

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



There seems to be a dastardly movement afoot to use the best of our technology as a substitute for human contact when it comes to customer service. Recently, I received a notice in the mail

that my account with a big department store had been incorrectly credited with 400 dollars of someone else's money. Not to worry, the company only informed me of this after the money had been removed and redeposited in the account of its rightful owner.

A bill for 70 odd dollars came with the notice, but as you might expect, it wasn't itemized. Instead, there was another note suggesting that if I had any questions, I should call a certain phone number. Not one of those free 1-800 numbers either. I wish I could say it was my dime, but as you'll see, the expense in time and money wasn't small change.

I dialed. A computer generated voice started talking, "Thank you for calling. If you are dialing from a touch tone phone please hit the number one."

I did that and there was some very high tech beeping in the background. Another computer answered.

"If you want information about your account, please use the phone to enter the account number at this time."

I did that too. Carefully I entered the numbers, all 15 of them. More high tech noise (shheee boy, all I want is a copy of my bill).

"If you want a current balance in your account, press one. If you want tax information, press two. If you want a cheeseburger with onions . . ." and on and on. I spent a total of three minutes getting to a human voice.

I knew it was a human voice. Computers don't lisp. At any rate, once I did get to this human, things went a lot better. She apologized for the inconvenience and we straightened things out in short order.

But it was annoying to play Dungeons and Dragons to get that far. The billing error was theirs, not mine. The phone call wasn't free, and the same annoyance I feel for answering machines with signal tones that shatter glass at 40 paces had been tripled. I was forced to discuss my personal matters with three separate computers I didn't even know by name.

And there was also the awesome responsibility of pressing all those numbers in the right order and at the right time. What if I'd ended up wandering for all time in the tax department? What if I had pressed the

wrong button and inadvertently launched a dozen missiles toward Omaha?

Healthier High Tech

Let's contrast this approach with the more enlightened use of high tech employed by Steve Beckley of Des Moines, Iowa, owner of Beckley Imports Ltd.

Beckley Imports is a Bosch Service Center that's been in business for the past 12 years, specializing in the repair of European cars. Many of Steve Beckley's customers have been with him since he first opened the doors. As a result, the service files on customers and their vehicles had become pretty bulky, and information hard to find.

This posed problems during the busiest hours of the day, since the files were used to keep track of previous repairs, and acted as a reminder to all concerned about the need for continuing maintenance. Finally, Steve Beckley decided that a computer data base would speed things up. He talked with a friend in the computer business, and together they designed a program to suit his needs.

The new system ended the old paper chase. Answers to customer questions were retrieved quickly. But the computer never became a substitute for personal service, administered by a conscientious, caring, living, breathing human being. Instead it was a tool that let Beckley Imports personalize, not depersonalize customer service.

In addition to speeding the writing of repair orders, the data base provided some additional benefits.

- It increased sales. Since customers were informed immediately about the need for additional maintenance or previously suggested repairs, they were more apt to just give an equally quick approval to an estimate.
- Since Steve Beckley does phone follow-ups to check on customer satisfaction, quick access to files meant equally quick answers to customer questions or complaints.

As Steve Beckley notes, "We handle complaints fairly, and we handle them promptly. Import owners have their own little grapevine communications network, and bad news travels fast. They talk to each other, and the reputation of your shop will live or die based on the perception of value among a small, discriminating clan of clients. The computer has improved our ability to provide service with a personal touch, and our customers appreciate that touch."

Now if I could just get Steve to start selling blue jeans and sweaters . . .

—By Ralph Birnbaum