KEEPPING
CUSTOMERS

DOES YOUR SALES STAFF HAVE CUSTOMER-SERVICE TRAINING? IF NOT, YOU’RE GOING TO LOSE THAT SALE!

BY GREGORY M. LOUSIG-NONT

So why do salespeople need customer service training? If a customer calls with a complaint, you just pass the buck or make like an ostrich until they eventually go away. Right? Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Even worse, you argue with the customer. Wrong again. Although it sounds senseless, many salespeople act like this and the result on all counts is loss of sales.

Not every business has a full-time customer service department, so complaints frequently revert to the salesperson who, often lacking this type of training, tries to wing it. Unfortunately, one screaming customer can clear out an entire room, future customers fleeing along with your staff. A different perspective and some simple customer service skills could go a long way to remedy this situation.

LEARN THE BASICS

“Like any profession, sales is a matter of learning the basics and becoming proficient at them,” says Gregory M. Lousig-Nont, Ph.D., industrial psychologist and creator of the Sales Success Profile, a sales skill test. “Psychologists agree that everything about selling is learned behavior.”

These basics include customer service skills. At Lousig-Nont & Associates, a Las Vegas-based sales skill testing firm, customer service is one of the 13 basic selling skills that are examined. Used to diagnose problems in current staff as well as in new hires, the Sales Success Profile also tests for skills in closing, handling objections, qualifying and time management. It is often noted during these tests that very low scores in social courtesy and human warmth can make it questionable whether some people enjoy working around people.

Unfortunately, you can’t train someone to like people and, unless they do, they probably won’t benefit from customer service training. But for the salesperson who genuinely cares about people, this kind of training can be invaluable. With this in mind, how would you answer this question, taken from the sales Success Profile?

A customer comes to you with a laser you sold him, screaming that it is the biggest piece of junk he has ever owned. It fell apart when it got on the jobsite. What would you do?

1. Tell the customer to change his attitude right now or you will call the police and have him kicked out.
2. Tell the customer that you don’t have to take his verbal abuse and that, unless he changes his tone, you are not going to help him.
3. Tell the customer to wait while you get the manager.
4. Tell the customer to leave and cool down. When he comes back, you tell him, then you will help him.
5. Tell the customer you can tell he’s
upset, and, if he could just try to explain the problem, you will do everything in your power to make sure he’s satisfied.

The correct answer is obviously number five, yet we have all witnessed scenes like those depicted in the first four answers.

One reason this kind of thing happens, is that angry customers trigger the “fight syndrome” and/or the “flight syndrome” built into our genes. It’s a syndrome that requires action, but if we don’t know what action to take, instinct takes over and we fight or run away. This may take many forms, all of which further irritate an already angry customer, who then feels obliged to tell his tale of woe to everyone he meets.

In all fairness to salespeople, customer service is not always emphasized as much as other areas of sales training, although it is one of the skills necessary to sales success. Salespeople are not
superhuman, and inability to satisfy an unhappy customer often undermines the seller’s confidence in the product. It is difficult for an ethical salesperson to approach prospects, face rejection and be enthusiastic about the product while shouts from a dissatisfied customer still echo in his or her mind.

**WHY DO WE BUY?**

Customer satisfaction is related to the question, “Why do people buy things?” Possible answers are these:

- To keep up with the competition.
- To improve their self-image.
- To keep up with the Joneses.
- Pride of ownership.
- To make their company operate more efficiently.
- They simply need it.

According to Lousig-Nont, all the answers are correct. It is often said that customers buy emotionally, then justify or rationalize their purchase logically. If that is the case, when something goes wrong, there’s a lot more at stake than just the product. Remember, they have rationalized buying your product; it’s now personal. Fortunately, most people will be reasonable enough if you help them save face and work through the issue. An understanding attitude and a few simple phrases can change a negative experience to a very positive one.

Instead of the salespeople taking the viewpoint that they are losing good sales time by taking time to handle an angry customer, they could take the approach that complaints provide valuable information that can be used to expedite other complaints or future closing objections.

If only 40 percent of dissatisfied buyers
bother to complain, (according to the Consumer Federation of America), and about 60 percent of those who complain end up satisfied, isn’t it worth it for a salesperson to welcome the complaining customer? If treated fairly, they also become faithful customers. Discontented non-complainers just go out and create “bad word of mouth,” which makes it even harder to prospect.

If you also consider that it costs about five times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep the one you already have, it makes it worthwhile for salespeople to change their perspective on irate customers. Customer-service skills training also can help change these attitudes. If done successfully, customer satisfaction skills enhance sales time rather than lose it. Knowing what to do creates confidence. Fortunately, like any of the other sales skills a salesperson needs to know as part of the entire sales package, customer service skills can be learned.

**DEVELOP GOOD HABITS**

So what are the good customer service habits you want to acquire as a salesperson? One of them is listening. Get the facts. Find out exactly what happened; this will help you identify the problem.

Some customers wander verbally, so you need to keep asking questions that lead them back to fact finding. Remem-
ber those open-ended and fact-finding questions you use when selling? Pull out your selling skills and find out what’s really bothering the customer, then offer a solution. It is always important to convey to the consumer that you care. You can do this with a statement like, “I’m sorry that happened.” This helps to neutralize anger so you can peacefully discuss the problem instead of waging war against one another.

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Most arguments transpire when the antagonist gets your emotional goat, forcing you to “buy into” the argument. One way to neutralize the customer’s anger is to calmly repeat your position each time he comes up with the new attack. Once you have the entire story and have identified the problem, convey again that you regret this happened, then offer a solution that has satisfied other customers.

If the customer is still dissatisfied, a statement like: “This is what I’m authorized to do to help you right
now,” often helps. Many customers prefer not to delay and will be satisfied with an immediate solution, as long as it’s fair.

Asking the customer what would make him happy is also another method. You’d be surprised: Customers are often satisfied with less than you imagine they want. When an immediate solution is not available, you should use phrases like: “I will find out,” and give a time frame in which you will accomplish this.

Saying things like: “I don’t know, I can’t, I don’t have time, or It’s not my job,” enrage an already angry customer. There is nothing more infuriating to a consumer than feeling stonewalled. If you want to be able to manage those irate customers, you need to get customer service training. You need the right answers. You need the authority to do something about the problem, or be able to get the complainer to the right department if it is beyond your technical knowledge or authority, and you need to let customers know that they can still talk to you if they still don’t receive satisfaction. Show them that you care.

You also need to know how to handle the “get something for nothing” complainers who count on getting you flustered to get their way. Once you calmly discuss the problem with caring concern, the fakers often go away because they can’t intimidate you.

Like the fire drills you participated in when you were in school, it pays to be prepared. Customer service training gives you the preparation needed to handle those complaining customers before they lose sales for you and ruin your day. So, take back that buck, pull your head out of the sand and welcome those grumblers. You’ll not only have happy customers, but you can increase your sales through referrals and repeat business.

About the Author
Gregory M. Lousig-Nont is president of Lousig-Nont and Associates, Las Vegas. The company has compiled a free report, Your Sales Destiny: Success or Burnout, 8 Questions Give You the Clues. It is available free by calling (800) 477-3211.