

No Such Thing as a Second-Class Customer

In the age of the customer, it is worth the mental journey to revisit the powerful lessons I learned about customers as a young man working at Swanson Hardware Supply. My father, Walt Swanson, and my brother, Bob Swanson, built a substantial business around the commitment to treating everyone as a first-class customer.

My most vivid image of first-class customer service is my dad, the former top executive of the largest employer in town, and my brother, the youthful upstart hardware merchant, carrying a fifty-pound bag of birdseed out to Mr. Sekel's old army-green Dodge truck. Mr. Sekel was a simple man and, compared to the big spenders, an insignificant customer. He was a laborer who was paid at the end of the week, and he would stop by the store on Friday nights to buy birdseed. He appeared to be alone in life except for the birds, which he fed generously. I watched my father and brother celebrate Mr. Sekel's interest and help him, as they helped all their customers. In my memory, the setting sun streams through the front windows of Swanson Hardware and highlights the figures in the front parking lot. I remember watching my sunlit brother and father chat with Mr. Sekel as they loaded his truck.

I imagine that Mr. Sekel spent most of his time loading other people's trucks and was rarely called Mr. Sekel. But at Swanson Hardware he truly was treated as a first-class customer. I watched Mr. Sekel go from buying ten pounds of birdseed at a time to buying fifty-pound bags. More than that, the other employees watched, and the other customers watched. We learned about the integrity of this company and the dignity of being a first-class customer—and that there was no such thing as a second-class customer.

I have many stories about Swanson Hardware. Being part of this enterprise during my formative years was a true education and a privilege. The current focus on the customer renews my hope of being treated in the marketplace the way I was taught to treat customers. But, at the same time, HRD personnel who never had the chance to work in or be served by Swanson Hardware are often asked to teach a sense of customer to company employees—not an easy task.

Swanson Hardware went to extreme lengths to satisfy customers. I remember being rented out with a garden rototiller to an older couple who wanted to plant a garden but lacked the strength to till the soil. We offered

free delivery service and often had the truck loaded before the customer hung up the phone. My brother regularly delivered and installed light bulbs for one particular customer. Two Swanson Hardware employees went off to sand and varnish a customer's bedroom floor because the shellac we had sold them would not dry. I remember the enthusiasm and energy we always had for trying to solve customer problems. Customers wanted help and we wanted to help them. It was fun and rewarding. Swanson Hardware grew, and the customers could not say enough good things about the business.

No trite mottoes, plaques, or posters about customer service were displayed in Swanson Hardware. There was a soul-deep understanding that satisfying the customer started and sustained a mutually benefiting cycle. There was nothing naive about this commitment; it was a sound business decision. From opening day, the goal was that nobody left Swanson Hardware unsatisfied and that no customer would need to go into a competitor's store. We would find acceptable substitutes or special-order their needed goods. If we were out of an item, we would even buy it from a competitor and deliver it to the customer's home for the cost of our purchase. At the micro level such a policy may have appeared foolish, but at the macro level it was brilliant.

Swanson Hardware opened in 1958 in a town that already had too many hardware stores. The two large, long-standing, well-established competitors of 1958 have long since gone out of business. Swanson Hardware now has three stores and continues its philosophy of customer service. I live 1,100 miles away and still manage to hear remarkable stories of customer service through various channels.

Everyone concerned about customer service should have a benchmark. The customer service lessons I learned in the hardware store, my benchmark, include these:

- Customers are the core of the business.
- Customers want help, and you ought to want to help them.
- Attending to customer needs has greater benefits than costs.
- There is no such thing as a second-class customer.

Even with such benchmarks, HRD professionals have the additional challenge of understanding customers at a number of levels. For example, HRD professionals have their own internal customers and external customers. If understanding and commitment to customers is important, HRD functions need to exemplify best practices to their own customers. Clearly, HRD professionals need to honor and serve their customers. Doing so provides a perfect opportunity for merging HRD theory and practice.

Concurrently, HRD personnel should realize that the most powerful teacher of customer service is the person sitting at the top of the organization. The image of a glowing sunset highlighting the silhouette of the owner of the business as he leans to lift a humble customer's heavy purchase is powerful

instruction. With a good example at the top, customer service interventions are more likely to be taken seriously by company employees. But when leaders convey exploitive, combative, and disrespectful messages, HRD efforts to improve the sense of customer among employees will most certainly be short-lived, if not futile.

I cannot imagine being responsible for developing a sense of customer in much of the over-the-counter service sector, given conditions such as absentee owners who manage from a ledger sheet, teenage minimum-wage workers enculturated by the values of Time Warner Inc. and their proxies Ice-T and Madonna, and supervisors with a year of seniority over their workers. Research confirms that customer service development efforts under these conditions are futile. Yet HRD practitioners continue to be duped into delivering quick-fix approaches to customer service development via comedic training videos, posters, slogans, and employee pledges. Save your money and time. Sending a copy of this editorial to the top management team would have an equal chance of improving customer service.

Only a soul-deep transformation on the part of top management will tilt the odds that an organization will achieve a systemic commitment to and realization of the significance of customer. I would suggest rounding up the top people in your organization for a seminar run by the top management team of another business that understands, practices, and flourishes from customer service. These customer service experts might need some help in organizing the seminar, and it might be wise to use a motivational training design that includes such core elements as identifying with the participants, setting the stage for the business issues, offering illustrations of success, and carefully articulating the solution (Swanson and Law, 1993). Such a seminar, culminating in a corporate equivalent of an altar call, will need to be followed by more earthly systems development and human development efforts.

The principles of customer service and the benefits of customer orientation are fairly well known, and the business measures of companies that pursue customer satisfaction are reassuring (U.S. Government Accounting Office, 1991). Even so, our customer service practices lag far behind our theory. As we struggle with this theory-to-practice gap, it is important that the HRD contribution to the customer service formula be researched and evaluated. There is still much to be learned.

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References

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