

REVITALIZING Your Customer Service Culture

12 Steps to Keeping Customers

by ROBERT MORAN

Even though the economy demands that we hold on to our customers, most businesses lose them every day because of bad service. Smart executives know that customer service development is an on-going process, not just a training event. If your goal is an excellent customer service culture throughout the organization, the following 12-step process will generate desired results.

1. Gain buy-in from the top.

One approach to capturing senior management's attention for building the customer service skills of staff and management is to calculate the value of one lifetime customer to the organization. When you present this figure, oftentimes six or seven figures, consider the number of customers who don't return due to service issues. One executive calculated the return on investment for an organization-wide training initiative in relationship to a real example of a saved customer. A typical customer for his company can bring in up to \$140,000 in revenue per year. If the customer stays with the company for twenty years, which is not unusual, that would be a \$2.8 million customer. Statistically this customer will share his or her experience with ten others, who may bring business to this company. Therefore this customer's positive experience could generate \$28 million in revenue. When compared to the cost of the organization-wide training initiative, the return on investment turned out to be 933:1. In addition to the investment of resources, senior managers need to provide a clear vision of the organization and

articulate how excellent service fits into the long-term plan.

2. Measure first.

Use data as a basis for understanding current service levels and where these levels can improve. Such data can come from surveys of staff and customers. One type of survey to document the impact of training is to ask employees the following questions before and after training:

The people I work with...

- have an attitude that represents excellent customer service
- practice effective listening skills to identify customer needs
- practice body language that delivers a positive message to customers
- take advantage of all opportunities to deliver excellent service
- effectively resolve conflict with customers
- go the extra mile to delight customers

One hospital asked its employees, as part of an employee survey, "would you bring your family here?" This type of question can solicit valuable data about the need to improve customer service in the organization. In addition, customer letters, complaints, and casual feedback are invaluable tools for learning where the opportunities are for improvement.

3. Make service-skill building a part of your strategic plan.

If customer service is a key part of the organization's vision and data says it needs to improve, goals related to customer

service need to be a component of every department's plan. Dealing with naysayers in the organization becomes much less of a barrier when everyone is accountable for excellent service. As an example, the leaders of one organization believed the organization needed to be grounded in a basic set of principles to guide its decision-making. They identified six core values to provide this type of guidance. One of these core values is "customer focused." Since these values are the basis for on-going decision-making, customer service is continually embedded in what and how things get done.

4. Structure accountability and train at the management level.

Too often training, OD, and HR professionals are expected to change the customer service culture without the managers' involvement in the process. Managers play a critical role in the service challenge and are responsible for creating a service environment for all staff. Such an environment is not only inspiring, but it is also composed of systems and procedures that work for the customer and the employee. In addition, managers are responsible for reinforcing skills developed in training.

5. Find the right training solution.

A quality customer service training program designed to improve the service culture includes:

- Behavior-changing activities
- Service standards customized for the organization

- Skill building for both internal and external customer service
- Linkage of standards to performance management
- Relevant case studies specific to the service provided
- An interactive and enjoyable experience for participants
- Application to all levels of the organization
- Specific modules for managers, which include leadership behaviors, managing feedback, measuring service, writing service standards, and recognition
- Capacity for delivery by internal resources

6. Plan the launch.

A well thought-out project plan and someone responsible for its execution will ensure a great program. Planning may include the structuring of sessions to work well within business operational needs, measurement, program evaluation, communication, training space allocation, attendance tracking, management participation, ordering of supplies, and follow up.

7. Make it a big deal.

This is an opportunity to excite the organization. Set up a promotional campaign that touches everyone via newsletters, press releases, flyers, banners, meetings, and bulletin boards. Make re-focusing on the customer a celebration. One organization posted signs a few weeks prior to the training saying “Service Excellence?” This type of communication generated a great deal of curiosity and discussion about the organization-wide customer service initiative. When senior management addresses the initiative with excitement and perseverance, the organization will follow.

8. Deliver quality training.

All elements noted in step five contribute to quality. Another key factor is the selection of facilitators. For larger organizations, you may select internal managers and staff members to be trained to deliver the training to the organization. The profile for great customer service training facilitators may include:

- Dynamic facilitation skills
- Animated, enthusiastic behavior style
- Leadership skills

- A passion for excellent service and the organization’s vision

You may be surprised at the hidden talent buried in the rank and file of your organization. This unusual opportunity for the staff to be facilitators of the training creates professional and personal growth for them. In addition, this format may generate a higher level of buy-in and believability among the participants.

9. Identify barriers to excellent service in the training.

When staff and management go through a training process on the topic of customer service, a great deal of participation and discussion can be expected—everyone can relate to the topic. You can expect issues to come up that will not be resolved in the training. Yet these issues make up the most

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valuable and comprehensive internal feedback to the organization you can ever imagine. Consider this feedback “gold.” One way to capture the feedback is for the facilitators to keep a flip chart visible in the room and name it “parking lot.” The “parking lot” issues are those that are important yet cannot be addressed in the training session. The most important factor in the success of the “parking lot” feedback tool is the commitment of senior and middle management to address the issues. Even if the issues cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of staff members, it is critical that management consider the issues and communicate its decision. When this happens, staff members will feel listened to and trust will improve in the organization. A lack of response and communication will have an opposite effect and weaken trust in the organization.

10. Re-measure results.

To do so, go back to the baseline measurement data collected before the training process. If a pre-survey was conducted, administer it again as a post-survey. Re-measuring is best done three to six months after the training. The passing of time

will give a true reading of the application of improved internal and external customer service skills in the day-to-day workplace.

11. Start process improvement teams as a result of the training.

Many of the difficult barriers identified in the training may include cross-departmental processes. A natural follow-up to customer service training is assigning process issues to teams who can go to work on them. After all, no one knows how to fix broken processes better than those who deal with them every day.

12. Build customer service training into new employee orientation.

Don’t short change new hires on the customer service skills and attitudes that are expected during their employment. Standard of service should be clear at the onset and new staff members should know they will be held accountable to deliver excellent service through the performance management system.

An organization-wide customer service initiative can garner measurable benefits to your organization. A new commitment to service from the top of the organization will spearhead customer-oriented behaviors from the staff. The refreshed staff will be inspired to deliver excellent service. Learning internal customer service skills will create positive energy and foster teamwork between departments. And ultimately, the re-focused energy on the customer will keep your customer coming back.

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