

Weighing the Variables of Service

07/02/07

Where does customer service belong? We're getting ready to clarify job descriptions, and one of the things we want people to focus on more is customer service. We're debating whether this job should report to sales or operations. What do you think?

Good question, and no right or wrong answer. It really depends on where you want to place your emphasis. Are you trying to focus customer service people on selling and retaining business? Or are you trying to understand and fix operations issues.

Let's start by defining customer service. The function of customer service is a crucial position in any company. It is the link between the inside of the company and the company's customers. It is where the rubber meets the road, as customers seek to do business with your company, and your company seeks to accurately and profitably meet customer demands.

Customer service, in small companies, starts with the receptionist, who takes calls and requests, and makes sure they get to the right person. It involves sales people, who have made promises about what customers will receive. It involves people in operations, who must deliver what the customer was promised. It involves finance, who bills customers and follows up to insure payment is received from customers. It involves human

resources, who is charged with insuring that employees are trained to handle customer requests and solve customer problems. It involves marketing, who research customer requests to understand what else customers want and how to position the company for future growth and development. It involves IT, who must create systems to efficiently and accurately manage data related to customer requests. It definitely involves the owner(s), who hear about it when customers are unsatisfied, and who seek to build their businesses on a base of growing, happy clients. In other words, customer service is everyone's responsibility.

Now let's look at the internal function of a company, and where to align customer service as a function. What are you trying to solve internally. Do you need more feedback for your internal operations? Are you trying to identify and solve efficiency and accuracy problems when it comes to delivery or order translation? Are you trying to smooth the transition from when a customer orders to when a customer receives what they ordered? Are you trying to clarify that the order is correct, before it goes out the door?

If you answered "yes" to the above questions, you may want to place customer service in the operations department. In such a case, customer service is going

to be focused on clarifying information, in order to deliver more accurately.

Here's another set of questions to consider. Are you more concerned about how to convert a customer's order into a longer term relationship? Are you trying to get customers to come back and order again, or to resurrect old, potentially dead relationships? Are you trying to increase either the quantity or the price of an order? Are you trying to upgrade customers to a higher quality bracket? Are you trying to get customers back for repeat purchases when they typically only order once?

If you answered "yes" to the above set of questions, you may want to house the customer service function in your sales area. In this case, you're trying to build on existing client relationships. The focus on the questions is all about getting customers to do more with you. That's all about selling skills.

Here's a third set of questions to consider. Are you intending to use customer service to gather information that will help you plan the future of your company? Are you trying to figure out what products or services to offer or drop, as you go forward? Are you trying to understand the fit between right customer and right product, and how to find more customers like them?



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Relative to this last set of questions, you may want to place customer service under the marketing department. With these questions, you're talking about research and planning. You're looking at how to use feedback from customers to effectively analyze and plan what to do next with the business.

What if you answered yes to all three sets of questions? In such a case you may want to decide on priority. Do you need to fix internal problems, or are you doing a pretty good job internally? Does your company need to expand the income from current customers, or move more of whatever products or services are already available and working? Or are you primarily focused on figuring out the future customers and products. Rank your answers to these three questions, and that will help you to figure out how to rotate customer service from one department to another, on a priority basis.

Whatever you decided to do, regarding assigning customer service to one department to another, here's another thought to keep top of mind. Everyone in your company is in customer service. Everyone touches customers, either directly or indirectly. Without satisfied customers, you don't have a business. And you employees won't have a paycheck. Instilling the belief that customers come

first, no matter what, is a top priority for every company.

Looking for a good book? Try Super Service, Seven Keys To Delivering Great Customer Service . . . Even When You Don't Feel Like It! . . . Even When They Don't Deserve It! by Jeff Gee and Val Gee.

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