A moving target

How to boost your customer service with service recovery systems   **Interviewed by Jayne Gest**

The way customers interact with your business — whether positively or negatively — plays a crucial part in how your company is perceived and whether you can keep and expand your customer base.

However, there are procedures you, as an employer, can enact to ensure that whenever customers are less than satisfied, you make the right moves to address those concerns.

"You have to have some type of service recovery in place to provide great service — through excellent response time, ensuring the service support people are knowledgeable about the product and customer' needs — in order to meet customers' overall quality requirements," says Edward Kromar, director of service for Blue Technologies.

Smart Business spoke with Kromar about how to continuously set service standards and recover less-than-happy customers.

What are service recovery systems and how do they impact business?

Service recovery is based on the customer's impression of the service provided by your company. The paradox is a customer can give you a higher grade on service for a product or device that requires service and maintenance on a regular basis than on one that doesn't. This might happen after the customer sees how committed your service department is to meeting their expectations in a timely manner and repairing the problem efficiently.

You, as an employer, need to set service recovery standards that will keep customers pleased in all areas from delivery and support to product availability and the knowledge and understanding of your sales and marketing teams.

In today's world of instant responses and technologies, sub-standard customer service can be spread throughout the business world quickly. It's something you want to manage closely, proactively working to have a positive response time to concerns and trying to make corrections for the constantly changing and specific needs of customers.

How can employers create standards to ensure their customer service is productive and efficient?

You have to have service support employees with the type of personality that can work well with customers. You can train your personnel on additional fundamental skills they might need, but each individual support

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person on the frontline has to have that natural ability to work with the customer during a high-stress time. That's something you or your managers need to be able to pick up in the interviewing process.

You also need to measure time closely. Every industry has different standards but it's imperative that you respond as quickly and efficiently as possible. Once a customer brings up a concern, you need to reply in minutes. After the initial inquiry, you have to look at the time the support staff takes when actually interacting with the customer. You need to train your employees to work efficiently — understanding how to use all their tools, manuals and resources — so they can troubleshoot, repair, explain and leave the customer fully confident that the problem was resolved. Remember it's always a moving target and you constantly need to think about improvement.

What are some best practices for service recovery systems?

You want to be able to survey your customers to see how they receive and perceive services. There are many ways to do that, including any type of survey or the basic follow-up on service — either hours or days later — after the service has been performed. However, one of the most effective methods is when the sales force interacts with your

customer base. You also should have your sales force or marketing team then work with all the data.

By listening to employees and gathering their input on customer concerns, you can customize training internally to address those concerns. Then, personnel can respond more proactively, knowing that this is now what customers want. Customers' needs change every six or eight months, so you have to work on it all the time.

Customer complains often go to frontline employees, how important is it for CEOs and managers to get that information?

Internal meetings and communication are extremely important, as well as the candor that managers have to display when they sit in a group and discuss concerns. You should meet on a regular basis — whether weekly or monthly — and consider these in a very open format. If you don't have that straightforwardness from your frontline personnel and you don't listen, you can get out of touch with your customers.

Sometimes a problem has to go to the management level and the managers can decide whether this is a corporate level correction or a manufacturer/vendor correction. If it's a corporate correction, you can get a plan in place, write a new procedure and dial it in. If it's a manufacturing concern, you should already be conversing regularly with manufacturers — daily or weekly — about the capabilities of the product and your needs as the manufacturer's customer.

How much of an effect has technology had on service recovery?

It's huge. Technology has been the driving force for product turnover with customers looking for more capabilities and features on equipment whether it's software or hardware. And that same release of new technology assists the support people who can deal more efficiently with customer concerns. You can educate customers by having them log in for a training session and you also can remotely dial into customers' products to check on problems or be notified automatically when something is wrong. There's high customer satisfaction when you can contact a customer who might not be aware of a problem and tell them you've been alerted to the difficulty and are actively making the correction. <<

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