

KEEPING CUSTOMER SERVICE WITHIN REACH

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The customer service issue has had no shortage of venues for discussion. E-R-C conference sessions and MOBILITY articles frequently address the customer service question from the various industry segments. Each of these earlier discussions has missed a very important aspect of customer service within our industry: the services offered by the various segments must fit together coherently.

THE TRADITIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE MODEL

In the "traditional" customer service model, the client or customer goes into a business and seeks to purchase a particular product. The odds are good that the only person that the customer deals with is the salesperson or company representative. If there is something wrong with the product or service, the customer returns to the representative and corrects the situation through that individual. The customer has little, if any, interaction with the different businesses that have brought the product to the marketplace. If we examine the purchase of a new automobile as an example, the car is bought from a dealer and the customer interacts almost exclusively with the dealer. The average car buyer will have no involvement with the businesses that produced the headlights, the internal computer, the brake parts, or the engine parts.

The person who is the "last link in the chain" to the consumer, therefore is responsible for ensuring customer satisfaction. Gregg Baron, President of Success Sciences, Inc., developed the following group of key steps to assist businesses in striving for customer satisfaction.

FOUR STEPS TO CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

The first step is understanding the customer's needs and expectations. We need to be cognizant of the fact that no two people are alike and, thus, their needs and expected results are peculiar to that single situation. Thus, the salesperson or vendor must be able to provide the services as they are required. Customer Service, from this point of view, must vary from customer to customer based on these expectations. Failure to customize the service will lead to dissatisfied customer, which, in turn, can lead to larger problems down the road.

The second step is product and service reliability. A common customer service pitfall is the inability to deliver the service as promised. When we fail to live up to our promises, we give the customer the impression that we are interested only in the dollars and not the reason behind the dollars- the customer.

The third step is vendor responsiveness. Customer needs and expectations can change from day to day, and vendors must keep abreast of changing needs to keep the customer happy and continue providing the level of customer service for which we are striving.

The final step to customer satisfaction is empathy. In order to truly meet the needs of the customer, the service provider must be sensitive to the customer's circumstances. One way to consider how we would like to be treated if we were in the customer's position

RELOCATION CUSTOMER SERVICE

Providing customer service in relocation is especially challenging because, unlike the traditional customer service situation, the transferee is interfacing with many service providers who are all trying to provide customer satisfaction. The difficulty is that each service provider has a different corporate culture. These various corporate cultures and how well they fit together directly affect the way the customer perceives the process.

INTERACTION OF CORPORATE CULTURES

The first culture is that of the employee's corporation. During the relocation process, the transferee typically will be dealing with his or her boss, the personnel department, the relocation department, and the traffic department. It is absolutely essential that the corporate culture accommodate the need to address the key steps of customer satisfaction, or poor employee productivity will directly impact the corporation's bottom line. The transferee has enough problems at this point without service providers adding to them by giving him or her the impression that the corporation does not care. The corporate entity must identify all of the transferee's needs imposed by the pending move. For instance, does the transferee have multi-generational responsibilities? Does the transferee have a working spouse who will need career assistance? Each of these problems will affect the transferee's outlook and expectations of the relocation. As relocation and human resource professionals, we must be responsive to the immediate needs of our customers.

The second culture is that of the relocation management company. If the transferee calls the counselor and is treated with concern and empathy, he or she is likely to feel good about the move.

The third culture is that of the household goods mover. The household goods mover can make or break a relocation and, thus, the overall customer satisfaction level. Even if the transfer has gone well to this point, if the transferee is forced to process a claim, and the mover fails to respond appropriately, it can lead to the impression that nobody cares. When my family was relocated to Florida, for example, within minutes after the moving crew arrived they had dropped my grandmother's pastel set, the television stand, and the television. When we processed a claim for the pastels, the household goods mover was willing to give us a fraction of their market replacement value.

The fourth culture a transferee encounters is the appraiser's. As has been stated in other articles and forums, how the appraiser treats the assignment can dictate the feelings of the transferees. If the appraiser comes in and leaves within a short period of time and does not listen to the transferee, this can start the process off on a bad note.

The fifth culture is that of the real estate broker. Too frequently, from the broker's perspective, providing customer service merely means selling the transferee a home. Brokers and real estate agents must take the time to truly understand the needs of the corporate transferee.

RELOCATION CUSTOMER SERVICE MODEL

Thus, the question is, how do we integrate the various cultures to ensure the transferee is receiving the proper level of service? One method of achieving this goal is to take advantage of an American innovation that was exported to Japan and just recently rediscovered by American businesses- quality circles.

Sud Ingle, author of the book "Quality Circles Master Guide," defines a quality circle as an integrated system that involves recognition, training, and participation of many aspects of the corporate operation.

Representatives from each of the aforementioned cultures would work as a group to find solutions to relocation dilemmas. The group would meet periodically to review, step-by-step, the process by which customer satisfaction is achieved.

STEP ONE: UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER NEEDS

The team would be given the responsibility and authority to implement a standard profile of transferee needs that could be used by each level of the process. The easiest method of developing a needs profile is to consider a worst case scenario. If a transferee needed every possible type of assistance, what would he or she need? The purpose of this profile would be to establish the relocation related needs that a transferee might have at any given moment, and provide insight into new services that might be needed. For example, if during the process of identifying the transferee's needs, we find that he or she needs spouse career assistance in the new location, the team can take the necessary steps to meet that need.

STEP TWO: PRODUCT AND SERVICE RELIABILITY

The team also would be responsible for monitoring customer service delivery for both overall and personal performance levels. This monitoring process would begin during the initial conversation between the transferee and the corporate relocation representative, who would develop the transferee's specific needs profile. The profile then would be disseminated through the rest of the network, to ensure that the promised services are provided on schedule.

STEPS THREE AND FOUR: RESPONSIVENESS AND EMPATHY

The team also would be responsible for updating the standard transferee profile approximately every two weeks. The various relocation service providers must remain empathetic to transferee needs and capable of changing their programs accordingly. If the team is not responsive to the changes, the transferee once again is given the impression that he or she is extraneous to the process.

As with any process, it is important that the group constantly evaluate the process, looking for areas of improvement. After each transferee has completed the process, the team would send out an evaluation form to have the transferee rate the success of the process in line with the key customer service elements discussed earlier. based on the responses of the transferees, the team then could make the necessary adjustments in the service packages.

In order for the quality circle to work, however, the various segments of our industry must stop telling each other that "you do not understand the business we are in." We are all in the same business-ensuring that transferee's needs are satisfied so that the move progresses well for all concerned. Customer service cannot be adequately delivered when we operate as separate segments instead of as a team of professionals with one goal in mind. Remember, studies have shown that each dissatisfied customer will tell from nine to 20 others about poor service. Imagine the effect on corporate morale(not to mention the bottom line) if a transferee were to tell 20 colleagues that he or she was dissatisfied with the relocation. It is so much easier for all of us to be customer service minded and deliver the required services as a total package.

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