

The 7 Biggest Myths of "Customer Service"

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I like what I do. Every year I deliver dozens of service and sales-building seminars for successful companies around the world. We also help overhaul and re-design manager and server training manuals and programs for a variety of successful chains and independent restaurants. And in doing so, I get to assimilate a wide variety of best practices relative to customer service. In many cases I see companies focusing their service efforts on premises that may not actually contribute to better service. Here are seven myths you may want to consider:

"Customers want service."

Do they? I'm convinced that what customers truly want today is the absence of complaints. Good service means never having to ask for anything, so the best way to enhance the customer's experience is to have a well-trained staff that knows how to meet and exceed customer expectations by focusing on what they need before they have to ask.

"The Customer Comes First":

Our employees are our first market. So never treat a customer better than you do an employee. Instead of ranking the importance of customers versus employees, we should focus on establishing equity instead. Service, like charity, begins at home, and if you're not investing in serving your team as well as you serve your customers, you're managing service backwards.

"The Customer is always right."

No. The customer is not always right, but is always the customer, and it's alright for the customer to be wrong. The customer is usually right. Rather than arguing about right and wrong, focus first on creating internal quality for your staff and they in turn will build a happy customer. And a happy customer buys more.

"A Satisfied Customer Comes Back."

Customer satisfaction is meaningless, customer loyalty is priceless. People don't want to be "satisfied" as customers. They want habitual consistency from the people they business with; they want fun, flair, memorable experiences. As New York City restaurateur Danny Meyer says, "Give your guests what they remember and give them something new each time they visit."

"We've Got to Focus on the Competition".

You're right. But what you may not realize is that your competition is the customer, not the other businesses that do what you do. So stop looking across the street at the competition and focus harder on treating the customer already in front of you with great care, respect and appreciation.

"Secret" Shoppers accurately Measure Service".

Measuring the quality of customer satisfaction by merely tallying mystery shopper scores or "comment cards" alone is like judging the quality of chili by counting the number of beans. When it comes to service, everything speaks. Measure the entire picture. Same store sales, customer traffic, and lower employee turnover are also key measures of good service. Mystery Shopping can be effective, but only if it measures the good as well as the bad, and the "shoppers" are people with hospitality experience who know the subtleties to look for.

"People are our most important asset."

The old adage that "people are your most important asset" is wrong. The right people are your most important asset. The right people are not "warm bodies". The right people are those employees who embody your culture, passion and commitment to serve.

"We Need New Ideas to Progress".

Why do companies always want "new ideas"? I'll tell you why, because "new ideas" are easy. The hard part is letting go of ideas that worked for you two years ago and are now out of date. So before you and your team brainstorm dozens of "new ideas" that get listed on flip charts, gives everyone a warm fuzzy, and then are never implemented, allow me to suggest a different angle. The newest and most innovative thing you can do for your business may be to master the "basics" that everyone knows and no one executes consistently (like caring behavior, service with flair, and employee appreciation). Because unlike Nehru jackets and boy bands, the basics of great service never goes out of style.

In summary, remember that there is no "silver bullet" for guaranteeing great service and a great team, but here's something to remember: "Keep it fresh, keep it focused, and remember to say thank you."

Jim Sullivan is a popular speaker at foodservice and retail industry conferences worldwide.