

To Provide or Not to Provide Customer TLC

By Sheriff John W. Kohl

In the 9-1-1 race towards technological advancement and the provisions of Integrated Workstations, Computer Telephony Integration and the like, vendors may often forget that in their quest to generate revenue, servicing the customer is of utmost importance. The simple pointers outlined below will assist vendors to improve relationships with their customers.

From the Inside Out

It all starts from within a company. Vendors should regard providing optimum assistance, adequate information, and face-to-face communication with their customers as paramount.

In providing service to the customer, vendor and account managers must not forget that providing after-sales support and service are paramount. Clients need high-end service, face-to-face contact, and as much product knowledge on their equipment's functionality as possible. Having to call the vendor with simple questions and requests for minimal equipment adjustments is discouraging to the customer and damaging to the reputation of the company.

Voice Mail

The Telephone, although used as a method of communication between two or more individuals, has a new twist to it with the introduction of voice mail. At its best, voice mail is great if you leave a message and the vendor returns your call. The innate problem with this technological advancement is that people hide behind their voice mail. In an emergency or crisis situation never overlook the value of having a live person on the other end of the line to field calls and resolve issues requiring immediate attention.

Internet Resources

Most customers will insist on face-to-face contact but the introduction of e-mail has proven to also be an invaluable tool for research and communication purposes. As for your Internet site, accessibility to information is key. The faster people can access your site and find what they are looking for, the happier they will be.

Communications and Service

Ever feel as if you're "out of the loop" when your vendor shows up, with little to no notice, to upgrade or service your equipment? With the proliferation of cellular phones, e-mail, and the like, communication with the customer is easier than ever - respect goes both ways. I can not stress the importance of keeping your customers in the loop on anything that concerns their PSAP operations and equipment.

It is important for customers to establish a definite link with a living, breathing person. Customers need information as quickly as possible. If there is a problem, let them know in advance, whom they need to

speak with. As a backup, give them an alternate method of getting an answer. When action is taken quickly, you indicate to the customer that you are doing something about the situation.

Multiple Vendor Installation

In a multiple vendor installation, the manufacturer may never receive, let alone hear, the complaints and issues of the customer. Make sure customer information, care, concerns, like, and dislikes are relayed to the manufacturer and all parties in the process. Inter-company communication or support lines geared to pass on problems serve to enhance equipment results. Your ultimate goal: glowing reviews in the eyes of your customers when they see that their requests are heard - and met.

The Transient Technician

When it comes to providing technical assistance via telephone or onsite, many companies are severely lacking competent technicians. Transient technicians generally are not with a company long enough, or have not received enough thorough training to provide proficient service. The old adage “good people are hard to find” is very true. Even more important and much more difficult is “keeping” experienced technicians. Treat your employees like people - with the kindness and respect that they deserve. Employers are encouraged to provide employees with training, incentives and rewards for work well done.

Technical Support

Technical manuals serve as a quick reference on how to perform certain functions. Situations do arise where direct assistance is necessary. The introduction of a 1-800 help desk support line to provide customers with technical support is an invaluable resource. Add on 24-hour service to the 1-800 line and you’ve got something really special. Last, but not least - if you do go to the effort of providing a technical support line - you must ensure it is staffed with well-educated, well-versed technicians.

On-line Technical Support

Nothing will save a customer more time or provide them with a sense of independence like the ability to dial in to a vendor’s on-line technical support and make the changes themselves.

Is the Customer Really Satisfied?

You must always act as if the customer complaints or requests are legitimate -because they are. The right thing to do - the only thing to do - is satisfy the customer. When faced with adversity, it is comforting to know that a company will go out of its way to meet a mission critical deadline and get the job done.

Spence Angel, Account Representative with CML Technologies Inc., stressed that revisiting an installation three to six months after cutover is crucial. “It’s very important to make sure the people know how to utilize the equipment. Follow-up is very important, especially within a computer telephone environment. Revisiting is the best way to provide the customer with a reminder of what features are possible and what the system can do.”

Words of wisdom for any vendor- don't make false statements about your equipment capability. You'll definitely lose "brownie points" if your equipment doesn't make the grade.

Train the Customer

It makes sense, both economically and in man-hours, to have onsite, trained personnel to respond to minor technical and equipment-related issues. By streamlining training, unnecessary calls to service technicians are alleviated. The introduction and use of new equipment through focused training courses provides customers with a working knowledge of how their system works inside and out. By better educating the customer and giving them knowledge on how components operate, you provide a service that allows them to maintain, control and work their equipment.

User Conferences and Trade Shows

Imperative to both the end user and developers are trade show, conventions and user conferences. User conferences are more focused - your customers are invited to attend. User conferences not only provide the customer with information on a product line's dissemination (i.e. what is coming up in the short term, and what the long term goals of the company are), they allow you to get some input from the end users directly, in a conference-style setting. In environments such as these, valuable suggestions on the importance or relevance of features come from attendees. The end user experiences a sense of accomplishment in providing input and suggestions that may be invaluable in improving a product line.

Trade Magazines & Newsletters

Advertising in and writing articles for magazines relevant to your particular trade, or sending out a newsletter serves as the initial introduction of your equipment to the public. Possible subjects include: what advancements, training and conferences are coming up, what's going on and how does it relate to government regulations; even a trouble shooting section is educational in that it reinforces what you know and serves as a reference tool.

Freebies

Customer give-aways are always a nice way of thanking or showing your appreciation to a customer. Whatever you choose, it must be tasteful.

Conclusion - Avoid the Pitfalls

Tasca sums it up this way, "Never fall into the trap of believing you can get back the customer you mistreated or ignored. It just won't happen. You may think there are enough customers out there so that you don't have to treat them well. Maybe there are in some businesses. In today's increasingly competitive world, if you don't treat a customer right from the very first visit, someone else will."

SIDEBAR: How to Satisfy the Customer

Bob Tasca, one of Ford Motor Co.'s most successful dealers, and the man behind the company's famous "Quality is Job 1" slogan, suggests that by following the Customer Satisfaction Highlights outlined below, you will get positive results.

1. Never gouge a customer on price. He or she will eventually resent it; once that happens you can't buy them back.
2. Never tell a customer that something can't be fixed. If the equipment was bought from you, you can fix it. If that's impossible, replace it.
3. Never over promise; always over perform. If you're uncertain about your ability to deliver on a promise, promise something less. That way, if you make your original goal, you'll build up positive credibility with the customer.
4. Never worry about the bottom line. If you make a lot of people happy, you'll sell a lot of product. The bottom line will take care of itself.
5. Always treat your customer as a customer. Start out with his or her needs, not yours. If you're uncertain how to treat the customer, treat him or her like your parent!
6. Give every customer the same fair deal. Menu price as much as you can. Other wise you're likely to overcharge some people to make up for undercharging others.
7. Take care of the customer at the lowest possible level of management. Every coworker has the same power to satisfy a customer. A customer shouldn't have to "complain to a supervisor" to get satisfaction.
8. Always try to fix it right the first time. Nothing upsets a customer as having to come back again for exactly the same problem.
9. Make follow-up phone calls to ensure installation has gone properly and provide further training if required.