



Clients First? Is Service on the Endangered List?

By: Troy Snyder



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When did client service die? Obviously, I missed the funeral. It seems inconceivable that in today's technology age where we receive instant information that customer service would be the first casualty.

It should be easy to focus on the client. Preparation is easy. We can summon the power of great resources, check business trends, research client news - all in a snap. But service seems a lost cause now. Maybe it's because we are chained to our laptops or afraid we will miss the next instant message. It seems to be "all about me!"

I have been in the client service profession for over twenty years. During that time, I have seen such erosion in client care as well as in overall customer service everywhere. Why is this? Why is it that taking care is not a priority today? Where is the passion of knowing you are doing something right, doing something extraordinary and making a difference?

Recently while on a business trip, I stood in front of an inattentive flight agent who showed no interest in answering a question. Only when I voiced the obvious, "you have a customer standing in front of you" did we actually make eye contact and made subsequent progress. Sad, really.

In today's business climate, service or courtesy is secondary to all other areas of professional development. "What about me?" seems to be the prevailing attitude. I myself have fallen into the trap of placing my own people first, worrying about using my technology gadgets, building and developing internal relationships, being visible and not wanting to be inconvenienced by interruptions. Actually, it makes very good business sense to take care of your people, develop internal relationships, and be visible.

Clearly, taking care of your people is critical to your success. However, there has to be a balance.

Quite simply, without satisfied clients nothing else really matters. Taking care of your clients should be on the same level of importance as everything else I mentioned if not priority. People want to be around others who are passionate individuals, who enjoy what they do, who foster interaction and who want to go the extra mile. It sounds so simple in theory, but the execution is not so simple.

Throughout my career in the "service" business, I have encountered and studied various techniques that are successful in delivering excellent client service more consistently. They are relatively simple in concept, but difficult to remember to execute consistently. Most importantly, be yourself, open up to your clients and remember to have fun! In the end, hopefully, you realize what a rewarding experience of serving clients can be and the reason why you do what you do.

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This is a Journey, not a Destination - Client service is not a one-time event. It is a life-long learning and refinement process. Enjoy the journey, instead of worrying about all the details...like if you are applying all the latest and greatest techniques or if something is not intuitive right from the start. Embrace your assets, and understand your liabilities. Accept constructive criticism. Solicit feedback from all levels - good and

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bad. Once you accept that this is a journey, you will be able to sit back and reflect. Your outlook may change dramatically and consequently, your effectiveness will too!

“Are you doing the right things to show you care?”

Be Passionate - Clients enjoy dealing with teams and people who are passionate. Remember to show substance and sincerity with your passion. Be mindful and aware of trends and news, and share this with your clients. Allow them to see both the professional and personal side of who you are. Passion comes from within. Reflect on what makes it burn inside of you.

Have an Abundance Mentality - Provide solutions. Think about alternative ways to deal with a situation, instead of always saying, "no." Be clever...show you are thinking through the situation, not against it! At times, is it appropriate and even necessary to say "no," but provide options; an unequivocal "No" should never be an answer. How would *you* feel if the response is just "no", without alternatives or other suggestions?

Show that You Care - Developing an emotional connection with your client is critical, but can also be unnerving. Having real face-to-face (not cell phone, email, text messaging or instant messaging), open communication creates emotional bonds. Some of my best emotional bonds arose after a disagreement or heated discussion. Don't be afraid to engage! The concept is simple...your behavior shows that you care. Are you doing the right things to show you care?

Share Knowledge and Add Value - Be knowledgeable about your clients' world and the profession you represent. Stay abreast of regulations, changes in the marketplace. Bring value to the organization you are serving. Develop value scorecards, a good tool to measure, track and understand value delivered to them.

Understand your Touch Points - How often do you think of your clients during the day? Have you developed various touch points to let your clients know you are thinking of them? There are obvious ones, like interaction during projects, but what happens afterwards?

Think about articles, market trends, community events or life events relevant to your clients' world. This fosters an on-going relationship that keeps you top-of-mind when new business opportunities arise.

Be Readily Accessible - How often do you call someone and get voicemail instead of a live voice? And, then wonder how long it will take to have your phone call returned? Have you ever sent an e-mail in which you did not get a reply, and then wonder if the recipient ever read the message? Simply, be accessible. Respond promptly, with a personal touch. Also, make your clients feel that they are recognized when they call your office.

Share the Accomplishment of Great Client Relationships with Your Team - Sharing success with others on the team helps to set the example. I am not advocating bragging or arrogant boasting, but sharing of techniques, best practices, reactions to prompt others to think, learn and provide better client service. Reflect on your own strategies. Celebrating success as a team is one of the many rewards of excellent client relationships.

Be Yourself - Often, we forget that in our business life, we are human. Accept it. Fine-tune it. Learn and grow from yourself and others. Always be yourself with your clients. Accepting yourself gives you greater patience with others. Remember, clients are human, too...

These all sound straightforward but can be tough to remember when you are focused on deadlines or technology. Fight against the tendency to view clients' needs as an interruption. At SLGG we define success the same way our clients do - with care, caring for people means so much more than caring about the bottom line. I am proud to work with a firm which creates an environment that encourages its people to focus on delivering excellent client service.

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