



TRENTON HIGHTOWER

Curriculum vitae

As Frederick Community College's associate vice president for customized training, Trenton Hightower oversees the training needs of more than 5,000 employees at 75 area companies. Mr. Hightower is a board member for the National Council for Continuing Education and Training. With a bachelor's in communications and public relations, and a master's in administration of higher education, Mr. Hightower still maintains his best education was basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the Army's Infantry Branch.

Customers discover poor service is norm

■ *First of a two-part series on customer service from both the business and customer point of view.*

By TRENTON HIGHTOWER

It's not matter of "if." It's a matter of "when."

Sooner or later, your dissatisfaction as a customer is guaranteed. Despite everything that's been written about it, good customer service is still the exception rather than the rule.

In fact, some would say that customer dissatisfaction has become the norm.

Many blame technology, and the impersonal set of customer encounters it now directs — phone trees, automated teller machines, do-it-yourself scanners at the grocery store, electronic billing, and e-mail.

For all the convenience these technology-driven alternatives offer us, there is a price to pay. When things go awry, are there any human beings around who can help?

Quite often, the answer is no. And frustrated customers who don't get what they want or need are not happy campers.

Getting real people behind the counter or at the other end of the phone is no guarantee of a pleasant experience either. That time-worn adage seems to have gone the way of the full-service gas station. You don't see either very often anymore.

In fact, the standard of good service has sunk to remembering to give a receipt, or asking "Do you want fries with that?"

While we all have our favorite examples of the jovial delivery person, the especially attentive waiter or the friendly receptionist at our doctor's office, think about the average person with whom you interact during a sales encounter. Do any truly seem to care about the decision you are about to make, or that you have the power as a consumer to "vote with your feet?"

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Rarely.

Too often, you get the feeling they'd just as soon you move on and let them get back to what they were doing — like talking on the phone, flipping through a magazine or anticipating their next break.

Perhaps you're a retailer or service provider on the opposite side of the "dissatisfaction guaranteed" equation? How to you assure that your front-line employees are delivering exemplary care to your customers?

Start by realizing that you may be dealing with an entire generation of employees who may never have experienced good customer service themselves. Many of them have only known the poor standards of service that have prevailed in the past 15-20 years.

Think of it this way: Good service is like the Grand Canyon. If you've never experienced it, you just don't get it.

Knowing how to take care of customers is a learned behavior. It starts with an understanding of the power of body language, facial expressions and eye contact.

What's not said in an encounter with a customer can be more damaging than the words that are actually used. Give your employees the training and practice they need to master the art of taking care of people well.

Want your company to be renowned for excellent customer service? As the manager or owner, you are where it all begins. Model these behaviors yourself.

As always, what you do and how you act will be far more important than what you say. Even the best training and education programs will fail to make a difference if the overall business environment is one of neglect and shoddy service — starting with top management.

Keep in mind one thing: Regardless of how high a priority you give customer satisfaction, mistakes will be made, and people will be displeased. Just remember: Even the worst experiences are opportunities to build customer loyalty.

Few people pay as much attention to the error as to how it is handled. Don't play the blame game. Fix the problem, quickly and as graciously as possible. Your efforts will not go unnoticed.

Customer dissatisfaction may be guaranteed, but if you train your employees as thoroughly as you can on the art of taking care of people, and stay focused on providing the best solution possible when the inevitable problem occurs, you don't have to lose customers.

Next week: The other side of the equation — the customer's responsibility for a good experience.