

Two Faces of Customer Service

How to make sure your co-op is showing the right one

BY MARI ROSEMAN

Mike dropped by the co-op to grab a sandwich for a quick lunch. He brought his purchase to the checkout counter, relieved to see the cashier had nearly finished with the customer ahead of him. Mike waited patiently while the sale was completed, but his hopes for a quick trip were dashed as the cashier and customer continued to chat. He waited while they waxed poetic about the cookies the customer had just bought and was somewhat amused when the customer offered to share. But amusement turned to incredulity when the cashier accepted, then hunted for a pair of scissors to open the package. Fuming, Mike finally grabbed his sandwich and switched lanes, vowing to shop elsewhere in the future.

It's no secret that good customer service is important in ensuring that shoppers return to your store to buy from you again. Great customer service can engender strong customer loyalty and convert customers to brand ambassadors (those who, without prompting, will sing their praise of your brand to others).

Alternatively, poor customer service has led to the slow demise of many an organization. Your co-op may have strong operations, all the right products at the right price, great visual appeal and a convenient location. But all it takes is one unsatisfactory encounter with a single employee to jeopardize your relationship with a customer, possibly forever.

Every employee in your organization influences customer service, directly or indirectly. Each staff member on the floor has direct interaction with customers, whether she's stocking shelves or ringing up customer purchases. But staff members in administrative positions also affect customer service, from the development of store policies to handling and responding to customer calls or comments. These are all touchpoints for your brand, and everyone has a role to play in the cumulative experience a customer has in your store.

Zingerman's suggests five ways to ensure you have great customer service (in *Zingerman's Guide to Great Service* by Ari Weinzweig), interpreted here for co-ops: define it, teach it, live it, measure it, reward it. We'd add: hire for it.

Define it. What does excellent customer service mean to you? Eye contact, a smile and a "hello" are simple and set the tone for a shopper's entire experience, but all too often, these basics are overlooked. Quickly respond to shoppers' needs: ring up purchases quickly, don't make shoppers wait at your



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service counters, notice when customers are struggling to find products. Some co-ops have a relaxed, casual culture, which can work to a co-op's advantage but also against it (see the example above). When on staff, what is the proper balance between engaging with customers and other staff?

Hire for it. Some people are innately wired for customer service. But because every employee influences the customer experience, we suggest that, once you've defined customer service excellence, you begin actively seeking employees dedicated to giving great service. Look for that "spark" of friendliness, empathy, good listening skills; ask for specific examples of customer service excellence in your interview questions.

Teach it. Provide ongoing regular training so that all staff understand how you define customer service and what they need to do to achieve it. Give staff the tools and flexibility to exceed shoppers' expectations and "make it right" when a service failure occurs.

Live it. Everyone has to do it. Consistently, from general manager to entry-level positions. Excellent customer service is a worthy goal, but consistently good customer service is critical and can achieve better bottom-line results than customer service that's sometimes excellent and other times downright terrible.

Measure it. How will you measure great service? Common techniques suggested by Zingerman's include using customer surveys, tracking customer comments (complaint or compliment), mystery shopping, etc.

Reward it. Develop a culture that recognizes and rewards great service. Acknowledge staff members who receive positive customer comments—in a staff meeting, through a personal note or in internal staff communications, for example. Establish a system to allow staff to recognize each other for going above and beyond, too.

Remember, most customers like Mike won't bother contacting anyone with a complaint; they'll just quietly take their business elsewhere. Great customer service can help ensure your shoppers will be back.

Now, for contrast, here's a different Mike (his real name this time), posting about his shopping experience on his co-op's Facebook page, during the "Superbowl of grocery shopping," no less—Thanksgiving week:

I just wanted to say that I had the best ever Thanksgiving shopping experience at Wheatsville this afternoon. I took off work a little early to get the shopping done. I found everything on my list, including an organic turkey exactly the size I was looking for, despite the fact that I hadn't reserved one.

I was in and out of there in 30 minutes with three big bags of groceries and the bird. The folks at the meat counter and checkout were super friendly, and when I was wandering around trying to find something, someone came right up and helped me locate it. I am so glad to be a member of this great co-op! Happy Thanksgiving! ■

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