

First Impressions and Long-lasting Relationships:

The rewards of great customer service

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Providing an unbeatable shopping experience is no longer optional for cooperatives—it is imperative. In the growing and increasingly competitive world of natural foods, cooperatives need to perform better than their competitors, especially in providing outstanding customer service. Customer service is one of the key areas where cooperatives can differentiate themselves from other natural-foods stores.

Customers make a conscious decision to shop at your store, and you should strive to make the customer's entire experience excellent. Your front end department needs to be a shining example of what excellent customer service looks and feels like. After all, your front end staff are the stars of the show. They have the most interactions with your customers, and they make the greatest and most lasting impressions. They are one of the most visible representations of your brand. How do you ensure the customer service experience at your store is top-notch?

Vision questions

First, the co-op needs to have a vision for what customer service looks like and how it feels. Determine how customer service is defined at your store and how that is reflected in its front end department.

Consider the following specific questions: What expectations are given to new hires? What kind of customer service training is provided to staff? Do you gather feedback from customers? How is customer service being measured? Do you reward excellent customer service?

The aim of such questions: if customer service is to become the most important part of the job, then we must make it the most important part of the job.

Leadership

Customer service begins and ends with leadership. Ideally, your front end manager has a service-centric mindset, demonstrating a high level of emotional intelligence, such as the ability to interpret body language and respond to it. The front end manager should model comfortable interactions with customers, demonstrate excellent active-listening skills, be capable of making the most difficult customers happy, and lead by a positive example. A front end manager's ability to model excellent customer service will support the entire front end staff.

Defining customer service

Your organization needs to define what customer service looks like. It is okay if your cooperative's idea of customer service is different from that of another co-op. In any case, it is important to create a policy that clearly defines your customer service expectations.

Start with a mission or vision statement. For example, at Wheatsville Co-op in Austin, Texas., they strive to be the "friendliest store in town"; at BriarPatch Food Co-op in Grass Valley, Calif., we talk about the ABCs of customer service: Acting honestly with integrity, Building positive relationships, Caring genuinely about customers' needs, and solving problems attentively.

This "mission statement" becomes the front end compass, and from there you can elaborate upon what it means to be the friendliest store in town, or what it means to care genuinely about customer needs. Through vision work and collaboration, you can have a clear and robust definition of what customer service looks and feels like. You will have something you can teach, reward, and measure.

Customer service training

Once you have defined customer service, you can start training and setting clear expectations. Most likely the co-op has a staff with varying levels of experience and skill. But everyone who joins the staff should receive the same information on customer service, have the same expectations, and receive the same training.

From day one, an employee should know exactly what customer service looks like at your store. Remember, employees are the co-op's representatives and ambassadors, and you want to make sure that they have the tools to perform their jobs. Most stores have training materials on how to operate the registers, how to stock the shelves, how to cull produce, and what to do during the slower times. Be sure you also have a customer-service training program in place.

Customer service is an art. At the most basic level, you need to teach the importance of specific behaviors: eye contact, smiling, body language, and common courtesies. When teaching these concepts, focus on the why: Why is eye contact important? Why is a smile important? What message are you sending through body language? Why is it important to show gratitude?

It is important to teach the techniques and just as important to >



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talk about the psychology of customer service. Ultimately, great service is about making first impressions and building relationships. It is about treating customers with respect and showing gratitude. We only get one chance to make a first impression. Your staff may have hundreds of interactions a day, but for the customer it is only one—and that one needs to be the best.

Once you have made your first impression, you get to build a relationship. We build relationships by remembering names, asking open-ended questions, sharing enthusiasm, having gratitude, and using positive language versus negative language. For example, instead of saying, “I don’t know,” you can say, “That’s a great question—let’s go find the answer.” Or, instead of saying, “No problem,” you can say, “Absolutely, I would love to help.”

Hiring for customer service

Consider motivational fit when hiring, and look for individuals who display natural customer service tendencies. For the front end department, look for people who can handle four-to-eight hours of talking to the public while handling the customers’ money, food, complaints, and other various comments. The ability to multitask is key!

When you interview, be prepared with the criteria you are looking for in a candidate. Look for candidates who are friendly, respectful, able to make eye contact, courteous, and confident. Body language tells us much about a person. During interviews, watch for clues in a candidate’s body language, and use behavioral interview questions. For example:

- Describe for us a time when you went out of your way to help someone or to make their day.
- What part of work gives you the greatest feeling of achievement and satisfaction?
- In three words, describe yourself.
- What does excellent customer service look like to you?

Share with us a time when you displayed or experienced this.

Measuring customer service

How to measure customer service? This one is easy! First and foremost, listen to your customers. What sort of feedback are they giving you? To better track customer service feedback, have suggestion and comment forms readily available for customer use.

Use the feedback customers provide as a way to track how well you are meeting their needs. This can be a very useful tool, but only if you are following up. Develop a system through which you document the comments

and ensure appropriate follow up. You can create a simple spreadsheet that tracks the comments coming in and, if followup was needed, what actions were taken.

Mystery shoppers can also give you great feedback. A mystery shopper is a third-party person who comes in at varying times and provides feedback based on the criteria you want them to evaluate. Valley Natural Foods in Burnsville, Minn., uses member volunteers as mystery shoppers, and National Co+op Grocers has an inexpensive mystery-shopper program tailored specifically to cooperatives.

If you decide to use a mystery-shopper program, it is important to understand that their feedback is a snapshot of one point in time. It is important to look at the whole picture and not single out an individual. If

someone does receive poor feedback, make your own observations, and, if needed, have a private, constructive conversation with the individual. More times than not, a customer service complaint is a reflection of your store’s culture, not a critique of a single person.

Rewarding staff

Another way to measure customer service is by having a peer-recognition program in which staff can give shout-outs to coworkers when they observe someone going above and beyond. Acknowledging and rewarding staff for going above and beyond is a great way to reinforce the fact that the co-op takes customer service seriously.

Staff recognition can be offered in many forms. It can be as simple as verbal feedback, or maybe a special button/pin for the employee’s apron, a customer service badge, a gift card, or a written note sharing your observations and your appreciation. Taking the time to share your appreciation of a job well done is a great way to foster a culture of customer service.

Your front end department is the face of your organization. They are the ones who get to build and maintain relationships with your customers. Often they are the first and the last impression a customer has of the co-op. Make sure that front-end staff are the shining examples of what your store is all about. A great first impression can lead to a longstanding relationship that the co-op can foster and grow.

Through leadership, having a clear definition of service, staff training, performance measuring, and peer recognition, your store’s customer service can be top notch. Customer-service skills are life skills that improve the quality of life of the individual and the community. □

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