



Combating conflicts with our craziest customers

by: Joanne Smikle, www.smiklespeaks.com

They are the customers who try us at every turn. They are the ones who force us to over-exercise our smile muscles and exhaust our customer service competencies. This is a tongue in cheek look at the customers who cause the most consternation, the ones who plague us with problems and tempt us to lose our cool. Perhaps they are more common among your customers with “mom and pop” operations, or among those who buy a lot of consumables from your dealership. Whatever the case, there are four of these loathsome urchins, and I’ll bet many of you have met them all.

Delinquent Darryl — He never pays his invoices on time. He wants more products and services even though he has yet to clear up his balance from prior months. When your in-house collection people call, after several friendly reminders in the mail, he has a song and dance worthy of a Broadway production. But, oh how he turns on you when you give his account to an outside collection agency. Then Darryl develops a major attitude. How dare you want to get paid in a timely manner?!

Dealing with Darryl — Be sure he has a copy of your policy on delinquent accounts. Give him a personal call before sending him to collections. Decide if his business is really worth the effort; if it isn’t, send him to your least favorite competitor.

Bargainful Betty — This price shopper acts like every penny she spends comes out of her 401k. She haggles your sales staff so much they think they’ve run a marathon when they finally get the order. In addition, good ole Betty is always looking for freebies with each order. She has no sense of loyalty and will drop you in a minute if someone else offers a marginally better price.

Beating Betty — Be sure she receives plenty of advance notification of sales, specials and the like. Make her feel like she is getting more than she paid for by providing her with demos. Create frequent buyer programs that reward Betty for her loyalty. Track her purchases. When she reaches a certain pre-set spending threshold have your sales manager take her to lunch (no place too pricey, after all, she appreciates a bargain).

Complaining Connie — Oh, you know her, she speaks the “language of complaint” so frequently we know it’s her native



tongue. She complains about your sales staff, your service staff, your technical staff, your products and services. When you thoroughly investigate each complaint you find them baseless.

Caring for Connie — Get her to partner with you in problem-resolution. Each time there’s an occurrence of a complaint, ask Connie how she’d like it resolved. Connie wants to be heard so be sure that she is included in any and every customer survey. The more you validate her, the less she’ll complain.

Indecisive Ignatius — He waits forever to place an order and promptly cancels it the next day. Where the ordinary sales cycle may take a month, a sales cycle with Ignatius takes twice that long and then some. He has a litany of endless questions about everything from toner cartridges to color copiers. His questions require detailed, well-researched answers that your sales representatives gladly provide only to find out that he still isn’t quite ready to place an order.

Igniting Ignatius — He loves information so give him plenty. Be sure he gets all sorts of industry news and information on trends. Keep him on a regular mailing list—not a marketing

list, but an information list so that he knows everything there is to know. Once the order is placed make a personal call (or have the sales rep call) to be sure that he is ordering what he wants and needs. Review past orders, both cancelled and consummated, to identify trends. When he cancels an order find out why.

If each of the strategies identified for dealing with these four characters still don't get you the results you seek, remember the basics:

Basic #1 — The customer is not always right, but he or she is always the customer. They are to be accorded every consideration. We have to remember that customer satisfaction is the issue, not whether the customer is right or wrong. Every effort has to be made to attain and, equally as important, maintain customer satisfaction.

Basic #2 — Innovation cures stagnation. Create an environment for creativity and innovation by getting input from employees and customers. The ideas and energy generated will propel you to the top of the class in service, sales and satisfaction.

Basic #3 — Reputations are earned with each encounter.

Whatever customers are saying about your organization is probably true. It is certainly their perception of truth based on their encounters with your sales staff, service staff and managers. The only way to improve your reputation is to be sure that you make clearly discernable improvements in each encounter. Provide everyone in the organization with adequate tools and training to excel at meeting customer demands. Reduce the layers of decision-making so that everyone can do whatever is required to satisfy customers.

So, when faced with these four characters, focus first on specific strategies that address their unique brand of neurosis. Strengthen your defenses by remembering to use the basics.

After all, the customer is the most important ingredient in every organization's food chain. ■

Joanne L. Smikle moves minds with exciting keynotes, workshops and retreats. Reach this dynamic speaker, consultant and trainer at www.smiklespeaks.com or (301) 596-2822.

