

Lessons for the front line

Improving Customer Service

By Janet Rorholm

When the phone rings at GreatAmerica Leasing Corp. in Cedar Rapids, employees jump. The goal is to answer any phone call within two rings. And because there is no voice mail or automatic phone attendant, a caller always gets a live person during regular business hours.

For customers tired of getting trapped in the world of voice mail and automatic phone attendants, that's welcome news.

Area businesses trying to stand out in a competitive market said they are focusing more on customer service in hopes of edging out the competition.

With fierce competition in the banking industry, banks are constantly trying to single themselves out.

"We've decided to differentiate ourselves based on our service rather than finding a hot product," said Susan Weinschenk, development officer at Iowa State Bank & Trust in Iowa City.

That's a smart move since businesses can easily spend three to 10 times more money to acquire a new customer than to build on an already existing relationship, said Rose Slaymaker, vice president of Nemece Marketing Group Inc. of Toddville. Good customer service can help gain new customers and retain those you already have.

Iowa State Bank & Trust started a customer service training program two years ago requiring all employees to go through a 12-hour class that aims at communication skills and enhancing overall service.

"It just gets down to basic communication skills and how use them. We talk a lot about how to greet someone and what the standards are for good customer service," Weinschenk said.

She stressed the need for employees to slow and take the time to talk to customers.

"Today everything is fast and now ..." Weinschenk said. "There's this natural tendency to think that person is in a hurry, I need to get them what they want and get them back to their day."

While prompt service is important, that doesn't mean that you can't take the time to say, "Hi. What can I do for you today and I'd be happy to do that," she said.

Other areas the bank focuses on in its training include clarifying a customer's needs, explaining information and resolving complaints.

Weinschenk and other bank managers attended a seminar featuring officials from the Ritz Carlton Leadership Center this fall in hopes of picking up more ideas to put in place at the bank.

The seminar was sponsored by the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce, which has heard complaints from members about the need for customer service training. Many members say they constantly deal with young high school or college students whose customer service skills are lacking, said Nancy Quellunghorst, chamber president.

Jerry Lewis, (left) director of account support at GreatAmerica Leasing Corp. in Cedar Rapids, works with Deanna Fellmer, account support adviser, on training.
Mark Tade photo/EdgeBusiness





Teresa Mitchell, service associate at Iowa State Bank & Trust in Iowa City, helps a customer.
Mark Tade photo/EdgeBusiness

The Ritz Carlton is well known for its high-quality hospitality.

“We know there’s always room for improvement, and we are working on ways to constantly improve our skills,” Weinschenk said.

One suggestion she picked up and intends to focus more on is resolving complaints.

“The Ritz talked about how important it is to apologize and empathize when something is wrong,” Weinschenk said.

They also stressed the importance of finding a way to manage complaints so they are adequately addressed and not forgotten. That includes a technical system that tracks the types of issues that arise whether it be a problem with a product or a service issue. The information can then be analyzed in order to improve customer service, Weinschenk said.

Slaymaker said one of the most important things a business can do to improve customer service is to work on follow-through.

“The very first thing you ought to do is do what you say. Follow through on what you tell someone. In our busy lives it’s easy to get distracted, but it’s what sets businesses apart in customer service — a strong follow-through,” Slaymaker said.

Another thing is to express gratitude for a person’s business.

“I’m floored by the number of people who don’t say ‘Thank you.’ Showing your appreciation for their business is a simple thing,” Slaymaker said. “Often it’s the little things that get the return business.”

Another way to improve customer service is to make sure that, internally, the business culture is positive and upbeat and employees feel like they are being treated well, she said.

“If you’re not treating your employees well, that’s probably going to impact customer ser-

vice,” Slaymaker said.

If employees don’t feel like you care about them, they often think, “Why should I care about the customer,” she said.

Jerry Lewis, director of account support at GreatAmerica Leasing, said customer service is a top priority for the company.

“To me, being able to provide the best customer service possible means being successful with one-call resolution,” he said.

The company also places a big emphasis on e-mail. The company strives to answer all electronic correspondence in 30 minutes or less, Lewis said.

To accomplish its goals, Lewis said employees must also know their jobs inside and out, and also other people’s jobs. In addition to classroom training, employees also train side-by-side with co-workers and are tested to see what level of information they have retained. The test is used as a training tool not punitively.

“They must answer nine out of 10 questions correctly before they are set free. We don’t throw anybody to the wolves,” Lewis said.

Employees are taught good phone etiquette, including talking in a calming, soothing voice and being emphatic to the caller who is having a problem.

“It doesn’t mean sounding like a robot, but it means treating each customer individually,” he said.

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