

The Freedom to be Excellent



By Christina Salwitz

Achieving remarkable customer service is challenging. Ironically however, achieving the overwhelmingly spectacular can be intuitively easy.

Some of the most talented businesses spend almost nothing on customer service and succeed in reaching extraordinary goals.

Growing up a retail baby, I was enamored with it from a young age and graduated high school early because I was SO motivated to get going and make my mark. I went to work at Nordstrom at 17 years old and was given the world's BEST retail training, in my humble opinion, and eventually became a trainer myself.

What was the most memorable part of my training?

I will never forget these words: "Just do your very best to offer outstanding customer service at all times, no matter what. If we feel you aren't doing that, then we will talk. Otherwise go forth and shine."

It was simple, straightforward and vast in its implications.

As a manager, salesperson, buyer, designer and merchandiser in retail for the last 25 years I have sold clothing, high-end homes and all things horticulture.

Though technology and customer driven data are changing our retail environments daily, the basic tenants of excellent sales techniques remain the same. Customers still yearn for the personal. They love being re-assured, comforted, informed and inspired.

A website can only do some of that and mostly in a cold, non-personal way.

When everything about the new retail millennium tells us that people will buy more and more online, it tells me that those who have their livelihoods firmly entrenched in brick and mortar need to step up their game when it comes to service.

The slow period of the new year is a fabulous time to look at how you can do that.

The Importance of Customer Service

Could you call your garden center a "Customer delight company that happens to sell plants?"

We are in a truly unique position in the realm of selling living things. Of course anyone can order plants online, but they can't smell the soil and fragrance of the flowers in the nursery either, and that awareness is hard to quantify. So, we make it personal.

A well-trained salesperson who has the freedom to go above and beyond can take a \$50 sale and turn it into a \$5,000 sale AND an ongoing relationship given the tools.

I know because I have done it over and over.

Giving a young, inexperienced salesperson, or a seasoned pro for that matter, the freedom to be excellent is easy.

Notice Nordstrom didn't ask me to go out and be "good;" they said go out and be "outstanding."

Then every month all 150 of us from alterations to maintenance would meet and the manager would read the personal, handwritten notes and emails from customers where everyday scenarios and examples of what that meant were laid out for all to hear.

Names and departments were mentioned with pride. We created delighted customers and identified what and WHO delighted them. I wanted THAT to be ME!

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It seems these days I rarely encounter the remarkable level of customer experience that makes ME want to be the one remarking about it.

But, I can tell you that when I recognize it from someone who is enthusiastic and given the freedom to be excellent, I am the first one to tell their superior, write a note or make a call.

Does your team dabble in the realm of the occasionally remarkable or the overwhelmingly spectacular? **LGR**

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