

Developing Customer-Centric Services Managers

By Joe Patton, Chairman and CEO of Patton Consultants

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Developing customer-centric service people is fundamental to effective field service operations. I recently heard a tirade from an angry customer complaining to a store clerk that he (the customer) was standing with money in hand to pay for a purchase when the store phone rang and the clerk kept the customer waiting during the phone conversation. Several people in the area commented that they were glad the customer sounded off because they encounter similar situations all too often.

Customers want to be the center of attention when they have needs. On the other hand, customers want to be left alone when they are browsing. One element of good service training is to understand what customers want in which situation. *Mass customization* may sound like an oxymoron, but it is a target of opportunity for product services.

Comprehending a potential customer's needs for service often can be guided by offering several options, letting the customer choose which he wants. Offering bronze, silver, and gold levels of service care is one example. Allowing Web searches for frequently asked questions, e-mail communications, instant messaging, or phone voice allow people to select the best media for their circumstances. I prefer e-mail if a situation is complex and I have tried other approaches already. Instant messaging often can get you answers to questions more quickly than waiting on hold over the telephone, and this method provides answers in writing for future guidance—plus it allows a help-desk technician to handle several callers at the same time. Some people communicate better in writing, and some verbally. If both persons are not native speakers of the same language, communication in writing can offer more flexibility for translation.

There is a "service personality." Some people possess and demonstrate it almost naturally, and others have difficulty comprehending why attention must be focused on the customer. When interviewing potential employees, I occasionally have dropped pieces of scrap paper or tissue while walking. A true service person will stop and pick up the item. If the

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potential employee does not do so, then they have a black mark against them.

If neatness and cleanliness do not come naturally to a person, there is still some hope that training and coaching can develop these traits. I was at an independent automobile service center recently when a man walked in and requested repair service on his car, but before he committed, he wanted to see the workshop. The supervisor showed him their clean and well-organized service shop. The customer stated clearly that he considered the neat shop to be evidence of capable mechanics, so he left his car to be repaired. Would you be proud to show customers your service shop?

Education, training, and coaching are key to improving services management. Nearly every service person is the service manager of his domain. The first step to good management is managing yourself effectively. One challenge in developing services managers is that historically, we have promoted a good technician to supervisor without providing formal training. Every few years, a new crop of people becomes responsible for services management. Their backgrounds may include academic, finance, logistics, manufacturing, marketing, or other experience that needs tuning to the unique challenges of managing customer service. Service is the fastest-growing segment of our economy. We need more formal service education in order to grow the intelligence needed to manage the business of services.

A mix of hard and soft learning is required. By hard subjects, I mean understanding economic factors, numbers, statistics, life-cycle costs, safety stock calculations, and financials. Soft subjects are the emotional, motivational functions that help to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, and motivate technicians to do an additional call and then return defective and excess parts quickly. Another vital topic that mixes both hard and soft functions: how to get management support for services.

Benchmarks and metrics are important subjects. Service functional performance is relatively easy to measure, but typical personnel are not anxious for performance evaluations. Goals must be set down in writing, measurable, understandable, challenging, and achievable. Just making sure that definitions and calculations are valid and understood can require considerable investigation.

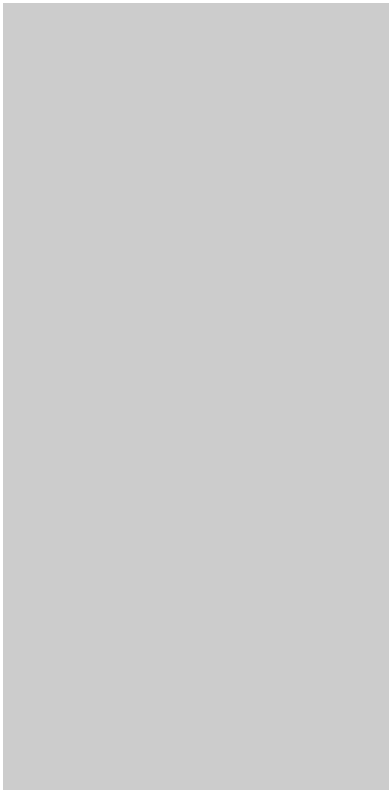
Practical exercises and hands-on calculations are a beneficial part of learning. All levels of ability, experience, and management hierarchy often can be mixed together for training. It is often interesting to see senior executives learning from junior planners. Junior people also learn a lot from experienced executives who can share the concerns and special interests of top management.

Industry books, magazines, and conferences are also excellent sources of education. Services can be too efficient. Reverse logistics is a growing

function because many businesses, especially retail Internet outlets, allow almost unrestricted returns. It is rare that over 60 percent of the value can be recouped from returned goods. Where is the balance point in your services that keeps customers loyal, but does not eat up profits? Economics and emotions come together in product services. At one end of the spectrum are the supplying services managers, and on the demanding end are customers. All must cooperate. Services people will succeed best when they relate economic profit metrics to the emotional customer-centric business of services.

About Joe Patton.....

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