

Overcoming Apathy by Bringing the Customer to Life in Your Company

By JoAnna Brandi

JoAnna Brandi hates to generalize, but I am beginning to think the service givers, especially here in Florida are suffering from a disease I call E.D.S. - Empathy Deficiency Syndrome. Some of the symptoms include apathy and an amazing ability to look right at a customer and not see a thing. The other peculiar indication of this syndrome is the inability to use the words "I'm sorry" or calming phrases such as "I can understand how that might be upsetting."

E.D.S. shows up in all kinds of businesses. Partially caused by a crummy attitude and lack of caring on the part of the service giver, it is exacerbated by managers who don't take the time or effort to make the customer, and his or her needs, concerns and pain real and meaningful to those delivering the service.

In today's business world, where customer focus and customer loyalty are critical business strategies, it is the manager who is really the connection between the customer and the company. When a manager understands and communicates the importance, the lifetime value, of the customer to the company, people begin to understand why delivering great service should be something they want to do. It's the responsibility of today's managers to get people excited about interacting with the customer. There is something inherently rewarding about helping to solve someone's problems or ease someone's pain, or making sure they feel good about doing business with you. Most people aren't apathetic to someone they care about. How do we get people to care more about the customers? Get them involved, get them to "walk in their shoes" for a while, get them to think more like them! As they, and their businesses, become more "alive" to service givers, their response will be noticeably different.

The highly successful software company Intuit (who developed Quicken and Quickbooks) follows their customers home from the store. In an attempt to better understand how easy, or difficult it is to install the software without help, Quicken has trained observers follow people home, not to help, but to watch. Then, they go back and make recommendations, based on the customers experience on improving documentation or how to instruction.

3M's surgical division has 750 people and all of them get out into operating rooms and don gloves and gowns and watch people using their products. This gives the staff a customer's eye view. It makes the customer real. What can you do to saturate your company with the voice and the faces of your customers?

Get out of the office - Get your staff members into the customer's office. (Yes, I am suggesting you get the service people and even the engineers out to meet customers.) Allow them to see and experience how your product or service fits into the customer's overall business. Let them ask questions about what customers need and how they might be more helpful. Have them ask the customers about their goals, their dreams and their fears. After each customer visit conduct a "show and tell" meeting. This makes the customer more alive back at your office.

Bring the customers to you - Invite customers to visit you frequently. Teach people to ask insightful questions that will help them form a vivid picture of what life is like for the customer. It's easier to be compassionate and empathetic when you know the whole picture. Brainstorm with customers and play with new solutions. When staff members know the customers better and are

touched by their real life challenges, they are more likely to respond to them with enthusiasm rather than an "us against them" attitude.

Tell stories, take pictures - Audiotape or videotape customer feedback sessions and play them at meetings. Take photos of customers using your product and hang them on the walls. Nothing is more compelling than a story and a picture or two. Use photos of customers in your newsletters.

Customer- Run Meetings - Ask the customer to come in and run a meeting. Have them pick the topic and design the agenda. Make this a regular way to get feedback.

Reserve a Chair - Have a special chair at your conference table for the customer. Pretend that a customer is always at your meetings and watch how your language and demeanor changes. Don't have a good imagination? Buy a mannequin and dress it up and sit it in the chair.

Send the staff shopping - Give members of the staff money to go out and spend time being a customer of someone else. But send them with a checklist of service behaviors to watch out for and observe. Have these lucky people come back and report to others. And yes, let them keep what they buy. Cheapest form of service consulting you will ever find.

Celebrate a customer day - Have one every month, celebrate one of your business customer's successes, meeting their goals, reaching their dreams, there's usually something to celebrate if you look for it.

Try some of these techniques in your company - most are inexpensive, if not free and will do wonders to boost service and morale.

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