer service person who hears nothing but complaints all day long. Wouldn’t it be difficult to be positive all day under those circumstances?

In short, the payoff for delivering quality service can be great to the salesperson and the organization, but it can be quite challenging.

In my next column I’ll try to shed some light on this difficult process by summarizing a steam of research that has identified five areas of service that seem most important to consumers.

I believe addressing these five areas can enhance customer service in either the business-to-consumer or business-to-business markets.

In the mean time, let’s have some fun.

Send me your best or worst customer service story at daveshepherd@georgiasouthern.edu. I’ll try to use some of these in the next column.

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Business brokers make buying, selling easier

Business brokers are intermediaries who assist the seller of a business and a buyer in the buying and selling process. They typically assess the value of the business; advertise it for sale with or without disclosing its identity and conduct the initial potential buyer interviews and discussions.

The business broker handles the negotiations between the prospective buyer and the seller. The business broker tries to overcome the challenges presented by the buyer and seller plus their CPA and attorneys.

A business broker will facilitate the progress of the due diligence investigation and generally assist with myriad details associated with a sale of the business.

Buying or selling a business is a complex task as there are many moving parts. These include the buyer, seller, lenders, landlord, attorneys, accountants, employees, suppliers, customers and others.

A business broker works to keep all these parts moving during the negotiating and transition process. Why use a business broker?

The process of successfully buying or selling a business can be improved by the participation of a dedicated professional with a diversified knowledge of a business sale transaction. This professional should be ready with a team in place to accomplish every aspect of the transfer.

Marketing and facilitating a business transfer is a full-time job. You deserve someone who will be as passionate as you are or even more so about the whole transaction process.

If you are interested in selling your business and don’t know the answers to the questions below, you could benefit from the assistance of a professional business broker.

• How do you reach qualified buyers, possibly including competitors, without disclosing your intentions to sell?

• How do you evaluate your business objectively to ensure you receive top dollar for your investment?

• How do you prepare and provide the information a prospective buyer will require to interest him in pursuing your business in favor of other options?

• How do you arrive at the best price and terms for your business?

• The seller wants to take into account the “new lifestyle” of not owning a business.

• How do you maximize your favorable exposure to potential offers while minimizing your potentially damaging public exposure to customers, competitors, employees and suppliers?

• How do you market your business in all of the appropriate markets, databases and media efficiently, effectively and confidentially?

• How do you screen and pre-qualify buyers, determine their motivations, managerial capabilities and financial strength?

• How do you effectively sell your business, diverting significant time, effort and resources to that process while continuing to manage your ongoing business productively?

Most business owners have focused their lives on growing and developing their businesses and seldom know how to answer all of those questions. In other words, your business demands a professional, just as running your business has demanded your professional attention.

Business brokers have the expertise, tools, and professional attention to market and sell your business successfully on a local and national basis. The objective is to protect your business investment and maximize your net after tax profit on the sale.

Your business brokers should strive to maintain high ethical standards and communicate in an open and honest manner during the selling process.

Leo McKittrick is a business broker with Best Business Brokers. He can be contacted at leomck@best-business-brokers.com or 912-667-7355.