



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Service with a Smile

by Mark E. Green

As a consumer of all kinds of things, it's rare that I receive exceptional service. That's exactly why those moments are memorable for me—they're different from the norm and pleasing at the same time. For this consumer (as, I would guess, for most), that's an irresistible combination—which means that it must be good for building relationships and business.

We know them when we see them: the attentive salesperson who just isn't like all of the others, the retail store clerk who really does care about satisfying our needs, the customer service representative who went above and beyond to help and others. And we talk about them.

Now, let's take a moment in organizations, many of us are customers to internal service providers. Here too, there are often shining stars: those who gladly help us when we are in need, those who openly collaborate and communicate and those with words of encouragement, empathy and ideas on a tough day. We talk about these people too.

When we receive great service, we become accustomed to predictable, pleasant outcomes. The service provider benefits by developing more positive, more productive business relationships. Something else very important is happening here in the form of a less obvious but highly valuable benefit for the service provider: their influence increases. Influence—the ability to get others to do what you'd like them to do, in the absence of direct authority—generally stems from proactively doing things to develop positive, productive relationships. And providing great service is a way to do just that.

Developing influence is like putting money—relationship capital—in the bank. Your accounts will grow and grow as long as you

continue to deliver quality service to others. This account is then available for withdrawals whenever you need it: to have an idea of yours heard and implemented, to get you on the short list for that promotion you want or to get people from other departments to help you meet a tight deadline. The possibilities are endless when you have relationship capital in the bank.

How would you evaluate your own performance as a service provider? You might have the opportunity to serve external customers, internal customers or both on any given day. Another way to think about this question is to evaluate your ability to influence those you serve. Your influence and your relationship capital, in most cases, will vary directly with your level of service to others.

Let's take a moment to explore the dark side of the customer service bell curve.

Research shows that for each customer complaint, there are up to 25 more who are dissatisfied but don't bother to complain. In many cases, those 25 people simply go elsewhere to meet their needs—it's almost as if an invisible plague hit the business, your relationship capital and your ability to influence. On the other hand, if you satisfy those who complain, you have up to a 70 percent chance of winning back their confidence and all that comes with it. You also have a chance to learn how to improve your service, which will carry over to make the other 25 "non-complainers" more likely to stick with you. So it is important to note that learning to improve from customer complaints helps to retain all of your customers, not just the complainers.

Within a business, poor service to internal customers promotes an array of organizational ills and, in most cases, compromises levels of service for external customers—the ones who



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INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

pay the bills! If they're not promptly addressed, internal service problems often lead to decreased morale, decreased productivity, higher levels of stress and longer cycle times. On a personal level, poor service erodes relationships, reduces relationship capital and decreases the provider's influence.

Incredibly, poor service and all of its effects are a result of choice. Every day, we each make decisions about how we behave. Making a conscious choice to deliver excellent service to our customers—internal and external—is the first step. The ripple effects of this are widespread and highly positive, not the least of which will be your increased ability to influence others. You will find yourself with better relationships, with a competitive advantage in terms of your career and with great feelings about yourself and what you're doing.

Take some time to speak with your customers to find out what they expect of you and what you can do to provide them with better service. Then, commit yourself to do something about it: create an action plan, develop service level measurements to stay on track, communicate openly with your customers about your efforts. No doubt they'll be thrilled and, more importantly, you'll be taking the right steps to improve your own situation and your future prospects.

Once you've made the commitment and implemented a process to make it happen, you will have created an atmosphere that will continually generate satisfied customers. You'll find yourself on their list as a shining star and you'll reap the benefits associated with relationship capital, influence and the satisfaction of knowing that you are making a difference. Now that seems like something worth smiling about! □

