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**Recession-Busting  
Customer Service**

# Recession- Busting Customer Service

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*What are you specifically doing to hold on to those precious customers that are the life-blood of your survival during this world wide recession, the so-called Global Financial Crisis (GFC)?*

Times are tough and they are going to get tougher. Everything we thought was reliable, predictable and fundamental about doing business has been tipped over. The money pyramid that is at the very core of consumerism and business has effectively vaporised for many of us. Our customers are suffering and that means they have less discretionary money to give to us - which is what spending is. However, are we going to survive, and more importantly thrive, in this environment?

This is the time to concentrate on doing what you do well, even better. As well, there is a critical need to consolidate your business to prepare it for long term survival after the recession woes have passed - whenever that may be. You may also need to find out from your customers what they want you to stop doing. That way, you may find some useful ideas for cost savings other than slashing staffing. This is not the time to lose all those valuable staff that you are going to need when things get better.

So, how are your customers? Do they love you? Will they stay with you through these difficult times? Do you know this; or, are you just hoping that your customers will stay loyal to you? You may hope this despite staff treating customers poorly in the past!

Do you deserve loyalty from your customers, or are you suddenly all cuddly with them because you suddenly realise you need them?

## **TRENDS IN CUSTOMER SERVICE**

No matter how micro or massive and global your business, nor how isolated from mainstream business, you will be affected by emerging trends in customer behaviour in this New Recession era. You can be sure that customers are more educated, sophisticated, demanding, cosmopolitan, diverse, cash rich and time poor on average. The other recession determinant is that all customers are watching their money very closely. Customers will not simply give you their hard-earned money on the back of some slick advertising campaign. As well, customers are less patient, less loyal and less tolerant of poor standards; and this means you have to find ways to satisfy their demands so they give you their money.

Customers fitting this profile are coming to a counter, or to a telephone near you, or contacting you electronically. Are you ready for them?

## **THE GOOD OLD DAYS**

The Good Old Days have passed. Those were the days when sales volumes were high, when you did not have to do any planning. The customers just rolled in the door and their money just rolled into the cash register. You could just ignore any customers who were difficult; and hope they went away. Your staff, and even you, may have even said things to them like, "...we don't need your type here, F...k off out of here..!", "...we don't want customers like you!"; and "f...k off and go somewhere else". And, your staff may well have said these in front of other customers in some cases - and have been cheered as heroes by other staff and talkback radio jocks! Don't be

shocked. These are all quotes from customers posting their stories of bad service on my [www.nocustomerservice.com](http://www.nocustomerservice.com) website!

Can you imagine just how much damage that can do to a business?

The mentality demonstrated by staff in the past, that customers are expendable and not important has to go out the door. There is no room in survival business for this type of mindset.

Your staff may well, bleat, "...but the customers are all so difficult! So dumb! So stupid!"

That may be; however, you need their money and you will not get it if your staff treat customers in that way. It is you and your staff who have to be the skilled ones, not the customers.

### THE TOXIC "GOOD OLD DAYS"

What if you have been sheep-following all the other businesses and distancing yourself from your customers during boom times?

What if cost-saving measures mean you have been using offshore contact centres to manage anything other than direct product and service supply and delivery?

Have you been paying sales staff on volume rather than retention and return business? This forces them to demonstrate pure commission-focus instead of customer-focus.

Have you outsourced your complaints management (a most peculiar concept)? Have you outsourced your debt recovery processes (peculiar also)?

How much of your business have you given to third parties to manage, ostensibly to make savings but ultimately so remove every possible opportunity for building and maintaining relationships with your customers?

### THE TOXIC BUSINESS

Have you, like the toxic sub-prime mortgage industry in the United States and other countries, been focusing on getting money from those whom can least afford it? Have you been driving your sales staff to keep the sales volumes up no matter what? Have you also operated without any

heed to the fact that the least able customers can default and leave your business bleeding to death? Are you being forced to even more desperate efforts of chasing more and more those customers least likely to develop any sort of loyalty to you. Once the sales commission is paid and the relationship with your brand is trashed, why would they be loyal?

How much of this is going on in your business? Are you being forced to adopt more and more ruthless practices to try to recover monies and build continued growth into your figures? Such practices are toxic to both customers and to the staff you expect to deliver them. How many of these ruthless practices have you put between your company and your customers? These practices alienate your brand further from the important foundation stone of all loyalty, a positive relationship with your customers?

This is survival and re-building time. There are no bells and whistles to rescue your business. There are no service fish being thrown around, and there are no service "Wow!" to save you either. It is time to return with a vengeance to the fundamentals of good service.

### APPROACH OF THE FUNDAMENTALISTS

My purist belief about service is that it is a waste of resources for companies to spend time and energies on "delighting" their customers if they can't get the fundamentals, the basics, right. The customers will be angry and the staff will be confused because despite their best efforts, the customers never seem to be satisfied!

My work takes me into many countries. I am reminded of a recent two-day Master Class seminar I conducted in Mumbai, India, home of many outsourced contact centres servicing companies in the developed economies. I had introduced my Nine Rules of Good Service and supporting Service Performance Indicators (SPIs) as the basis of service fundamentals. Participants consisted of talented and expert operatives and managers from industries throughout India. The Director of one of India's largest call centres had travelled with his lead team from Bangalore to attend and learn about service issues in a modern context. After that first morning he declared, "We thought we were doing the fundamentals of service; but we now know that we have a lot of work to do to go back and get the basics right".

### THE ©NINE RULES OF GOOD SERVICE

Remember at all times, the absolute return to basics that each customer is a person whether they are across a counter from you, in your show room, at the end of the phone or at the end of a mouse. This is an imperative for you and your staff. To help companies understand the fundamentals of service, I developed the nine rules. The rules are simple, straightforward and specify:

1. Be courteous to your customers.
2. Be helpful to your customers.
3. Consult with and listen to your customers to gain their views on improving your business.
4. Provide information to your customers about what you can do for them, and the rules of engagement with you - and do this in plain simple language.
5. Be open and honest about what you cannot do for your customers, and any limitations of your business.
6. Offer choice to your customers about how they can receive the products and services they require.
7. Provide the highest standards of prompt, convenient service including:
  - be open and available at times to suit your customers,
  - deal willingly and positively with anything that goes wrong,
  - communicate well by listening to your customers and ensuring that they are understanding everything you are saying about your business and its services.
8. Provide value for money within the limitations your business can afford.
9. Put things right when they go wrong to demonstrate the highest level of complaints-handling.

And these all have to be done, with each and every service transaction, with each and every customer, all the time.

Even though the rules seem simple and obvious, customer service is not a simplistic issue. It is absolutely locked into your capacity for profitability. When we look more closely, we see that the rules follow the customer journey into the land of your business. By way of explaining some of the complexity behind the rules:

- i. From the very first contact whether in person, by phone or email, or web, the customer must experience the highest level of appropriate courtesy from each and every one of your staff members;

- ii. Next, staff must work to help the customer get what it is they want in terms of product and/or service. Staff must help the customer achieve this;
- iii. To help the customer, “listening” skills are important, as your staff must establish exactly the needs of the customers. This will help you be the “best fit” for the customer’s spend plans;
- iv. In building an understanding of what the customer wants, you and your staff must provide good information about what you can do for them and the rules of engagement with you;
- v. At the same time, staff must be upfront and honest about what you cannot do for your customers, both generally and in any given circumstance throughout the transaction relationship;
- vi. Ask the customer their preference in any range of choices you can provide (both product and service processes). Don’t try to guess or pre-empt as the risk is too great that you will get it wrong, or not quite right;
- vii. The challenge for any business and its staff is to deliver all the myriad aspects of a service transaction with the highest standards of promptness, appropriateness and convenience for the customer;
- viii. Overall, whether your business advertises itself as a premium provider or bargain basement discounter, value for money must be present at appropriate levels to match your advertised brand and the limitations your business can afford; and finally,
- ix. If something goes wrong, fix it! No discussion or argument. Just fix it. Then enact preventative actions to prevent recurrence.

#### SERVICE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

There are also 54 Service Performance Indicators (SPIs) which underline the nine rules. These SPIS are trainable, demonstrable, observable, measurable, actionable and reportable.

You may need to be in dire threat of complete business failure before some diehards will accept the customer focus approach necessary to save your business. By implementing the fundamentals of service to recession–proof your company, you will be best positioned for when there is a resurgence in customer and business confidence in the next positive growth period. This will have you poised to exploit the opportunities. Adopting a fundamentalist approach to the best possible service at each and every customer transaction will guarantee you still have loyal customers to work with when the New Good Times roll.

You can read more about the ©Nine Rules of Great Service in *May I Help You?* published by Allen and Unwin and available at:

[http://www.amazon.com/May-Help-You-Customer-Business/dp/1865088587/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1219643041&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/May-Help-You-Customer-Business/dp/1865088587/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1219643041&sr=8-1).

More information request *Recession Busting* to [progbus@pbinsitute.net](mailto:progbus@pbinsitute.net)

# SIX SIGMA 2009 ROUNDTABLE

**6 OCTOBER 2009**  
**Leadership for Lean Six Sigma**



#### THEME

**Leadership for  
Lean Six Sigma**

#### CO-HOSTS

Lean Six Sigma Division  
and  
Monash University

#### DATE

6 October 2009

#### PLACE

Melbourne, Victoria

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.aq.org.au/sixsigma2009.htm](http://www.aq.org.au/sixsigma2009.htm)

To join the Lean Six Sigma Division go to  
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LOCATION  
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*Sharing knowledge, experience and promoting best practice in business continuity and disaster recovery planning*



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#### Our goals:

- Provide a forum for discussion on business continuity and disaster recovery
- Educate and inform members and the business continuity community
- Encourage development and implementation of business continuity plans

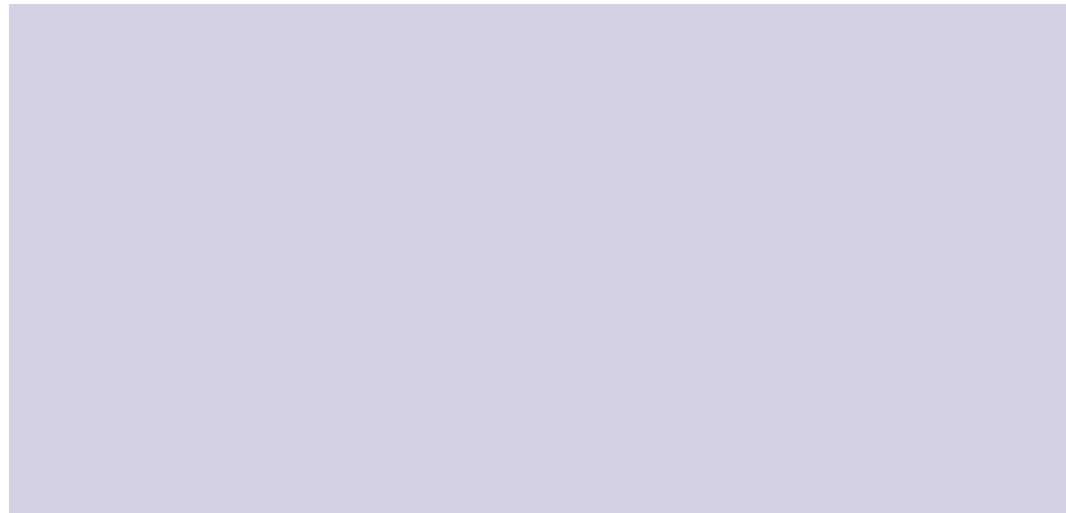
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