



Toilet paper matters

My late mom was born and grew up in Argentina to Greek parents. When she came to South Africa as a young bride in 1955, she learned to speak English for the first time in her life. But simultaneously learning Afrikaans as well was just too hard for her as an immigrant settling down in a new country, and although she promised herself she would eventually do so, she just never got round to it.

Long after she and my dad retired, a new soapie began airing on one of the SABC channels. The main language of "7de Laan" was Afrikaans, with subtitles in English, and she watched every episode without fail. When they replayed all the daily episodes on Saturdays, she'd watch them again. The whole family knew one rule: NEVER call mom when 7de Laan was on. She'd get quite upset with us and would say, "You know my favourite programme is on. Don't call me!"

I never found out what the attraction of this particular soapie was for my mom, and to this day I wished I'd found out while she was still alive. Given the choice of so many alternatives from America, Brazil, Australia and even South Africa, what was it about THIS programme that hooked her in? What was it that attracted her to the stories and actors who played the roles that talented writers and directors had created?

Please indulge me while I tell you what seems to be a totally unrelated story, but which has everything to do with delighting your customers. The general manager of

a hotel and conference centre recently told me about a wedding that was to have taken place at his establishment, but what actually happened had scared the hell out of him – and me too.

Apparently, a bride-to-be and her mom, family and various hangers on came to examine the hotel to make a decision about whether they wanted the reception to be held there or not. They seemed to be very positive and enthusiastic, even to the point where they specifically spoke out where "this" would go and where "that" would happen. They loved the gardens, and they liked the deal he had put together for them. They seemed delighted by the little extras that he offered that would add value for them – a special room for the bride and her bridesmaids to rest and change clothes in, free transport for all the out-of-town guests from the airport, specially trained staff who would assist with all the highlights of the reception, and even his list of all the various suppliers of things that happen at weddings – photographers, florists, discos and bands, bakeries, even seamstresses. They told him of the exact date of the wedding, and since the hotel ballroom was free, he pencilled it all in.

Mildly worried because he had not received any deposit or any communication, just a few weeks before the event he telephoned to gently and diplomatically find out whether they had made a final decision. Imagine his shock when they told him that they had decided against his venue – and booked elsewhere. We are not talking about a small reception here – it was to be for around 200 guests, some of whom also needed to stay over. Not wishing to make them uncomfortable, he thanked them for giving him a chance to prepare a quote, but was really mystified about how why he had lost the deal.

Just by pure coincidence, a few months later a friend of the first bride also came to check out the venue for her wedding. They discussed everything, and once again everything seemed just perfect. However, towards the end of the meeting, the bride's mum asked if he could change the toilet paper dispenser to normal toilet rolls. Puzzled by the request, he sensitively probed more deeply to find out more, and they insisted that they didn't like nor want those stainless steel boxes that dispense one sheet of toilet paper at a time.

It finally emerged that the hotel's decision – probably made by an anonymous bureaucrat from the head office to cut costs by not allowing toilet rolls – was what had troubled the first bride and her mother. By rationing the toilet paper to save a few cents, this decision had cost them dearly. A powerful path to your customer's heart is an attitude of abundance and generosity. It leaves them surprised and grateful, and they will repay the favour. A generous mind-set has a magnetic impact on customers. It attracts them because it expresses to the customer the kind of unconditional positive regard that characterises relationships at their best. Do the opposite, and you pay the price.

Toilet paper matters, and it is obvious from these two stories that customers do things for their mysterious reasons, not ours. One final anecdote: In spite of the fact that I'm rather stingy and hate spending money needlessly, I buy really expensive food for our pet dog, Buddy. Is it because I'm obsessed with animals? Is he a valuable and loved member of the family that is spoilt like a child? No, not really. Buddy's job is to bark if someone jumps over the fence.

But my vet recommended this food for the dog, and, most importantly, suggested that the quantity we feed him is much less than one would feed a dog with other foods. Buddy seems to have suffered no side effects, and is always healthy and alert. But I buy this expensive dog food for me, (and no, I don't personally eat the stuff.) Since I am the person at home that has to clean up after the animals, and because – as yet – I have been unable to persuade my sons that R10 for "poop parade" once a week is more than enough, I find that cleaning solid little round black golf balls has made my life a lot easier than the previous piles of stinky mess.

Customers do things for their reasons – not ours.



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6 tips for providing top-class shopper support in-store

Customer service is one of the biggest drivers of sales and loyalty in retail, yet plenty of merchants continue to underestimate just how powerful it can be. Head to the mall and you'll see that many companies still fall short when it comes to serving and delighting consumers. Don't let your business be one of them.

Strive to provide superb customer support and make sure that you and everyone else in your team are willing to go above and beyond for shoppers.

To help you accomplish this, we've done some research on the customer service practices of some of the world's top retailers. Check them out below and see if you can incorporate them into your business:

1. Start by hiring the right people

We've said it before, and we'll say it again: when it comes to recruiting for customer service roles, you're better off hiring for attitude and training for skill. Some of the world's best companies recognise this.

Action steps: When hiring associates, consider focusing on their attitude first. Skills and experience are important but

know that as long as someone is trainable and has a natural service-based disposition, they will perform better than a skilled employee who doesn't have the right attitude.

2. Be smart about how you delegate customer service tasks

Your associates won't be able to serve customers properly if they're too busy doing admin work or restocking shelves. If it makes sense for your business, change the way you delegate tasks in-store. For example, instead of training everyone to do a multitude of tasks, consider letting people specialise in specific jobs (i.e., serving customers, fixing merchandise, etc.)

Action steps: Are your employees juggling multiple jobs or do they specialise in certain tasks? If it's the former, try testing task delegation practices. You may find that when you have employees whose sole job is to assist shoppers, your customer service metrics (and sales) will improve.

3. Encourage empathy

A dose of empathy can instantly take your customer service practices to new

heights. Because here's the thing: in many cases, customers just want to feel that they are being heard, acknowledged, and understood. In other words, they want to feel that you know what they're going through. Yes, it's important that you fix whatever issues they're having, but empathy is almost always the first thing they need from a customer service rep.

Action steps: Encourage empathy in your employees. Train them to put themselves in the shoes of your customers and doing so develops compassion and ultimately leads to better customer service.

4. Make sure that everyone – from front-line employees to executives – receives customer service training

This lesson is brought to us by Amazon, which is not only doing phenomenally well in sales and innovation, but is also killing it in customer service. The e-commerce giant is always on Prosper's list of Customer Service Champions, thanks to its customer-centric practices.

Action steps: Evaluate the customer centricity of your company. Is every member of your team in touch with the needs of shoppers? Would they benefit from additional training or regular reminders to be empathic towards customers?

5. Empower employees to keep customers happy

One of the ways that the e-tailer accomplishes this is by empowering reps to use their judgement and just keep customers happy.

Action steps: If you haven't done so yet, encourage your staff to be helpful rather than salesy. See to it that they make each customer's happiness a priority, and empower them to use their judgement when it comes to serving shoppers.

6. Be proactive in approaching customers

Encourage your associates to move from behind the counter and onto the sales floor where they can interact with shoppers.

Action steps: Promote proactive customer in your store. Don't wait until someone asks for your or your associates' help; go out there and actively look for customers to assist. bizcommunity.co.za

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