“Up the Creek without a Paddle”

This is a story about my passion and purpose as a Business Coach. I might even say my rant. Yes, my pet peeve is about customer service, or really the lack thereof and the fact that it seemingly does not command the time and attention it deserves in so many Businesses today. While getting customers through the door or to your website is important and converting them to paying customers is vital to the growth of a Business, serving the customer so they become your raving fans for life is the most obvious and most overlooked component of building a successful Business. Over the years I have compiled some of the best and some of the worst customer service stories and how they have made me smile and tell the world and unfortunately more often, made me cry and tell the universe.

As a Business owner, can you think of a time when you were so impressed with the level of service you received in a Business you just had to run and tell someone right away? Maybe a few times! How about a time when the level of service fell way below your expectations and you have not returned to that establishment since? Was there even an opportunity for you to make your disappointment known?

Unfortunately the latter is more often the case. I am quite sure no one actually plans to fail; it’s more likely they simply fail to plan. In other words, what is in your heart and the vision you hold for your Business has somehow not been articulated to your staff on the front lines. How will they know? Only when you show them and tell them, leaving nothing to chance!

I would like to share a funny, not so funny story about trying to buy a paddle for an ocean kayak in a popular Oceanside resort town on Vancouver Island. Now to fully appreciate this story you must understand something, we are in the surf, kayaking, canoeing, boating Mecca of North America. A friend of mine recently purchased a couple of surf kayaks and unfortunately one of the paddles did not make the trip with us. We thought no problem, will just stop in to one of the many shops in the town and buy one.

The first was a surf shop with boards hanging from the ceiling and related accessories everywhere, except paddles. When we approached the clerk at the till after waiting to speak with a staff member for over 10 minutes, we were told they did not sell them and he had “no idea” who would. All of this was said without lifting his head and not making eye contact with us. We thanked him for taking so much of his time to help us out and that we would certainly tell all of our friends about the great service offered at his shop.

Do you think he was the owner of the shop? Do you think he was ever shown how to treat a customer who comes in to buy something? Do you think there was an employee training manual for him to follow for situations like this?

So off we go to find another shop where things certainly would get better, we hoped. Bingo, we find a place that rents kayaks. Certainly they would sell or maybe rent us a paddle. We walk in, say hello to the mature women behind the desk, explain our situation and ask would she be able to help. Without looking up
from the book she was reading, she told us a tour was out at that time and they had no paddles in the shop. She said there might be some down on the dock in a locker but it was a long way to the water, could we check back in an hour. When I asked if I could run down to the dock and check for myself, I was given a look over her reader glasses like the one you would get if you had just committed a felony. I then asked if there was any other place we could find a paddle. We were told there wasn’t any other place in town that could help us out. We later found about six other shops that rented or sold kayaks, just not on the day we were looking.

The story continues to get better, well, that is if you have the sense of humor I do, not so much if you are normal. We press on going from shop to shop and it starts to feel like a skit right out of Laurel and Hardy. We now have over two hours of time invested and day light slipping away, but still no paddle. One shop showed four paddles in inventory, but alas the computer was lying. Another had 25 or 30 kayaks resting along with their paddles but apparently they could not be separated for fear of kayak paddle anxiety I suppose. They would only rent us the kayak and the paddle together. I’m starting to look around for a mirror to see if I have a sign on my head that says “don’t give this person whatever he is looking for”. So as a Business owner, let me ask you this.

How would your staff represent you in this situation? What separates you from your competition and keeps customers feeling valued and appreciated? When challenges come up in your Business, has your staff been empowered to make the right decision that serves the customer and builds your brand and goodwill? Or, are you leaving your customers with the feeling they are “up the creek without a paddle”? Is there congruency between what your vision and mission are and what your staff are saying and conveying to the public? How easy is it for customers to do Business with you?

Start today to create your operations and training manual. Knowing that most Businesses don’t have one, don’t delay, start writing today!

More next issue on creating a system that builds your bottom line.

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