

SSPA news

June 2006

A Publication of the Service & Support Professionals Association



Great Customer Connections: It's About Technique, Not Attitude

JUNE 2006

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Somewhere, behind the walls of a neatly-manicured office complex, a help desk manager and his vice president are sitting down and reviewing a picture that isn't very pretty: customer satisfaction scores are declining, morale is at an all-time low, and turnover is going through the roof. "I don't understand it," the help desk manager exclaims. "We gave them all customer service training!"

There are many and varied reasons that performance declines on a help desk. As a former help desk manager and customer support executive who has successfully helped turn around support performance, I'd like to take aim at perhaps the biggest one: giving your team the customer skills they need to do their jobs well, and feel good about coming to work every day.

Look up "customer service training" on Google, and you will find (as of this writing) close to 1 million hits. Within this wealth of resources, ranging from major training and development firms to every motivational speaker on the face of the earth, you will find one overriding message in most of their offerings – how to be a quote-unquote "nice person" with a "great attitude."

Motivation always seems like a good thing on the surface. On a help desk, however, there is one problem with this approach: in my quarter-century of experience, smile-mongers like these have rarely, if ever, actually changed the service performance of workplaces I've been part of. On the other hand, there is one approach that has consistently, and often dramatically, changed service quality metrics on teams I've worked with: specific communications techniques, based on known principles of behavioral psychology, that change the way that people react to you in difficult situations.

Let's take a small example. Suppose that you answer the phones at a parking and traffic bureau, a caller is angrily greeting you with, "Did you tow my car away?" – and, in fact, you just did! Will smiling help here? Or being nice? Or how about "creating magical moments"? I've got a better idea, which actually got great results when I taught it to a real parking and traffic bureau: say things that (1) speak to their interests, and (2) acknowledge what they are feeling. For example:

"Your car is in a safe place."

"I know where your car is."

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"Optimize the Customer Experience! How Novell Extends CRM with Search, KM and Self-Service" Novell wanted to

"I can help you get your car back."

"I get really frustrated when things like this happen to me, so I know how you feel."

I didn't just make this idea up – it is based on a principle of behavioral psychology, known as *social cognition*, that holds that we decide in the first few seconds of an encounter whether we are dealing with a friend or a foe. By focusing relentlessly on what you *can* acknowledge and *can* do – a process that I call the "can-can" – you keep triggering the friend-versus-foe reflex in your favor, and the other person finds it difficult or impossible to stay angry.

There are similar techniques for almost any difficult situation with a customer, all of which have their roots in proven concepts from psychology:

- When you are delivering bad news to someone, a structured process of introducing, explaining, and empathizing – similar to the techniques that psychotherapists use to treat fears and phobias – will generally keep the situation calm and productive.
- When a caller is angry, we tend to "move away from the pain" by disengaging from the other person – but when we move towards their anger by asking focused questions, the anger often quickly subsides.
- When someone is talking too much, you can quickly and easily gain control of the conversation – by enthusiastically acknowledging them as you steer the discussion.

For most people in a call center, techniques these feel like wearing a t-shirt backwards at first, because they all go against human nature. But with training, and more importantly coaching, they eventually take hold – and when that happens, the results are nothing short of magical. Not only do customer satisfaction scores improve, but morale and turnover start changing, problem employees suddenly become less of a problem, and many of the other political and cultural problems that you may be dealing with suddenly start falling into place – because people start developing a newfound confidence in what they are doing.

So, if your team's service skills and stress levels need work, remember that the long way around is the shortest way home – motivation generally won't work, but with the right skills training and coaching, the results can be very motivating!

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About the Author

Rich Gallagher is a critically acclaimed business author and former help desk manager whose latest book *Great Customer Connections: Simple Psychological Techniques that Guarantee Exceptional Service*, has just been published by AMACOM Books. Visit him on-line at www.greatcustomerconnections.com.

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