

From ordinary to extraordinary
Quality customer service begins in the HR department
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The clichés are abundant. Companies are “trying to exceed the expectations of their customers.” They are “valuing the customers” and “anticipating their needs.”

But good customer service is more than catchphrases. There truly is a science to delivering quality service – and a healthy dose of common sense, as well. Both sides of the equation originate in the human resources department, where key decisions are made on hiring and employee training.

The Ritz-Carlton-Dearborn is a good example. It is widely acknowledged for delivering excellent customer service to its guests – a reputation it didn’t receive by accident.

“We are structured, organized and systematic about it,” explains Michel Goget, general manager. “This means that we have a system that allows us, as soon as a customer comes to any Ritz-Carlton worldwide, to be able to ask him questions and establish his preferences.

“For example, if you are in Atlanta, and you make a comment to one of our employees that you don’t like chocolate, that’s a preference. If you are a regular customer of ours, we are going to plug that into a computer system so that if you stay with us two weeks later in Dearborn, we’ll know that you don’t like chocolate. If we give you a special gift, it won’t be chocolate but perhaps an auto magazine, because we know that’s what you like.”

The Ritz-Carlton uses carefully developed personnel selection and training processes to guarantee that its employees automatically provide a level of service not frequently found elsewhere in the industry, says HR Director Laura Gutierrez.

Ritz-Carlton employees are “selected” rather than “hired,” and the difference is more than just semantic. All 470 employees of the Dearborn Hotel carry cards that say, “I noticed your work.” They hand them out as recruitment tools when they notice someone whose personality or professionalism makes them a prospect to work at the hotel.

Gutierrez has found prospects at Home Depot stores and grocery stores and even such unlikely locales as bus and truck stops. One food and beverage service employee who was discovered at a Grand Prix hospitality tent has now been with the hotel for six years.

Once selected for employment at the Ritz-Carlton, employees go through an immediate 16-hour orientation process, says Maureen Klein, the hotel’s director of training and development. The Ritz-Carlton then spends about 100 hours on training, which includes a lunch at the grill and formal seminar-style training sessions – both conducted just as if the employee were a Ritz-Carlton guest.

The Ritz-Carlton spends about \$6,500 training and outfitting an average employee – about the twice the industry average. Turnover rates are about 25 percent in an industry where the figure can exceed 100 percent.

Every employee is instructed to solve problems without passing the buck. Part of the credo is that Ritz-Carlton employees are “ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.” Employees are expected to use certain words and phrases such as “certainly,” “my pleasure,” and “I’d be happy to;” and avoid saying “sure,” “okay” or “no problem.”

“Marty the doorman is a kind of celebrity in and of himself,” says Gutierrez. “He’s been rated by *Condé Nast* magazine as the best doorman in the United States – quite frankly, an award we didn’t know existed.” The Ritz-Carlton has won awards that most people do know exist. The hotel chain won Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards in 1992 and 1999, a feat that Goget says is highly unusual in the hotel industry.

THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

Scientific methods of applying and assessing customer service often begin with a simple reply card, but extend to ongoing and complex surveys and interviews that help companies assure that their customers are getting what they want.

“We put a survey in every single invoice that goes out that basically says, ‘Here’s an invoice for the work we’ve performed; if you are unhappy with any of it please tell us now,’” says John Silvani, president of First Edge Sornson (FES), a business solutions company that provides software for accounting, customer service and a multitude of other business functions through its six offices in North America.

“We usually invoice every two weeks. So every two weeks, people are getting a contact card saying, ‘Are you happy?’”

Each quarter an independent agency contacts FES customers and conducts a lengthy interview to quantify what the company is doing right and wrong. It is this feedback that allows FES to constantly upgrade its customer service.

A scientific approach toward customer service indeed pays dividends, but simple, common-sense methods of satisfying customers are just as important, Silvani notes.

"I think probably over 75 percent of it is common sense," he says. "I always tell my people, 'Put yourself in your customer's shoes. What would you expect in that situation?'" It's the Golden Rule: treat others like you'd want to be treated. It's common sense. It's basically saying, 'If you make an appointment for 9 a.m., you should be there at 9 a.m. That's what you would expect, that's what they should get.'"

Rigorous training programs don't just apply to how employees behave toward customers. At the Detroit Regional Chamber, a program called "The Customer" teaches employees how to approach each other as well as the Chamber's members, explains Thelma Costello, vice president of human resources and operations. The step-by-step program teaches effective internal and external customer-service skills, using team-building and problem-solving approach.

Castillo credits the program, which was recently brought back for both new and existing employees after a successful 1995 rollout, with helping to create a friendly and open work environment.

"A lot of it is making sure the person you are speaking to is the most important person at the time, whether that is an external member or a team member on your staff," she says. "I think that was one of the hardest things our staff had to overcome was the fact that an internal staff member was a customer."

The Chamber program is taught over an eight-week period to give employees an opportunity to put its principles into practice and discuss the results in subsequent sessions.