

# Smile, Please, You're in Front of a Customer

BY BRUCE PALMA

About a year ago, our major competitor held a focus group with some of its customers. We learned from several participants—longtime members of our co-op—that many people in the group told the competitor they loved shopping at Co-opportunity, primarily for the service experience.

One of our assistant managers had a friend who was a manager at the competitor's store. The friend told our manager that, because of the group feedback, our competitor's store was sending in a team from corporate to focus on improving service. She asked our employee, "What are you doing over there to create such good service?" Our employee said, "I don't know. They're just really serious about service here..."

While I wished she had been more eloquent, I was happy to hear that. I knew someone in our organization got the message I was trumpeting: We are serious about service. And while I believe we're pretty good at delivering great service, I know there's plenty of room for improvement. We're continually looking for ways to provide consistent, great service.

Since becoming general manager in 2006, I have focused on spreading the message that we are nothing without customer satisfaction. I talk to staff about service on the floor; in department meetings, full-store meetings, management team meetings; in my office, in the hallway, and in the break room. I continually communicate my vision of doing whatever it takes to give our customers the best experience possible—whether it's thanking an employee for getting a great mystery shopper or customer appreciation comment, or teaching someone how they could've given better service.

The following are various examples of how we view service at Co-opportunity—and what we've done to improve.

## You can't engage with a can of soup

Here's a little context: We have 7,800 square feet of retail and 41 parking spaces. We do over \$18 million a year. Average daily customer count is over 1,600. We sign up roughly 100 new members each month. We have six Whole Foods, three Trader Joe's, and three independent natural food stores within five miles of us. Let's not forget farmers markets (bless their local, sustainable hearts) on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday all over town.



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In many ways, we're fighting for every sale we get. We don't do it with parking—in fact we frustrate our shoppers on a daily basis with our limited parking. We don't have the lowest prices in town. We don't have a salad bar, hot bar, or fresh meat and seafood. But the customers keep coming—through recessions, new competition, and \$17.99 jars of almond butter.

Aside from our product selection, I believe we've succeeded because we've created an atmosphere that—after 35 years—allows for deeper, more fulfilling interaction and engagement with our shoppers and staff. We have key service superstars in every department, many of whom have been with us for years. They have their own fan clubs—customers who come in specifically to see

them. They know how to make the service experience more than "service." They know how to create a meaningful encounter with a shopper. They know how to have fun with our customers. And this rubs off on new hires; if all goes well, they're also forming relationships with our shoppers. Our goal is to create consistency with all staff at all times. Like a string of Christmas tree lights, I want all the bulbs bright and flashing.

We need our employees to bring their own innate intelligence, playfulness, humor, empathy and creativity to each and every encounter with a customer. I tell our staff to simply be aware. Focus on the customer, not the cans of soup you're stocking (or the conversation with your co-worker about last night's party).

## Pickles, fish and a little zing

In the past few years we've based our service trainings around two customer service systems: Zingerman's ([www.zingtrain.com](http://www.zingtrain.com)) and Give 'em the Pickle ([www.giveemthepickle.com](http://www.giveemthepickle.com)). Before that, through the FISH! training ([www.charthouse.com](http://www.charthouse.com)), we learned how to throw fish and bag groceries. But we switched to pickles—they smell better.

We've done several full-store trainings with the Pickle DVD, and we also brought ZingTrain in to train our entire store offsite in a hotel. We've adopted the Code Red and Green system from Zingerman's (customer feedback forms filled out by staff for internal monitoring).

We tell our staff to "Give the customer the pickle." Go the extra mile. Do whatever it takes to make a customer happy. Smile. Engage. Make eye contact with customers. Ask customers in the aisles if they need help. Don't point. Walk the customer to the product. Don't just leave them there in a dark aisle with a strange jar of pickled plums. Ask if they have any questions. If you can't answer, get help—fast.

We have weekly mystery shops, annual customer service surveys, suggestion slips, and other means of capturing customer feedback (emails, letters) and measuring results. We have our staff choose monthly service stars from among their fellow employees and reward them with gift cards and their picture on the break room board. And we give our staff bonuses in profitable years—always reminding them that it's because of customer satisfaction (and customer spending) that we've been successful.

I teach our staff that every interaction with a customer is a marketing opportunity. We encourage all staff to find ways to give each customer an amazing experience. So, even if there's a cost—a very liberal return policy; giving a gift card to someone if we really dropped the ball; delivering product to people's houses; going to a competitor to get a product for a customer (if we're out of stock)—I want them to view this as a marketing opportunity, not a "loss." I want our staff to really understand why it's best to focus on making the customer as happy and satisfied as possible.

## Hire the best xylophone player

If you were in a band and needed a new bass player (or xylophone virtuoso), you'd probably audition a lot of players and find the best possible player you could. They would certainly need to have some natural, inspiring talent. We've learned the hard way that we can't grab anyone simply to fill a shift. They can be trained, but they probably won't have the energy, edge, enthusiasm that a great hire should have.

This is crucial. We used to fill positions as quickly as possible. Our department managers interviewed and hired their staff, sometimes with little regard for their service skills. We now have our HR manager and store manager screen all applicants. They focus on picking applicants who

# 8 Steps to Great Service and Customer Nirvana

Since it seems everyone has a series of magic steps to business success, I'll offer mine:

- 1 **Create an environment** that allows everyone (customers and staff) to be as natural, happy, and engaging as possible.
- 2 **Build a management team** that is customer-focused and models great service.
- 3 **Hire the best** and most natural service providers you can find.
- 4 **Point everyone in the right direction** (training, coaching, key principles).
- 5 **Use customer feedback** (mystery shops, surveys, customer praise and complaints) to continually learn and grow.
- 6 **Shout it from the mountaintop:** The customer experience is everything.
- 7 **Hold all staff accountable**, including managers, for providing great service.
- 8 **Hold your breath** and hope for the best.

show natural and exceptional service skills. It's best if they've already had customer service training and experience from their previous jobs. This way we don't start from scratch. It's easier if they know the basics; we can then orient them to our principles. We can directly benefit from someone's training at Whole Foods, Starbucks, or a major grocery chain. We ask the interviewees to "Tell us about a time when you had to handle a challenging customer service situation and how you handled it."

If they seem genuinely interested, enthusiastic and experienced in giving great service, they'll be passed on to interview with the department manager. In the past year, we've seen a dramatic improvement in our service consistency by initially hiring outgoing, empathetic, natural service providers.

More than from trainings and systems, I believe we've raised our service levels most by raising our hiring standards.

## In the beginning was HR

Our HR Manager, Colette Romero, includes the following in every new-hire orientation on the first day:

"As I introduce the employee to the [Zingerman's] Code form system, I emphasize the importance of customer service as a fundamental part of all of our jobs. I reiterate how internal service to our fellow co-workers is viewed as just as important as the service we give to our shoppers. I go over how we, as employees, are all empowered to get the

customer what they need and want; and how best to use an empathic response when a customer is unhappy with a situation. I show the employee how the Code Red form can be used to document cases in which the employee went above and beyond to get the shopper what they wanted or how the employee helped to make the situation into a more positive Code Green experience.

"I give examples of my own experiences with customers and explain how I handled certain situations. (Colette worked in membership for several years.) I remind the employee that a good part of the reason they were hired for the job had to do with the impressive response they gave to the interview question, 'Tell us about a time when you had to handle a challenging customer service situation and how you handled it.'

"I also emphasize how the more we share and talk about the positive experiences we have in the store, the more such experiences will happen between ourselves and our customers."

## Don't wait too long for smiles

After we've trained and coached, and after we've begged and pleaded with staff to do right by the customer—if someone still can't (or won't) make it happen, we will usually replace them with someone who can. This includes anyone on the management team. It's important to hold everyone accountable to providing great service. This, again, helps maintain consistency and allows for greater service growth. ■