

# Being A Customer Service Leader

By Bette Price

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In 1990, authors and management consultants Karl Albrecht and Ron Zemke published one of the first books on customer service, bringing to our attention how customer service impacts the long-term success of a business. One decade later more than 1500 books have been written about customer service. And in 2001, Albrecht and Zemke updated their findings to reflect customer service in the new economy. Despite all that has been written about customer service, research by TARP (an organization which researches the effectiveness of customer service) and the American Customer Satisfaction Index (which ties customer service to profitability) indicate a continual decline in customer service. So, what's the problem? Doesn't anybody get it?

“Getting it” requires taking a serious look at how you treat customer service within your organization. In that vein, two important considerations must be looked at:

**One:** Customer service must be thought of as a leadership issue. Any employees whose age put them in their early twenties a decade ago have not likely experienced much in the way of effective customer service. Reading about it, being told about, even attending training about it, are not the same as personally being on the receiving end of good customer service. So, it becomes a leadership issue. It becomes incumbent upon leadership to ensure that good customer service is modeled and rewarded. People grasp what they experience.

One of the leaders most important tasks is to establish an environment of trust. James Copeland, CEO of Deloitte & Touche, is quick to point out that merely talking about trust does little good. “I think they [employees] have to see it in action,” he says. “People have to understand that you shoot straight with them and if there's a problem, it has to be talked about honestly and not sugar coated. If it's a hard solution, that's all right, but you

have to deal with that in a way where people would say it reflects the trust they have put in you.” This trust philosophy directly relates to the recovery factor when a customer has been disappointed or let down. Statistics show that when customers are told the truth when encountering a problem, and provided honest answers and solutions, they not only remain customers, but it enhances their loyalty. It is a leader's responsibility to model and reinforce this trust.

**Two:** Customer service is a marketing issue. It always has been, yet often it is set aside as a separate issue. Marketing is, after all, everything you do to reach and keep customers. Therefore, any organization that commits to making customer service the focal point of its marketing strategy has an opportunity to gain a great competitive advantage. Today, organizations that understand and deliver effective customer service will stand out in a customer's mind when compared to the poor customer service that is delivered by many organizations.

The ability to determine what good customer service is for your organization begins with your mission statement. The development of an effective mission statement directly ties back to being a leadership issue. Too many organizations have unrealistic or public relations-oriented mission statements rather than well developed, realistic, living mission statements. When your mission is genuine, succinctly written, and truly reflective of your organization's core values, it will serve as a valuable document from which to craft operating principles. Take the mission statement from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation for example:

*“To research and identify the unfulfilled needs of society and to develop, implement and/or fund breakthrough solutions that have a lasting impact and offer a choice and hope for the future.”*

This mission is so clear that it is easy to go into the core of it and define who, what, where, when, and how of each integral part of the mission. As this relates to customer service, for example, when a client of the foundation is dealt with, it would be easy to go into the mission statement and ask, “did I respond in a manner that will have a lasting impact and did I reinforce that we offer a choice and hope for the future?”

Your mission statement can also be helpful in establishing service standards—specific standards that will be acceptable practices for all employees from which to operate. If, for example, your mission statement says that your mission is to “serve the needs of your members,” what standards can be set that will ensure that you are meeting that part of your mission? What specifically will your employees be expected to do to ensure that you are living your mission?

Organizations that are committed to being service oriented will use their mission statement as a living document--referring to it often, building principles and standards from it and evaluating performance and changes based upon it. Bill Matthews, Managing Partner of the Michigan based public accounting firm of Plante & Moran, says there may be very little difference in his firm’s Core Purpose, Statement of Principles, and Commitment Statement than any other organization’s other than the fact that his organization works very hard to practice what is said on these sheets of paper. Whenever the firm’s management is faced with a challenge of determining the right thing to do, “We say, well, what do we say in our statement of principles? And we go back to that,” Moran says. “We constantly refer to that in making decisions on where we are going.”

Reevaluating the appropriateness of your mission statement is a good place to start whether you are establishing new policies for delivering customer service or whether you are re-evaluating your current customer service practices. Then make your service standards

clear, concise, observable, measurable, and realistic by checking to see if they are aligned with your mission. Once established, make sure everyone in your company understands the importance of operating by the standards and monitor them often. Acknowledge those who live by them, and set an expectation that sends a strong message to everyone in your organization that you are a leader who is serious about providing good customer service.

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