

Balancing Service: What to Give? What to Expect?

By Michael Angelo Caruso

(as published in “**Teleprofessional**,” trade magazine
for the telecommunication industry, New York City)

Customer service. How much to expect? How much to give?

It’s easy to answer these questions with clichés like “good quality and good service at the best price” and the equally banal, “give good service at a fair price.” Let’s examine the customer service concept.

First of all, “good service” and “fair price” are relative concepts. “Good” compared to what? “Fair” by whose standards?

Let’s remind ourselves that both the customer and the vendor approach every deal with a specific agenda. For example, vendors are looking to make a profit. In fact, the more profit they can make, the better for them. Conversely, the customer usually wants to pay as little as possible for goods and services. After all, the customer is usually on a budget.

In any relationship, common ground is critical to a successful deal. This is where the customer’s agenda and the vendor’s agenda need to overlap. Common ground is the basis for the transaction between them. In order for both parties to benefit from the transaction, the vendor and the customer need to honor The Relationship. The Relationship has two main ingredients: relationship selling and relationship buying. The concept of relationship selling has been around for a long time. Corporations spend millions of dollars every year teaching sales teams the techniques of relationship selling. The same corporations, however, spend very little money teaching purchasing teams the finer points of relationship buying. Relationship buying and relationship selling are symbiotic in that they benefit each other. In addition, both relationship buyers and relationship sellers can be pro-active.

Author Stephen Covey made “be proactive” habit #1 in his best-selling book titled, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” In the context of customer service, proactive selling might include open-ended questions, and what Covey calls “emotional bank deposits” such as compliments. Most sales people are proficient at this technique, if not transparent and perhaps heavy-handed.

Proactive buying can be demonstrated with open dialogue and specific questions about what type of customer service to expect. A proactive customer can increase his or her service by alerting vendors to specific the buyer’ upcoming projects, instead of hurrying to get the vendor off the phone.

Too many seller/buyer conversations go something like this:

S: Do you need anything?

B: Not right now.

S: I'll call back tomorrow.

This is not open dialogue. No specific questions were asked. In the above example, the seller and the buyer are burning calories but nobody's losing any weight. The buyer can be more pro-active in this situation by helping the seller focus on a particular need. Notice how the following conversation takes the relationship to a productive level:

S: Do you need anything?

B: Not right now. But I have a big project that you can bid on in 60 days.

S: I'll call you back in 4 weeks.

In the second example, open and honest dialogue will serve both parties well. Remember that a sales person's favorite word to hear may be "yes," but a sales person's second favorite word is "no."

The Relationship achieves several critical objectives.

The Relationship limits “commodity mentality.” The technology age has helped commoditize products and services, which tends to drive price down. Low margins can spell trouble for a value-added service. Even the best suppliers cannot provide quality service and exceptional warranties without healthy profit margins. The Relationship frees the customer and the vendor from buying and selling at the lowest price because everyone knows that quality service and exceptional warranties have value.

The Relationship encourages value-added service. Many vendors would love to distinguish themselves from the competition with innovative customer support programs. Commoditization, however, sometimes makes it difficult to tell Product A from Product B. After all, what is the the substantial difference between Coke and Pepsi? What is the service differential between Cingular and Sprint telephone service? What’s the best way to tell the difference between Northwest Airlines and American Airlines?

The Relationship promotes non-adversarial atmosphere. Customers can expect the best service when their relationship with the seller is non-adversarial. The Relationship allows mutuality and the vendor is treated like an ally instead of the enemy.

The Relationship allows synergy. Vendors and customers are more likely to trade information and help each other when there is a Relationship. The buyer can save money because the supplier is sympathetic to the customer’s need for value and the vendor picks up business because the customer starts looking after the seller by offering referrals and out-of-the-box ideas.

What should vendors be prepared to give? Sellers should demonstrate unselfish concern for their customers. Vendors need to turn a profit. But there are many ways to make a profit and simultaneously provide dedicated service.

Genuine caring goes a long way. Find out what motivates your customer by asking about their background and their non-work related interests. Call your customer before and after “normal” working hours and note how he or she has more time to talk. Be sure your customer knows who to ask for if you are unavailable when they call. I have offered my home phone number to customers for years. Very few clients have used it, but all of them have appreciated the gesture.

Provide your customer with industry news and trends. Be their clipping service. As a credible source for tips and advice, you will become a trusted advisor as well as a valued vendor. Vendors who educate will rule the Information Age.

Most importantly, manage your customer’s expectations. Be up front and consistent with what they can and cannot expect.

What can customers expect to give? The Relationship will compel the buyer to provide vendor allegiance by returning calls and giving the seller time and attention. This is certainly a natural response to someone who cares about you and treats you well. Give your vendor information. Tell him or her what you have planned and how you feel about The Relationship. Concerned customer service reps will want to know. After all, it’s their relationship, too.

Michael Angelo Caruso is President of the Edison House, a Detroit-based communication company. He is the author of “5 Cool Ideas for Better Working Living & Feeling,” “Hmmm . . . Little Ideas With BIG Results” and the audio book, “Dear Michael Angelo – A Father's Life Lessons To His Son.” Mr. Caruso delivers 180 presentations per year. Click [here] to request booking information. Mr. Caruso can be reached at 248/546-9140 and at www.EdisonHouse.com. ©2003

This article is available for reprinting and republishing in your corporate newsletter, e-zine, web site or advertisement. Please click [here] to request permission.