

Creative Customer Service

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Three cheers for the folk who make service fun! Three cheers for the folks who use creativity in all of they do to satisfy customers, from planning to implementation and evaluation. These are the folks who are in the trenches everyday, earning your company its reputation as a service leader. But, what do these people and the organizations that support them do differently to separate them from the rest? This article highlights the strategies employed by these leaders that enable them to move from ordinary to extraordinary.

Kindness, Sincerity and Aptitude make the strategy known as KSAs.

Kindness

Somewhere along the way we have lost the human touch in our interactions. Is it any wonder when people would rather talk on cell phones than talk to the person two feet away? Or worse, when people who are two doors away rely on e-mail to deliver each and every message. Practicing kindness means refocusing our service efforts on basic humanity.

Let me provide an example of kind service. Many of us don't think of our physicians and their staffs as customer service providers, but I beg to differ. When my sister recently developed a chronic illness, our physician, Dr. Jerry Seals of Ellicott City, Md., not only returned every call from family members, but he also called just to check in after my sister was in the care of a specialist. That is kindness and reflects a level of care and compassion that makes us proud to be in the business of service. Dr. Seals' entire staff reflects his attitude of kindness.

There is always a warm smile, a human touch and even a joke or two in their service.

Sincerity

The second member of this KSA trio is equally as important as the first. Sincerity goes a long way in earning repeat business. It is hard to define and to touch, but we all know when we are encountering service providers who really care about our issues and us. Sincerity is the intangible that you can't see but can always feel, even through phone lines.

I am an admitted procrastinator. I always wait until the eleventh hour to make travel reservations. On one such occasion last fall I was making last minute hotel reservations for a trip to San Francisco and was on a tight budget. I called the Hilton reservations department and lucked up on a person who listened to my dire situation and searched hotels in the region for a reasonable rate. He would not give up and was committed to finding a good rate at a nice property. After more than 15 minutes, he found a match that met my criteria. I thanked him profusely and was struck by his reply.

"It's no problem. I really don't mind helping you. Are you sure that you don't need my help with anything else?" he asked politely.

I realized he could have easily blown me off at several points during our conversation and moved on to the next call. But, he stayed in the trenches long enough to create a thrilled customer. That was evidence of a sincere commitment to his employer and to me, the customer, and to an excellent level of professionalism.

Aptitude

Finally, aptitude is the third component of KSA. Frontline service staffs who know what they're doing are worth their weight in gold, especially when they couple aptitude together with kindness and sincerity. Aptitude requires work on both the individual and the organizational level. The individual service provider has to be willing to invest time and energy in their own learning through formal and informal training. They must be willing to read industry journals and publications to stay abreast of current trends. On the organizational level, there has to be a commitment to creating avenues and opportunities for learning. The organization that focuses on staff and management development is the one that consistently produces the highest aptitude. This is the organization that makes education and training an integral part of the business model, rather than an aside that gets addressed when there is a little extra money in the budget as a result of repeated complaints.

Knowledge Brokering

The KSAs are a good start on the road to creative service with a human touch, but it takes a little more than that.

Organizations that successfully position creativity in the service function use a process called "knowledge brokering."¹ This process, created by Andrew Hargadon and Robert I. Sutton, has four steps.

The cycle begins with **capturing good ideas**. This requires endless discussion of possibilities and probabilities in the service environment. It is evident when people are comfortable making suggestions face-

¹ This process is detailed in *Building an Innovation Factory* by Andrew Hargadon and Robert I. Sutton, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2000, pp.157-166.

to-face through meaningful conversations with colleagues, rather than through an anonymous suggestion box.

The next step in the cycle is **keeping the ideas alive** by sharing them, playing with them and discussing them. Even if the idea being circulated isn't Nobel Prize material, it presents an opportunity for discussion of endless possibilities. When the ideas come from the frontline they have tremendous merit, because they arise from direct customer contact.

The third step, **imagining new uses for old ideas**, allows for resurrection and rebirth for ideas that were originated at the wrong time or in the wrong place. Through the lens of a lively imagination, the ideas can breathe again and potentially see the light of implementation. This is another area where the frontline staff provides tremendous insight. They can tell you why and how an idea met its demise and how it could potentially work in another light.

The last step in the knowledge brokering cycle, **putting promising concepts to the test**, is the most fun. It allows everyone to have a hand in the trial and error process that marks learning organizations and learning individuals. Restaurants commonly use this step of the cycle when they feature new items on special daily menus. By putting their most promising gastronomical concepts to the test, restaurants unwittingly employ this concept.

Creating Innovation

Using the knowledge brokering cycle requires a commitment to innovation and is characterized by openness to new ideas and new concepts. This is evident when

people avoid a response of "we've always done it this way," and instead are willing to try different approaches. This openness to new ideas is a reflection of curiosity and is the most essential element of innovation. Curiosity is what drives everyone, staff and management alike, to the process of exploring the endless possibilities that keep customers coming back. Innovation calls for collaboration between individuals and departments. This cooperative mentality spurs people to habitually reach for and help one another.

As a frequent visitor to my local library, I am amazed at how well the librarians harness their collective resources to help patrons with research problems. They create quiet hum that does not end until the patron has the resources required. When I go to my favorite librarian with my latest research project, I stand back and watch her work with her associates to turn around answers in 30 minutes, which it would take me hours to accomplish on my own. One works on the computer while the other goes to the stacks and still a third disappears into the off-limits zone of book-lover's heaven. They have these little mini-conferences and check to see who has found what and to keep me informed on their progress. This is collaboration and cooperation in action. Each member of the team shares their expertise and their findings so that I, the patron, can leave satisfied.

Organizations that are innovative are characterized by constantly seeking and implementing creative answers to the hard problems indicative of today's business environment. People in these organizations are willing to talk about what they do and work collectively to do things better. They use these discussions

as a way of taking the Knowledge Brokering Cycle from theory into practical reality.

Innovative organizations have also been successful at removing the perceptual blocks that limit creativity. According to James L. Adams, perceptual blocks are the obstacles that prevent us from clearly perceiving the problem itself or the information needed to solve the problem.² These blocks include stereotyping, failure to utilize multiple sensory inputs and difficulty isolating the problem. Organizations and individuals that seek input from customers, frontline staff, colleagues and competitors are positioned to get beyond these blocks. Just as dialogue is essential in innovation and creativity, it is also important in keeping the organization forward-focused.

KSAs in Action

Everywhere you look there are examples of creative, innovative service in action. People, in even the most unlikely places, are finding ways to make the customer's experience a pleasant one. Some have actually thought about the KSAs and make a purposeful attempt to incorporate them into their *modus operandi*. For others the kindness, sincerity and aptitude come naturally. Either way, individuals and organizations are making the extra effort to use creativity and innovation to create satisfied customers. ■

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² Perceptual blocks are explored at length in *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas*, by James L. Adams, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1985.