

The care and feeding of customers

Review your current customer relations system as the season winds down. It's never too late to make some changes.

by John B. Calsin, Jr.

■ Do we really need another article on customer service? Yes!

An article on a new piece of equipment or control product would be nice. But if your care and feeding of customers is nothing more than waving to the customer as you walk behind your mower, read on.

Whether you are a sole proprietor with one truck and a few pieces of equipment, or the division head for a regional or national company, it's critical that you improve customer service and/or keep your customers happy.

Tackling complaints—"We really strive for customer service," says Chuck Feld, vice president and 19-year employee of J. Franklin Styer Nurseries in Concordville, Pa. This 105-year-old company is a frequent winner at the Philadelphia Flower



Show. It supports a large garden center, has four architects on staff and nine crews on the road.

According to Feld, Styer does not consider itself big enough to have a specific customer service department or representative, but it does have a plan to handle customer complaints.

If there is a complaint, it goes directly to the salesman who sold the job. This person tries to solve the problem. Even if the customer is at fault, "we usually just take care of it," says Feld.

The company does all it can to satisfy the customer, and guarantees its plants for two years.

If the salesperson is not able to remedy a problem due to a personality conflict or design problem, the complaint moves up to the vice president.

This does not happen often, however. "The salesperson has full responsibility to take care of it and full power to take care of that customer," explains Feld. They can't "give away the store," but Styer wants to "make sure (the customer) is happy."

Feld believes professionalism is the reason why there are so few complaints about the company's work.

In other words, do the job right the first time.

Keep customers informed—Styer also distributes handouts to customers:

✓ A doorcard checklist is signed by the foreman and left with the customer.

✓ A printed maintenance sheet with instructions for proper irrigation.

✓ "A Basic Primer on Garden Insect and Disease Control" contains instructions for applying control products.

It comes down to harmony versus good agronomy. John Carson, division manager of Ehrlich Lawn and Tree Care, says,

"We're really trying to focus on customer service issues as opposed to agronomic issues. I think it is becoming less important what materials (for example, the former industry battle of liquid materials vs. granules) you're using and much more important how the customers are relating to the services."

Ehrlich operates in a multi-state area, and is headquartered in Reading, Pa.

'It's a heck of a lot cheaper to keep (customers) than to gain new ones.'

—John Carson

Carson says the company did a quality-of-service survey four years ago. Representatives talked with current customers who were satisfied, and those who had left.

"The number one, glaring issue," Carson noticed, "was that customers want to hear more about what's happening with their service, and they want to hear it from the person who is providing the service—the technician. The customer wants to be reassured that the company is trying to do all that is necessary."

Training for technicians—the front-line service people—incorporates customer service issues. It includes role playing between service technicians, in which one takes on the role of the customer.

Technicians speak with the customer before and after the service is provided. These chats cover treatment, problems and expected results.

This way, customers are not left wondering what is going on with their lawns or trees. It also helps to cut down on nervous or angry telephone callbacks. For example, the customer is told that certain weeds may take two to three weeks to die back, and that others may show up before the next treatment.

Carson believes that, especially in the lawn care business, there is a trend to sell on price, and acquire new customers through discount programs. This, natural-

Customer relations guidelines

- Answer the phone by the third ring, no matter how busy you are
 - Answer with a smile
 - Be polite
 - Speak slowly
 - Answer questions to the best of your ability
 - Customer complaint form is filled in with information, which is used later.
- For landscape designers:
- Return calls the same day they come in
 - Set appointments within the next week
 - Keep the appointment, and be there on time
 - Dress neatly

—J.C.

ly, effects a company's profitability and its ability to pay professional, year-round technicians and other employees, which in the long run impacts employee turnover.

Carson states that Ehrlich realized it has to maintain competitive pricing levels. "We are not going to sacrifice profitability and we're not going to sacrifice what we believe we need to pay professionals technicians, year-round as we can make them."

This is a fine line. "Customer service is the basic guiding principle of our firm," says Terry S. Wallace, president of Landscape Services of Kennett Square, Pa. When she bought the business in 1980, it grossed \$300,000. This year, Wallace expects \$1.5 million in gross sales.

The issue—Several years ago, Wallace came to the conclusion that customer service was "the key issue" in today's market. Her company started a couple of initiatives to improve customer relations, which also included a customer survey. Some of the customers' concerns were caused by common industry problems (such as phone calls not returned promptly, or missed

Handling the gripes

■ Advice from Lawrence

Kokkelenberg, popular speaker at the PLCAA show, for handling customer complaints:

- 1) Establish in the first three minutes of a conversation with the customer that you are going to be helpful.
- 2) Never point to a customer's errors.
- 3) Try to avoid the word "you;" instead, use the customer's name in conversation.
- 4) Draw the customer out by engaging

appointments).

"(These are) basic things we could have figured out ourselves," says Wallace, but hearing it from the public made a big impact.

The company also provides a number of informational pieces which deal with different aspects of the service the customer will receive and what they might expect.

in conversation.

- 5) Use nurturing words like "I can appreciate your concern."
- 6) Always try to be calm: use gentle gestures and a gentle tone of voice; be reassuring.
- 7) Give bad news only when after the customer is settled down.
- 8) Use common sense. Assume you are dealing with a person who possesses a good bit himself or herself, and he/she will respect you more.

Included with each bill is a letter of appreciation and a questionnaire, to learn what can be done to make the service better. They also send out complete, specific maintenance instructions for every type of plant used on site.

The author is a freelance writer and president of Lighthouse Writing Services, Inc., West Chester, Pa.

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