



May I Help You?

What this world needs now are
more people who give a hoot about
awesome customer service

BY RON FURLONG
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

One of the best quotes I ever heard was, "Maybe customer service should be more than one department." I don't know who said it, but it sure rings true today.

It seems a bit ironic (I was going to say funny, but there is nothing funny about it) that as our life supposedly gets easier with technological advancements, customer service seems to be getting worse. They almost go hand in hand: one step forward for technology, one step backward for customer service. You'd think (crazy idea, I know) that maybe they would improve together.

Golf course superintendents deal with customer service several times a day, in one form or another.

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GAFF TICKET
10-15 Hole Round \$130.00
20 Hole Round \$130.00
RANGE TICKET \$40.00
HAWAII ISLAND

KEEP PACE
HOLIDAY ALTERNATIVE
TO GOLF PLAY
HAWAII ISLAND

GOLF LESSONS
By Appointment
TJ Connor, Bob Campbell
Bud Sower, Dave Collins
Miguel Alvarez, Ken Blaine
HAWAII ISLAND

Good customer service tries to exceed expectations at the point of initial contact.

Superior
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I want to focus on the customer service we are receiving on a daily basis — from the fertilizer salesman to the dispatcher at the sandpit to the credit card representative for your company card to the travel agent booking your trip to the Golf Industry Show in Orlando next year. In the course of a normal business day, you might deal with as many as a dozen customer service reps (even though quite often many of these people would not consider themselves customer service agents), and that's just for your golf course duties. Add another half dozen for your daily personal life and suddenly you have a heckuva devotion to dealing with people who you want to help you. When as many as half of those people are unable to help you or they help you in a manner that you consider unfriendly or even hostile, it can make us all a little frustrated, stressed and disillusioned.

Here's an example of a recent call I made to my credit card company.

Rep: "May I help you?"

Me: "Yes, I have a question regarding my account."

No answer.

Me: "Hello?"

Rep: "Yes."

Me: "Would you like my account number?"

Rep: "Sure."

Me: "55555555."

Rep: "OK."

Me: "Well, I had a question regarding my bill. I just received the statement yesterday, the 14th, and I noticed the bill is due on the 22nd."

Long pause.

Rep: "And your question is . . .?"

Me: "Well, I don't think that's enough time to pay it. It's only eight days."

Rep: "Would you like to change the date your bill is due each month?"

Me: "No. I'm just asking that the bill arrive sooner than eight days before the payment is due."

Another long pause (I think maybe even the faint hint of a sigh).

Rep: "I don't think that can be changed."

Me: "So maybe it can?"

Rep: "Pardon?"

Me: "You said you don't think it can be changed. To me that means maybe it can. Can you find out?"

Rep: "Sir, please don't get rude. Please hold, and I'll talk to my supervisor."

Click. Mozart's Jupiter symphony comes on, which does actually calm me some. Six minutes later my calmness is beginning to fade a bit when another representative comes on.

Rep 2: "Can I help you?"

Me: "I was on hold with someone else."

Rep 2: "Oh. Please hold."

Three minutes later, I'm disconnected.

This is an extreme example, I'll admit, but I'm sure we all, unfortunately, have a similar story and probably more than one. Customer service is awareness of needs, problems, fears and aspirations. Customers who don't get support become someone else's customers. Consider the old saying: "I won't complain. I just won't come back." Although I'm actually the guy who will complain and then not come back.

Mike Erb, a representative of Wilbur Ellis, is one of the most respected fertilizer/chemical salesmen in the Seattle area. Not only does he know his products and know his stuff agronomically, but he also actually cares about his clients and their successes. Mike's the guy who calls you after you've bought his product and applied it to see how it went and how the turf is doing. He often comes out to see the fairways or greens for himself.

"Excellent customer service does not just happen in today's competitive business environment," Erb says. "Superior customer service is the foundation that successful companies are built on. Exceptional customer service principals have to be continually practiced and improved on."

Shane Riley, a sales representative for UAP

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Successful organizations empower their staffs to develop strong working relationships with clients.

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Professional Products in the Seattle area, agrees..

"It sounds cliché, but to me superior service means several things: doing more than the customer expects and more than the competition is willing to provide," he says.

Here's a quick list of things that annoy me most regarding poor customer service:

- Rudeness or shortness on the phone, as if the rep is doing you a favor by helping you.

- Talking with a sales agent in a store and having another customer walk up (or worse, an employee) and the sales agent deserts you (usually with an "excuse me") and proceeds to help them first.

- Calling customer service and not being able to reach a live human being. An old trick is to press "0," but more and more this option is not working. Which leads to the question: Why are they taking this option away from us? Is it because they don't want to talk to us?

- A salesman coming unannounced and expecting you to drop everything and have a meeting with him. I've had guys I've never met actually sit down in my office and start pitching their products while I sit at my desk with a stunned look on my face.

- Major commercial Web sites that do not offer phone numbers for assistance. Have you ever noticed that when you try to contact a company for help online, you hardly ever see a list of support people by name? Why?

- Calling customer service and being told "our computers are down, so we can't help you at this time." Every company should have a back-up plan for this, which would prevent people from saying, "We can't help you at this time." It could be as simple as keeping a paper and pencil nearby. Then a person could write down your problem, tell you they'll get to it as soon as they are up and running again, and then contact you to confirm the action was taken.

- Salespeople who won't go the extra mile for you. I've so come to expect the 110 percent from guys like Mike Erb and Shane Riley that when I don't get it from others in the field, it almost feels like I'm not getting what I deserve. Sure, it's probably unfair to expect your local vendor to run you up some fungicide on a Sunday evening or at 5 a.m. on Monday so you can spray ahead of golfers in an emergency. But

when one or two guys do it for you without hesitation, then how can the others compete?

When one of the five or six local fertilizer/chemical companies hires a new sales representative, which most of them seem to do every couple of years or so, I'm always up front with the new guys. I tell them right off in our first meeting that I give 70 percent of my business to Wilbur Ellis and Mike Erb, and they are basically competing for a share of the remaining 30 percent. That is how important I view strong customer service.

Erb agrees with the philosophy of creating a strong client/salesman relationship.

"Successful organizations encourage their outside sales staffs to develop strong working relationships with their clients," he says. "They empower their sales representatives with the freedom to work with their customers to create effective working strategies."

Most significant transactions are grounded in personal contacts and personal relationships. There is a quote from Henry Ford that, although might not have exactly been describing a salesman/client relationship, seems utterly perfect for that analogy. Ford said: "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."

What this world needs is more people who give a hoot about you and what you are trying to do. In our case, it's to help us make as great of a golf course as possible within the confines of our budgets. Although I spend a lot of money with him, I doubt that I'm Mike Erb's biggest client. But you know what? He treats me like I am. And that's what we're all looking for.

I often find myself in the local hardware store in the town where I work. The prices are outrageous compared to the big-box home-improvement chains, and you wonder how these places stay afloat. But about once a month or so I go there. I'm greeted at the door. I'm checked on a couple of times as I breeze the small, cramped aisles. I talk weather and gas prices with the clerk as I pay for my overpriced wasp spray or marking paint. I keep going back because they give a hoot. And so do I. ■

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