

# Customer service: the *formula*?

by Robert M. Gignac

My recent Small Business Canada Magazine article “Customer Service: An Oxymoron?” struck a nerve with many readers based on the e-mail feedback I received. While I offered only three examples of lack of service in the article, I received dozens of examples in response, ranging from ones that would be mildly annoying, to those which would be downright appalling.

As business owners, a critical question is this: How can we make sure that we do not fail in our efforts to provide a quality customer service experience for those who do business with us?

Many of the e-mails I received asked for a formula, something tangible that they could use to raise the service level of their organizations. Given that request, I would offer the following as a key to providing quality customer service:  $P - E = VAT$

Where P equals “perception,” E equals “expectation,” and VAT equals “value-added transaction.” In short, we can be confident that we are delivering quality customer service when the customer perception of the service exceeds their expectations, leaving a positive value-added transaction.

If you want to provide quality customer service, ensure your customers leave with their expectations not only met,

but also exceeded. That is the only way to achieve a positive outcome. Perceptions must exceed expectations. That means doing more than expected. There is a Cajun word called “lagniappe” (pronounced ‘lan-yap’) which means “a little bit extra for the same price.” Others might refer to it as under-promising and over-delivering. In either case, you obtain the goal of a positive “value-added transaction.”

But what happens when you can’t raise their perceptions? You are left with only one alternative—lower their expectations. From the feedback I received, it seems far too many organizations across Canada are doing this.

How does this work in the real world? Let me ask you a question. Have you ever purchased coffee from a vending machine? Sure, we all have. But why? Why? We knew what was going to come out. The makers of coffee vending machines the world over have lowered our expectations to the point that we are ecstatic when the cup shows up before the coffee starts pouring. There are always buttons on the machine—extra cream, extra sugar—do they work? I don’t know. But it gives us something to push, something to do, as if we actually had input to the process.

Too many organizations have lowered the expectations of their customers, and by

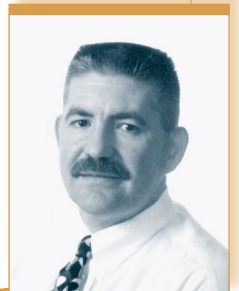
doing so have conditioned them to expect less than quality service. Their customers don’t expect too much, and guess what—they don’t get it. They have fallen prey to the idea that “paying ones dues” is a one-time affair, when in today’s business environment, what you gain by paying your dues is the right to move to the back of the line and pay and pay again. It is the commitment to quality service and to raising perceptions that separates the ‘winners’ from the ‘runners-up’ in the customer service arena.

The winners are easy to spot. They always have a friendly smile (whether in person or on the phone); they stay until the job is complete even though the store closed five minutes ago; and they provide the feeling that your request is the most important thing to focus on right now—not merely an interruption of something else they’d rather be doing.

The runners-up are also easy to spot. The annoyed frown, a strict adherence to the clock compounded by lackadaisical, emotionless service. When you can engage them in conversation, it is often punctuated by comments such as, “I just work here...” and “you know, this would be a great place to work if it weren’t for our customers...”

Think about the formula ( $P-E=VAT$ ) and make the conscious decision to raise the perceptions of your customers instead of lowering their expectations. This will not only benefit your customers, it will raise your profile in an environment that seems dedicated to lowering expectations. This simple shift in thinking can make your organization a winner in the customer service game. **SBCM**

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