

# Connecting With the Customer

By Russ Rado

*Customer service is the lifeblood of most businesses. Learn how to determine where your company's customer service needs improvement, and what to include in a customer-service awareness program for employees.*

Your eye caught the title of this article, and zeroed in on the words, "customer" and "connecting." You said to yourself, "Hmmm, I should check this one out. Maybe I'll read something that will help me to be more effective with customers."

What you have just encountered are assumptions—my assumption that the words in the title would lure you into the article, and your assumption that you might gain something useful from reading it.

In this case, I would hope that our assumptions prove to be correct. However, assumptions often represent major pitfalls in effective customer connections. Positive customer connections can be viewed as the lifeblood of most businesses; think of assumptions as Dracula, ready to drain away that blood, leaving your business lifeless.

Four common assumptions stand in the way of achieving positive customer connections:

- assuming that you know your customer's (or potential customer's) needs and wants;
- assuming that all people are defining customer service the same way;
- assuming that you don't have to test your assumptions;
- assuming that you know what customers are trying to tell you, rather than listening to what they're really saying.

You can assess your own company's approach to customer service, and you can help the organization get beyond those roadblocks. In order to move toward making connections and building long-term, positive relationships with customers, an organization has to take three steps:

- defining the customer and customer service;
- analyzing individual and organizational performance-model factors that affect real and perceived customer service;
- beginning internal assumption checks, and building momentum toward achieving effective customer

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connections through customer-service awareness training.

## The customer and customer service

In its broadest sense, the word "customer" describes a person who looks to you to provide a product or service. That includes external and internal customers—the people who buy your products and services, and the staff and line personnel who rely on each other to make the business run. A lot of individuals make up the chain between production and delivery of your product. An organization's ability to create positive customer relations is influenced by the extent to which employees view each person in that chain as a customer.

To make effective customer connections and achieve marketing and business goals, most companies must provide effective customer service. Customer service includes any activities that demonstrate an attention to customer needs and desires. When customer service is done well, it can help the company build long-term business relationships and a growing customer base.

In general, customer service comprises the following factors:

- real or perceived value provided to customers;
- an extension of organizational values or culture;
- a performance result.

### Real or Perceived Value

Since the customer is someone who looks to receive a product or service, the bottom line on customer service is the value the customer places on that product or service. The customer may form a perception of the value through various means. The customer may base the perception on such experiences as having a knowledgeable person respond to a telephone inquiry, receiving a product that fits a particular need, having a deadline met, or receiving clear and concise directions.

The key is customer perception. Perceptions are neither right nor wrong—they are reality. You can guess or assume what your customers' perceptions are, or you can go the extra step and check them out. That could involve having customers fill out surveys, creating opportunities for personal contact, sampling products, or finding out what the competition is doing to obtain and retain customers.

## Organizational Values and Culture

The quality of customer service is directly related to how employees perceive the organization's expectations, demands, and rewards. Employee perceptions tend to manifest themselves in paying attention to detail, answering phones, covering for absent team members, sharing information, and other job-related performance factors that affect quality and service.

### Performance Results

Customer service, like other work activities, is a performance result. Achieving quality performance results (or providing valued services to customers) requires some basic competencies:

- a working knowledge of the company's products, services, and customers;
- knowledge of functions and key contacts within the organization, to achieve results and to be able to direct an inquiry to the right person when

the request falls outside one's area of responsibility;

- effective communication skills, to be able to deal with customers in order to assess needs, demonstrate good listening skills, and achieve understanding as to what is expected and what will be delivered.

## Performance models

Since customer service is a performance result, a performance-model framework can be used to analyze what makes it work or not work at your organization. Performance models generally identify three components that interrelate and affect an individual's success:

- **competence**—the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills;
- **commitment**—the composite effect of attitudes and values on a person's work ethic;
- **climate**—the organizational practices and programs that influence an

## Customer-Service Awareness Training at CIGNA

The customer-service awareness program at CIGNA's Property and Casualty Group focuses on drawing information from the participants rather than telling them what to do. For example, leaders have employees relate their own perspectives on how they have been and would like to be treated as customers, and employees come up with potential benefits of providing effective customer service.

The key is achieving clarity and understanding about the benefits of good customer service, and getting participants to share their knowledge of the right things to do and how to do them right.

Employees go into the program with the following objectives:

- to define the benefits of good customer service—for themselves, the customer, and the company;
- to identify their internal and external customers;
- to define the practices and behaviors that make up good customer service;
- to identify the obstacles that interfere with good customer service, and determine how they will deal with those that they can control and try to influence those outside of their control;

- to develop an agreement as to how they will work to enhance the customer service they provide and build solid customer connections back on the job.

The sessions involve individual and group activities that result in sharing perceptions, assumptions, and ideas for the group to analyze and discuss. Participants may share stories of their own experiences as customers, identify elements of good and poor customer service that they have seen, draw illustrations of what customer service could look like in the organization, and brainstorm about obstacles to providing and customer service and how to deal with them.

To achieve maximum benefit, the groups participating in the session are mixed across function and organizational level. That helps reinforce the idea of internal-customer needs and issues, and open dialogue between people who may feel awkward about raising such issues on the job.

The sessions have helped to build team spirit, bring employee concerns to management's attention, and support continual improvement efforts in providing effective customer service.



individual's perception of the kind of company he or she works for.

Customer-service performance results are based on a composite of those three areas, as manifested in the employee's behavior and the results achieved. Where do you start to either correct a customer-service deficiency or enhance your organization's customer connections? The answers are not simple.

The process of determining what has broken down or where you have opportunities to enhance customer service is an analytical exercise. Your analysis needs to focus on the question, "What is causing my customer-service deficiencies or opportunities?" To answer that question, consider such factors as employee competence and commitment, organizational support and reward systems, work flow, and lines of communication. Once you begin to zero in on suspected causes, you can analyze possible responses.

For example, if the need you uncover is in the area of employee competence, a logical response would be to look at training in particular functions or relational skills. If deficiencies or opportunities are a result of employee

commitment, then you should look at your performance-management system or awareness and motivation programs. If climate (a composite of organizational programs and practices that provide clarity, reinforcement, and rewards) is the important factor, an organizational-development intervention may be called for.

When using that kind of analysis, remember that any major problems you uncover in your performance-management system or overall climate should be addressed before you go ahead with awareness or motivation training. One cannot overestimate the impact of poor management processes on the overall climate and the commitment of the workforce. Never jump past the analysis stage and assume that customer service is a competence issue; likewise, don't always assume that skills training is the answer.

If your organizational programs and practices are effective, and your competence needs are clearly mapped out and are being addressed, one area to address is customer-service awareness training for employees.

Programs that focus employee attention on customer-service issues often

result from situations and attitudes such as those at CIGNA's Property and Casualty Group. The company believed strongly that customer service involves commitment to quality and reliability, and that it revolves around attitudes, feelings, and values. Most employees had been given basic training to be functionally competent, and were thought to have the knowledge and skills to deliver effective customer service, if they could be made aware of its benefits. (See the box to learn more about CIGNA's awareness program.)

Customer-service awareness training is one of the foundation blocks to help employees focus on doing the right things and doing them right. But because customer service is an integral part of all company activities, there is no one answer or program that will work in every situation.

Achieving effective customer service is largely dependent on having a competent and committed workforce that functions in a positive organizational climate. Competence, commitment, and climate help support that essential business lifeblood and marketing goal—effective customer connections.



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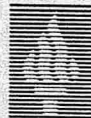
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