

## Published TMG Articles

As seen in the Asheville Citizen Times WNC Business section.

### **DON'T LET YOUR CUSTOMERS FIRE YOU**

#### **Have you ever fired your bank?**

You know the drill; you have grown disappointed with their performance, and so you "called them into your office", reviewed past performance, and decided to part ways? I've done it. I fired my bank. It felt good, too. In fact, it felt so good, that I went ahead and fired my dry cleaners, car dealer, Telephone Company, and grocery store. Shortly thereafter, I went out and recruited new businesses to fill those positions, and I seriously improved my level of satisfaction in each case.

As a consumer, I always have the right to choose with whom I do business. When I grow disappointed with the performance of one of these service providers, I have the right to "fire" them. I have high standards, and for my money, I expect a reasonable, money's worth.

As a business leader, you need to learn from this little story of firing those with whom you do business. Nothing is more crucial to the continued success of a business than CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS. Today, a comprehensive Customer Relationship Management System is required to assure successful customer relationships. If you are a sole proprietor, you know that customer relationships start and end with you. Your customers love working with you, and tell you if things aren't just right. What if you are a larger business with many employees and thousands of customers? How do you manage the quality of your many customer relationships?

#### **1. You must understand your role in each customer's life.**

How does your product/service help make your customer's life easier?

How do your customers view your relationship?

How do they view you?

Crescent View Retirement Community of Arden doesn't have the "typical customer". Yet, Margaret Abbott, the Executive Director, operates this facility with all the professionalism you'd expect at the highest level of any business. The group of professional managers that are responsible for the day to day services at Crescent View are very aware of their "customer" relationships, and the role they play in their life. Mary Craig, the Marketing Director, has a plaque on the wall of her office that sums it up perfectly: "Our residents do not live in our facility; we work in their home".

#### **2. You must regularly make the time to LISTEN to your customers.**

Customers have a funny way of telling you if they're unhappy. You may not hear anything, but you'll know it nonetheless. How? It's very simple: they'll stop spending their money with you. You don't want the client-business relationship to reach that point. A successful business will initiate the crucial contact with customers in order to give them the opportunity to communicate with you. This is more than a simple "suggestion box" approach. In fact, there are many options available to you for customer communications where YOU are the listener:

Direct mail such as a "How Are We Doing" Questionnaire

E-mail or other web-based systems testing customer satisfaction

Telephone: never forget a personal, "warm voice" contact.

In directing business for a large clothing retailer, I required each person in upper and middle management to speak (either in person or on the phone) with at least three customers each week. How would you feel if a key executive of a company you do business with, called to get your opinion of how they're doing? This gives customers an opportunity to tell you how you are doing, and what's important to them.

**3. Insure that every member of your organization understands your exacting standards for customer relationships.**

Whenever I've been disappointed by the customer service of an organization, it's usually been by those in the "front lines". Those who interact with your customers on a daily basis (phone operators, cashiers, sales people, drivers, etc.) are often the primary representatives of your organization. You must ensure that their behavior reflects your ideals; these people are your company's Ambassadors.

Customer Listening may not feel like the most important thing you can do with your time as an executive; but, without it, you and your company may just hear the two most dreaded words in business: "You're Fired!"