Are You Giving Satisfaction or Just Service?

Marilyn Moats Kennedy

Is there a Fortune 500 or 1000 company, not to mention not-for-profit, that isn't talking about customer service in an attempt to whip employees into a frenzy of caring? We doubt it. Most of these efforts will be wasted because the word “service” invites people to buy out, not in. In fact, the disconnect between satisfaction and service has a long, unhappy history.

If you remember the 1960s, the motto of that era was, “If it feels good, do it,” and it must have, because a great many people did. In the 1970s, the buzz attitude was self-improvement. People who hardly ever walked signed up to run marathons. Orthopedic practices disdained hips and fingers to become flourishing sports injury clinics.

The motto of the 1980s was “Do what works” or “Get the result.” The 1990s was a time of personal development. Now we’re looking at coaching to cure all ills. (It’s a fad and it won’t.) The point: all of these management and personal fads focused, and still do, on process. People, including most managers, still do not get the point: service is the process. The result to be delivered is satisfaction!

People focused on serving rather than satisfying clients, customers, or even their bosses are completely out of sync with this decade. They are on auto pilot. The two most common worshipers of process at the expense of satisfaction are the airlines—all of them—and the Transportation Security Agency. Every airport is a temple to chaos, dysfunctional processes, and customer dissatisfaction. How often do you hear someone say, “I understand what you want me to do but that’s not our policy”? Oops! That’s the service mentality in action. There goes the customer. It’s especially true of customers or employees younger than 35 years of age. They do not complain. They walk.

To appreciate process-oriented thinking in full flight, try to cash a check in a supermarket on a Friday evening. The nearest bank ATM machine is a longer distance. Besides, you spend approximately $5000 at this market. They should be glad to help you. There are three people behind the service desk. One is obviously in a coma and in need of medical attention. Another is studying his fingernails with impenetrable concentration. You can look right through the eyes of the third worker to the back wall and it doesn’t disturb the view. Your check is written. It’s a 60-second transaction. Why are they making you wait? They think they are there to service you—in God’s and their own sweet time. What if we called it the Customer Satisfaction Desk? Would anyone get the point?

Editor’s note—Marilyn Moats Kennedy’s article titled “Managing Change: Understanding the Demographics of the Evolving Workforce” was published in the 2002 AAEP Proceedings, pp 467–470.
Although you personally understand the concept of providing satisfaction and not service, what about your employees? Are they serving instead of satisfying? You'll know when a customer or client tells you emphatically, and she is anything but satisfied and will find another supplier. Remember: the beginning of all wisdom is recognizing that substitutes exist for every product or service, including the option to forgo something entirely. Here are some ways to get back on track.

Satisfaction Varies by Age and Lifestyle
One size does not fit all. Do not do unto others as you would like to be done unto. Do unto others as they would like to be done unto.

Identify What Satisfaction Means to Your Customer
Why do you think you can answer this question? Remember the first rule of journalism: if your mother says she loves you, check it out. Is it how quickly you fill orders or how rapidly you solve problems? They are different. Do your customers want to talk to a live person? Until you can give satisfaction a full-body description, it's all a dangerous game.

Change the Way the Score Is Kept
Revamp the reward system right now. You get the attitudes and behaviors you reward. Your people may rate job success or how many people they process rather than satisfy. Ask them how often they say, “No problem!” when a customer asks for something, particularly if the request requires additional physical or mental effort. No problem is the phrase used by those determined to satisfy.

Share Problem-Solving Methods and Reward Originality
Weekly staff meetings are pointless unless they teach and reinforce what you want done. Get people to share stories of how they've satisfied customers. It reinforces the idea that satisfaction is the desired outcome.

Give Directions for Getting Results, Not a Process
Yes, there is a difference. Suppose your receptionist concludes that people are rude, crude, and abusive—and they are, based on the way they treat her. She begins to respond in kind. If you ask her to be more cheerful, she may put on a happy face but people still will not feel welcome. Instead, say, “Sarah, when someone turns away after talking to you, that person should have the distinct measurable impression that you were delighted to help. Now get that result by whatever means are necessary and appropriate.”

This is a no-brainer. Stand at the door and ask visitors if Sarah seemed glad to see them and eager to help. More than 85% of the time, visitors should say that she did. Remember, teams don't give satisfaction, individuals do, so stop flogging teamwork, and give the Gipper a rest.

Reward Your Best Performers and Discipline the Rest
If you want to change people's mindsets, teach and encourage. Use psychic rewards instead of money. Foster informal competition to satisfy more people. Let them know the best way to impress you is by satisfying everyone to the max, not just customers, but co-workers and other managers. Don't just talk. Be seen relishing the opportunity to create satisfaction for difficult people.

Mention Satisfaction in Performance Reviews
Ask for examples of ways in which a direct-report produced customer satisfaction. Give examples that you have observed. Walk your talk, which means talk non-stop about your implacable intention to promote only those who are fanatical about customer satisfaction. Be prepared to reject loyalty, trying hard, and good intentions in any form as adequate reasons for promotion. Be gentle but firm.

Satisfy Your Employees’ Need for Fairness and Consistency
Don’t make them guess what your real values are. If you’re not sold on satisfaction as a business strategy, please don’t expect them to be. If you never fail to ask anyone, “Does that do it for you,” or “What else do we need to do,” your employees will get the point.

Ultimately your organization must put substance into customer satisfaction. Why wait? This is a chance to lead in what’s most important in this decade: building long-term relationships because you have more satisfied customers. You’ll stand out because, thus far, there is little competition.