

Turning Customer Service Inside Out!

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While companies focus thousands of dollars on external customer service in hopes of wooing and retaining customers, little attention is being paid to the effect poor internal customer service has on customer satisfaction. It all starts within your organization! Sooner or later the ripple effect reaches your customers. To really walk your service talk, make sure your commitment to internal customer service matches your company's external focus on customer care.

When we think of customer service we think of staff serving customers over a counter or over the phone. But customer service occurs within your organization as well. How well is your staff serving its internal customers: other departments, its management, vendors and consultants? Believe it or not, it all counts. Internal customer service refers to service directed to others within your organization. It refers to your level of responsiveness, quality, communication, teamwork and morale.

I define Internal Customer Service as effectively serving other departments within your organization. How well are you providing other departments with service, products or information to help them do their jobs? How well are you listening to and understanding their concerns? How well are you solving problems for each other to help your organization succeed?

Teaming with Success

How well do you work with other departments? Does your Marketing department communicate well with the Legal department? Does Fulfillment relate well with Shipping and Receiving? Do Catering and Facilities work well together? When it's time to communicate with others from different departments do you take a deep breath, or smile and relish a chance to renew contact with colleagues from elsewhere in the company?

As a manager I once joined a publishing company and found myself in the midst of a war between departments. Production resented Editorial for the way they missed deadlines and delivered shoddy copy. Conversely, Editorial had little respect for the resulting manuscripts they received back from Production, full of errors and oversights. Poor teamwork, poor communication and myopic thinking had led to a hardening of positions over time. They each cared about the finished product but were putting pressure on each other without realizing it. It took time, but eventually both groups came to appreciate each other and how to best work together to achieve win-wins for the greater good of their customers.

Do you relish or dread committee work with other departments? Does it seem their aims are contrary to your department's? When other departments contact you for help

do you regard it as a nuisance, a distraction and a drain of your valuable time? Can you see the greater good that comes from helping them solve their problems or fulfill their needs?

You can take pride in opportunities to help other departments look good. Obviously, you don't want their success to come at your expense. Usually helping others doesn't mean you lose a zero-sum game, where only one of you can win and helping others hurts you. In most instances helping other departments leads to a win-win situation. And what goes around usually comes around. Helping other departments succeed can help yours too when the roles are reversed.

Up with People

Good internal customer service starts with good morale within your group. Are your people happy? Do they feel good about themselves and their contributions to the goals of the department and to the company at large? They should, and effort should be made to help them do so. Happy employees are productive, and customers take note. Happy employees are also better team players. Will you fly the airline whose employees are striking with management, or the airline whose employees are management? Employees invested in employee stock purchasing plans with matching contributions see themselves as much more a part of the company. Thus, as the company goes, so do they go.

When I fly out of Oakland Airport I use an outlying parking lot and shuttle van. This shuttle is shared by employees from Southwest Airlines, coming to work or returning to their cars after their shifts. I've found them as happy and upbeat when they're starting their shifts as when they're finishing their shifts. That's great morale, and tells me they like their jobs. It's contagious! Sometimes I'm envious on that shuttle when I know I'll be checking in at a competitor's ticket counter.

Who's On Top?

Many organizational charts employ an inverted pyramid with customers at top. Some companies instead put their employees at the top. In many senses, the employees are management's customers. Corporate values that emphasize treating employees well translate to good customer care too. Does your organization value its people? Invariably, companies that care about their people can better ask their people to care about their customers.

Catering to Customer Service Needs

Here are five tips for your organization to help strengthen its internal customer service orientation.

1. Employees should never complain within earshot of customers. It gives them the impression your company isn't well run, shaking their confidence in you.

2. Employees should never complain to customers about other department's employees. Who wants to patronize a company whose people don't get along with each other.

3. Employees at every level should strive to build bridges between departments. This can be done through cross training, joint picnics, parties or offsites, or creative gatherings, as well as day-to-day niceties.

4. Utilize post mortems after joint projects so everyone can learn from the experience. Fences can be mended and new understandings gleaned when everyone reviews what went right...or wrong. By doing so after the project the immediate pressure is off, yet stronger bonds can be forged while the experience is fresh in peoples' minds. Not doing so can result in lingering animosities that will exacerbate future collaborations.

5. Consider letting your employees become "Customer for a Day"; to experience firsthand what your customers experience when doing business with you.

Congratulations on turning customer service inside out! By improving internal customer service, you have just enhanced the customer service your external customers receive. You're walking your talk regarding customer service. Touch