EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE ONLINE

The real bottom line on Internet customer service is not technology or policy. It's about one person with a problem talking to another who is supposed to solve it. At that point your technically advanced web site, advertising, branding, or public relations don't mean a thing.

It doesn't matter if your company is large or small, for the Internet customer your company comes down to a voice on the phone. That voice IS your company to your customer. So it had better be soothing and effective in solving problems. When service isn't good, even a company as large as mighty Microsoft can be damaged by one bad customer service rep.

Most customers don't initiate this one-to-one contact until they have a problem with your product or service. Your customer judges your company by the level of satisfaction s/he has with a live human being trying to solve his or her problem.

I believe I am uniquely qualified to evaluate customer service because for 15 years before I started working as an Internet marketer, I ran a consumer complaint handling service called Rent-A-Kvetch. It was more of a hobby than a business, since I also ran a successful PR firm at the same time. Over the years I helped hundreds of people resolve complaints about products and services of companies large and small.

Again and again I heard companies make the same mistakes dealing with customers. And I heard repeatedly what people really wanted when they complain - to be heard, heeded and helped. The Internet hasn't changed that one bit.

Nothing to learn from Microsoft

Customer support is only as good as the person handling the call. Since Microsoft is perhaps the most visible technology company on the planet it would seem reasonable to expect good customer service from them. After all, if a company with Microsoft's money and resources can't or won't do customer service right, who can?

Nine times out of ten Microsoft technicians probably handle problems adequately. But screw ups seem to come in bunches and my experience was as bad as it gets.

I'm not telling you this just to bash Microsoft, although they surely deserve it and it's fun to do. I'm telling you this so you won't let your customer service reps and technical support staff treat your customers this way.

My Outlook Express problem was turned into a 6 hour marathon nightmare by two inept technicians on two different days. The first, who kept me on the phone for four hours filled with misinformation, was earnest but clueless. The bizarre behavior of the second technician was downright scary. He was ready to have me re-format my hard drive to solve what turned out to be a ridiculously simple situation. Customer Central Manager Ken Pierce said, "We definitely take the rap on this. This definitely was not handled well. My approach is apologies."

What was the problem? My Outlook Express email was disappearing after I read it. Turns out, there is an option called "View" in which one can check "Hide read or ignored messages." Some glitch caused this option to be checked. But neither technician figured that out in a grand total of six hours of telephone consulting torture. My friend, Kushal Dutt, of TrainCentral computer consulting figured it out after Microsoft failed. It's no wonder a lot of people love to hate Microsoft.

The problem could have been easily solved by better trained Microsoft reps. Instead of looking for the simplest solutions, both reps went straight for the heavy artillery, and the customer suffered. It's up to management to make sure that customer service and tech support reps listen carefully to what the customer says. And that they start with the simplest possible explanation for any problem.

Simple rules for good service

Here are some simple rules your company can follow to insure excellent customer service. Teach your customer service and technical assistance reps who deal with the public to:

- Get the customer's name and phone number immediately so you can call them right back in case you are cut off.

- Give the customer your full name, direct phone number or employee ID number so they can reach you again if they need additional help.

- Tell the customer you are sorry they are having a problem and that you will make sure it is solved before you hang up the phone - whatever that requires.

- Rephrase the customers' problem or concern to make sure you understand it

- Look for the simplest possible solution to the problem first -- even if it may seem overly simplistic. Better to try something simple and obvious than to go into a detailed dialogue about a simple problem.

- Be unfailingly polite and attentive to the customer, no matter what they say. They wouldn't be on the phone with you if they didn't have a problem your product or service had caused them.

- Never, never, never say "That's the first time anyone ever complained about that." Who cares? Someone is complaining about it now.

- Don't say "I'll put you on hold for a minute" and then disappear for 10.

- Don't say "I didn't cause your problem! I am trying to help you." You are the company when you are talking to a customer and the company caused the problem.

- Customers are not annoying. Customers pay your salary.

- The customer is always right, even when the customer is wrong.

- Customer complaints are important and legitimate and need your compassionate attention.

These points seem simplistic and obvious don't they?