

Whatever Happened to Customer Service?

Scott Deming knows and has a way to make things right

By John Dunlap

If you are over the age of 50, you probably remember when, as a kid, you would walk into the local Five & Dime or hardware store and the clerk behind the counter knew your name. They probably also knew your mom, your dad, your brothers and grandparents. But the most important thing is that they made you feel welcome—and that atmosphere was the same every time you set foot in that store, even as an adult.

Scott Deming remembers the days when being a customer meant being treated well by the shop owner and employees. He remembers when an easy smile and a genuine interest in your well-being were an essential part of owning and operating a business. Those days, for the most part, are gone. Yet Deming, a motivational speaker who will be one of the key presenters at the SSA's Fall Conference & Trade Show in Las Vegas, is not one to sit around and pine for the past. Indeed, he counts it as a personal crusade to help businesses, from the CEO to the lowest employee on the job ladder, to relearn the art of caring about the customer.



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~ Scott Deming

Deming points to a study from the Wharton School of Business on customer dissatisfaction which states that customer service in America is at an all-time low. He also has heard business leaders talk in terms of customer service as being “not that bad” and how customers expectations “have changed.” Deming is astounded that business leaders would settle for “not that bad.”

The 52-year old Deming, who ran the multi-million dollar advertising firm RCI before deciding seven years ago to get into motivational speaking and writing, is no stranger to the pressures and ups-and-downs of the business world.

Still, he feels as if a certain disconnect has been taking place between business people’s home-life personas and their work-life personas.

“In the home life, people feel the need to be caring and uplifting to their wives or husbands and children, which is absolutely correct,” he says. “Then those same people go to work and become laser-focused on the task at hand, leaving behind those caring and uplifting aspects. And the shame is you see that situation in virtually every industry in the country. I’m on a mission to get humanity and caring back into the business world.”

Getting the Deal Done

“The problem lies in the fact that most people in the working world only care about one thing: getting the deal done,” adds Deming. “Combine that with a decided lack of leadership in the business world and the fact that everything is done with the bottom line in mind, and you can see how we’ve drifted away from caring about the customer.”

“A new employee is hired and given a job description. Basically they are told ‘Here’s your contract, here’s what you are supposed to do.’ The mindset thus becomes a tiny circle in which you are told how to do your job and not deviate from that tiny circle. It used to be that new employees were encouraged to make the tough choices and people felt as if they had a much larger role in the development and success of a company. A job description should not be an employee’s role; there’s no inspiration for leadership with that situation.”

Deming imagines a company that makes its employees feel welcome...and the trickle-down effect is that the employees also make customers feel welcome.

“Wouldn’t it be great if companies told their employees ‘We just want you to know how much you mean to us?’” he adds. “But part of the problem is that so many companies don’t encourage their own employees to feel welcome; it starts at the top of the company with the CEO and works its way down.”

Deming has a website (www.scottdeming.com) in which he offers videos and newsletters that deal with

ways to inspire better company practices. His newest book, *The Brand Who Cried Wolf* is a handbook for companies and individuals who want to establish and sustain their most powerful, successful brands. In that book, he points out that great branding doesn't necessarily come from gimmicks or good advertising—instead, it begins and ends with exceptional, innovative customer service.

Then There's the Customer

Deming says that good customer service starts with paying attention. He describes an exercise he does for top executives where he surrounds himself with magazines that showcase his love of the outdoors. Deming has the executive come into his office space to talk with him.

"The first few minutes they are very cordial and ask me how I'm doing," says Deming. "Then, it becomes all about them. By the end of the meeting I ask them what they know about me and my interests. Hardly any of them pick up the fact that I have outdoorsman magazines spread all around the desk. I tell them, 'You don't have to turn off your humanity and interest in others when you leave your house. You should bring the same humanity and same concerns to your workplace as you do to your home and loved ones.'"

Another interesting example that Deming likes to cite about the lack of customer faith in American businesses is demonstrated in the way they deal with complaints.

"Only 4 percent of those customers who have complaints actually voice their concerns to the company itself," he says. "Meanwhile, 40 percent of those same people voice their complaints to friends and family. When asked why more of them won't take their problems directly to the company they bought their product from, the customers general reply is 'It won't make any difference.' That's how little faith they have in being treated well."

Of course, the flip side is dealing with customers who are jerks and have no intention of trying to come to an amicable solution.

"I'm sure that there are a lot of customers who have turned customer service people cold," Deming says. "When you are training people, you have to let them know that you understand how hard it is to deal with the public sometimes. You have to let your employees know that it is not always their fault and to let it go."

Nonetheless, Deming still feels that business owners and operators need to learn to be more like they are at home while at work.

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"When you are talking to a customer, you have to ask yourself, 'Is this the same way I talk to the ones I love at home?'" Deming adds. "Put yourself in the customer's shoes and look at the way you treat your customers. Then, if you are still having a problem dealing with customers, you have to ask yourself if you are cut out to be in this line of work."

Deming thinks that a good way to evaluate your performance in customer service is to step back for a moment and look at things with a clear mind.

"With my 15-year old daughter, I sometimes pretend that I don't know her or the way she was when she was 10-years old," he says. "I act as if I haven't seen her before and listen to what she is saying and try to understand her point of view from where she is right now. You can do that in the working world with customers. Start new with each one and treat them like your first customer. Show them that you are listening and you care about them."

Humanity is a quality that doesn't need to stay at home, and Scott Deming will be the first to tell you to step up and make the effort. You'll likely make a lot of new customers (and friends) in the process. ♦

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