

Customer First

The Journal of the National Customer Service Association



**Making
Customers
For A Lifetime**

**Little Things
Matter**

**Listen With
Your Eyes**

**At Ace, you're a neighbor,
not a number.**



In this issue...

The first word...



Welcome to Issue I, 2014 of *Customer First!*

Once again, we are very proud to offer you some of the best examples of putting the customer first. Our featured organizations are successful because they understand the link between a commitment to their customers and day-to-day behaviors. We know you will gain some excellent insights into world-class service and encourage you to share this information

with your co-workers and colleagues.

We are also pleased to present an article by a "customer" on behalf of her fellow customers who face challenges when they shop at your places of business. Take a close look at her story and pay more attention to all of your customer's non-verbals to assure you serve each one individually and fully.

Loyal customers are not the result of your best intentions, they are the results of what your customers actually experience. Let me share a recent personal experience that illuminates this fact.

On a recent trip, a client provided lodging at a historic hotel, known for its charm and ambiance. We had our breakfast each of the three mornings in the lobby restaurant. To heighten the professionalism of our experience, the server took our order by memory only - nothing written. Unfortunately, each time, the food delivered was incorrect. We noted the same experience with our singular attempt at room service. With each wrong order, we were offered very sincere apologies. So, while the restaurant was charming and service staff were dressed very professionally, the "experience" left much to be desired. I shared our experiences with the restaurant manager and once again, received a heartfelt apology.

Service is an end-to-end process. Like a chain, customers remember your weakest service "link".

Good luck in serving all your customers. We are here for you.

Best wishes,

C. William Crutcher, President
National Customer Service Association

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Hardware with Heart

BY MIKE KELLEY, MAPLE LEAF ACE HARDWARE,
JAY HEUBNER, ACE HARDWARE CORPORATION
AND NIVI NAGIEL, NCSA

Pop quiz! Finish this tune: "_____ is the place with the helpful hardware folks." If you can fill in the blank in a snap while humming the tune, it could be due to the ubiquitous, catchy marketing campaign, and it could be because the business lives up to its slogan... or both.

Mike Kelley, co-owner of Maple Leaf Ace Hardware in Seattle, Wash., would say, unequivocally, "BOTH." As with many family-owned businesses, Kelley and his wife, co-owner Kathy Stephenson had the opportunity to purchase her family's Ace store in 2005. They were excited to become a second generation Ace retailer due to, as Kelley described it: "The Ace customer-minded principles and values which generate prosperity for all—our family, the employees, our customers and the community."

Hardware is a complex retail business and we are making customers for a lifetime—not for the day," says

Kelley. In fact, Kelley's commitment and belief in the underlying principles is so complete that he took it upon himself (based on his prior retail and HR background) to author an Ace "Language of Service" one-page graphic for his team. (See page 6 of this issue, "Language of Service".) It features 57 words and short phrases that speak to the service philosophy and culture that Ace has followed since its inception in 1924. It is posted in Kelley and Stephenson's Maple Leaf Ace Hardware employee break room as a constant reminder of how all staff are expected to respond in every customer interaction. The "Language of Service" piece is so well done it was circulated through the Ace corporate office and onward to the entire



Mike Kelley doing what Ace does best—walking the talk by being active in the community.

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Ace Hardware retail network as a helpful reminder of what amazing customer service means at Ace. "We aim to give people the right tools and an opportunity to use them well," says Kelley. "This simple graphic makes it easy for associates to be mindful of how we can help make good on our brand promise every day, with each customer."

Ace currently has approximately 75,000 team members world-wide across more than 4,700 locally-owned and operated retail stores. All associates—from part-timers to regular full-time staff—must know the business well and are trained to ensure they have all of the technical knowledge and expected interpersonal skills required to fully amaze every customer, every time.

Jay Heubner, Director of Retail Learning and Development for Ace Hardware Corporation, echoes Kelley's statements—"The role of Ace's corporate retail training function is to support Ace retailers by providing award-winning tools, programs and rich content to help them fulfill our Brand promise with every customer, every time." Ace retailers want and need corporate involvement because, according to Kelley, they provide:

- Excellent distribution
- Goodwill as a focus
- Excellent pricing
- Superior product assortment
- Significant rebates
- Innovation

Heubner says the highest compliment paid Ace is, "When competition works to copy us—we must be doing the right thing with our culture of integrity, trustworthiness and good communication." To sustain this culture for 90 years, Ace not only constantly adapts to customer needs and expectations but to the ever-evolving and challenging competitive landscape. To that end, they have created a 'Helpful 101' program complete with certification and an annual renewal challenge—with stores working hard to retain that designation.

'Helpful 101' is a customer experience training tool loaded with value. It provides, according to Heubner, "A methodology for creating a customer for life. This includes training on asking the right questions and giving the customer exactly what they need, even if they don't know what they want." The training is for every employee in the store, regardless of role, and focuses on who Ace is and what it stands for as a company. Employees are practiced in how to "interview" and care for customers. "The award-winning program is highly engaging, interactive and fun," says Heubner. All Ace local stores have the option to go through this state-of-the-art training and receive coaching online as well as the opportunity to 'practice' on the floor.

At the end of the training, the store associates are only half-way to certification. Heubner says, "They must show they can apply the behavior for seven consecutive days as a team. Amazement is a 'team sport'." Whether the store should be certified is actually up to the customers, who are asked to complete a 3-question survey that takes 30 seconds to answer at in-store kiosks set up for this purpose. Associates ask the customers to participate and the owners can monitor the results and customer comments. There are certain minimum requirements for certification and, annually, the stores will go through a refresher.

So how does 'Helpful 101' and the "Language of Service" play out every day in the Ace stores given that this is retail and, therefore, has a lot of part-time help with some natural turnover among its workforce? It's connected to the culture. Kelley states and Heubner agrees that "...there is no problem that can't be solved by the right people. Better service always equals more profit. Rewarding your customer today brings them back tomorrow."

The modular approach takes a couple of weeks to complete and employee compensation is uninterrupted during training. This voluntary program was released in April 2013 and, thus far, nearly 2,000 stores have signed up to become Helpful 101 Certified with 1,400 meeting the challenge in 2014. Kelly and his staff will be going through the program to enhance their already incredible customer satisfaction ratings because, Heubner says, "all of the concepts in the

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Ace proudly displays its corporate headquarters located in Oak Brook, IL.

course bear repetition. They are great, simple and easy to learn through the packaged course. It reminds people to never take any customer for granted. For some staff it is reinforcement. For others, it's eye-opening. It provides an infrastructure for predictable consistency. And we won't be complacent—every year the bar will be raised with a new level program to be focused on the next goal."

For companies always looking at the bottom-line, Kelley reminds them that the "Culture of service is free. Words and attitudes are free." Stephenson went on to say, "It comes from a position of caring. We are 'hardware with heart.' We genuinely care for one another and want to help, from retail to corporate."

Ace's seven values are not just a 'plaque on the wall' but rather draw people like Mike Kelley to the business and keep him there. The words chosen by Ace President and CEO, John Venhuizen, speak to the most thoughtful of characteristics which all lead to "Winning"—for the employees, the customers, the vendors and the communities with Ace store locations.

Ace Hardware stores have long been involved in their communities because their owners live there too. Heubner states, "We have been helping neighbors

Ace's Seven Values

- Winning
- Love
- Humility
- Excellence
- Integrity
- Teamwork
- Gratitude

since there were neighborhoods. A brand is a promise and at Ace, we want to be 'promise keepers,' fulfilling our Helpful brand promise to amaze every customer, every time. Helpful is our weapon in the world!"

Ace monitors customer satisfaction through the 'Helpful 101' program via follow-ups such as 'mystery shoppers' and customer surveys, which lead to added support for stores as needed. But the most important satisfaction measure is whether customers keep coming in the door. Excellent customer service is

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"I was sent to my local Ace Hardware by my husband who was repairing some plumbing at home. He sent me with the 'part' for which I was to get a replacement. In the door I go holding the 'part' in my hand and praying for one of those 'helpful' people. I didn't even know which direction to head to try and find it on my own. I barely got inside when a young woman approached me with a big smile (but not one that inferred—'oh no—another person who doesn't have a clue!') and asked how she could help. I imparted my very limited information and handed her the part—a huge relief to give it to someone! She guided me to the appropriate section and found the matching part but then she went on to say that if I used another part with a certain sealant, I wouldn't be back in six months to replace the part that was now broken. I called my husband and had her talk with him about the 'what and why'—they agreed. I bought the new part and the sealant, took it home where my husband very handily installed it—1 1/2 years later: no leaks, no new parts! Ace is all about what I need and clearly know that a loyal customer is worth losing a little on unnecessary sales. They have a customer for life!"

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rewarded at the local stores, says Kelley, "by sharing a compliment from a customer with the staff members—putting it on the bulletin board in the break area so that all can continue to appreciate what we are about."

"Ace is the place with the HELPFUL hardware folks." After 90 years, they still aim to amaze every customer, every time. Heubner admits that the competition in the home improvement industry is huge but many customers still want personalized service. They want to park near and walk to a neighborhood store. They want to be greeted by someone ready and capable of helping. Someone who will send you home with what you need. Ace is blessed to be in the business of serving others and proud to have been doing so, one customer at a time, for 90 years and counting. ■

Mike Kelley is the co-owner of Maple Leaf Ace Hardware in Seattle, WA.

Jay Heubner is the Director of Retail Learning and Development for Ace Hardware Corporation in Oak Brook, IL.

Nivi Nagiel is an NCSA Editor.



Ace is proudest of its front line staff who are the "folks" you count on every day.

Ace From the Inside

Jay Heubner is the Director of Learning and Development for Ace Hardware Corporation, one of the most trusted and respected brands in the world. His award-winning team is responsible for equipping Associates in over 4,700 stores in 65 countries to fulfill Ace's "Helpful" brand promise to every customer every time.



The visionary and driving force behind Ace's 'Certified Ace Helpful' retail training curriculum, Jay is credited with leading the charge to develop a customer-centric, "prove it"-type approach to store level brand fulfillment Certification. Stores that have successfully achieved Certification (it's not easy!) are reporting higher sales, transaction counts and employee morale than stores that have not. Jay was recently quoted in a business blog as saying "store staff can't just take the training and sit back. We ask them to get out of the simulator and prove to the world ... that you can come together as a team and amaze every customer that walks through the door, every time." Jay was featured in the new best-selling book *Amaze Every Customer Every Time* by Shep Hyken and has been interviewed by various media outlets and industry experts on the subject of customer engagement.

In his time at Ace, Jay has been called on to lead many different areas of the business including IT Application Development, Call Center Management, Store Operations, Category Management, Business-to-Business, Customer Insights and Retail Innovation/Analytics. An avid St. Louis Cardinals baseball fan, he also enjoys fishing, mushroom hunting and trying to beat his wife Chris in golf.

Ace's Language of Service

Hello! Hey! Hi!	Nice to see you	What can I help you with today?	May I order that for you?	Glad you came in today	Please	May I take that up front for you?
Good morning. Good Afternoon. Good Evening. Good Day.	Tell me about your project.	We have just the thing to make that easier.	"No problem" Glad to help	"No problem" You are welcome	"No problem" My pleasure	Let me use my radio — pardon me
Thanks for shopping here today	We have several options	Keep the receipt & return what you don't need	How can I improve your day?	How many would you like — two? Three?	How may I help?	I understand
How can I make it better?	What are you trying to do?	What can I help you locate?	Yes	"Ace Hardware and Paint — this is _____"	What does it look like now?	Holler if we can help
"Let me check — may I put you on hold a moment?"	Of course — follow me over here		We should have more on Tuesday — let me hold a couple for you	What are you working on?		Another thing that works well is _____
We're open 'til 7 if you think of anything else	Is there someone you could call to check the size to save you another trip?	Let me get someone to help who knows more	Here — try it yourself	Let me help you out with that	Do you have a photo on your phone?	Yes we do — let me show you
Anything else on your list?	What else may I help you with?	Thank you				
Here is my card and the item #, call me if you have any more questions		Thanks for bringing that to my attention				
If you would like to buy six there is a savings	What's on your list today?	Here — let's open it so you can see				
Is this what you had in mind?	Thank you for your business	Hope to see you again soon	Let me get you a basket...	Will this work for you?	If I were you I would...	How will you be using this?



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Service Builder

Make The Promises You Can Keep And Keep The Promises You Make!

We have all had the experience of making a promise or commitment to another person and then falling short on meeting it. It may be picking your kids up late, missing their game or not delivering on a work assignment. All constitute commitments/promises you made and did not fulfill. The promise could have been verbal, in writing, inferred, direct. Regardless of its format, YOU know it is a promise and YOU know you are not keeping it.

Your integrity is at stake here let alone the impact of inadequate role-modeling you are offering to your children, co-workers, direct reports, etc.



BOTTOM LINE: Think before you make a commitment or promise whether it seems minor or not. Consider realistically what time you can arrive at your child's game, tell them that (even if you are acknowledging that you will arrive after it starts) and then make it happen. When given an assignment at work, clarify when it is needed and either assure that it is completed appropriately and on time or negotiate for more time.

DON'T cause yourself even more anxiety than life already offers in general by constantly "chasing your tail" trying to keep the promises you made that were never realistic. Yes, there will be times where we make a promise, full well intend to keep it and find that we can not—situations outside our control prevented us from keeping it. That should be the exception, however—not the rule! Learn from that experience so you don't find yourself repeating that same inability to keep a promise made.

Give yourself a break—MAKE THE PROMISES YOU CAN KEEP AND KEEP THE PROMISES YOU MAKE! ■



**We Support
Our Veterans**

We at NCSA, extend our sincere
“Thank You” to the
wonderful men and women
of the U.S. armed forces.
You are the epitome of
Service and represent the
best of this nation.

Land of the free because of the brave.

Our Imperfect Customers

BY LINDA W. ARMS, INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT FOR TRAINING; CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND SERVICE DELIVERY; AND SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

How do you view your customers? Are they like you? Are they at the top of their game as you might be? Probably not. We have many imperfect customers who need special attention or, at least, an awareness of their challenges. I used to always see my customers as having similar cognitive abilities as I and my co-workers. After suffering a brain injury eight years ago, my views have changed. There are millions of people in the United States who have a cognitive impairment, so you might take a second look at who is your customer.

Those of us with cognitive impairments travel, shop, visit web sites, visit business offices, talk on the phone, drive... you name it. For many of us, we do it with great difficulty. When we're done, we are often exhausted. For example, just doing a simple thing like grocery shopping was a tremendously difficult task. There were days I would decide not to go, or I'd walk into the store and right back out again because it was too overwhelming; other times I'd fill my cart with an

item or two and then just leave it and go home; or after shopping, I'd go home and nap for two hours.

I spent over 25 years in a customer service role providing a variety of financial and information technology services to a wide range of customers. As a manager of a help desk and other IT services, I was always looking at "who is my customer" and "what do they need," trying always to improve their experience with our services. I looked at our Help Desk customers in terms of their role in the organization and their different needs (engineers, administrators, highway maintenance workers, etc.). I saw other sets of customers based on how they accessed the organization's network (hard-wired, dial-in, VPN, etc.) to work with various applications. There were other types of customers also, but I never considered the cognitive health of those we served.

There are many people like me whose cognitive abilities have been affected by trauma, disease or

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How Many of Us Are Out Here in the United States?

- 1,700,000 people suffer a traumatic brain injury each year.
- 800,000 people suffer a stroke each year.
- 70,000 people are diagnosed with a brain tumor each year.
- 30,000 people suffer a brain aneurysm each year.
- 5,000,000 people live with Alzheimer's.
- There are many others with diseases that can affect cognition, including Parkinson's disease and Multiple Sclerosis.
- There are many who live with an acquired brain injury due to anoxia, bad drug interactions and other things that damage the brain.
- One in five veterans returning from the recent wars has a brain injury.

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other causes. I look fine, and have, since my accident, but in the early years of my recovery my cognitive abilities were greatly affected. Impaired cognitive abilities cause problems with awareness, perception, reasoning, ability to focus, memory, judgment and many other things. Since every injured or diseased brain is different, there are many symptoms. Our brains control everything in our bodies, including the ability to walk, see, talk, comprehend written and/or spoken communications, perform math calculations, make decisions, balance, move our hands, hear, and the list goes on and on. Most of us have problems with the speed at which our brains process anything. The world moves and speaks way too fast for many of us. Many people with an injured or diseased brain have problems with our visual systems. Some of us have problems with sounds, where we become overwhelmed by too many sounds, too much volume, and sensitivity to certain types of sounds.

The Challenge of Phone Calls

Interacting on phones can be very difficult for those with cognitive problems. There are many steps that our brain needs to process when we make a call and we can easily become overwhelmed. First we have to find the phone number and dial it. Next, we have to comprehend the automated message or what the person on the other end is saying. Our brain has to process the accents or dialects of the person. We have to try to adjust to the speed of their speech. Our brain has to work harder when the person is not speaking clearly or there are distractions we hear in the background. We may not be able to keep up with the speed at which the information is coming to us. Unfamiliar terminology throws us off. Complex sentence structures overwhelm us. Sarcasm and innuendo may not be understood.

The Overwhelm of Stores and Offices

Walking into a store or office can be overwhelming with a cognitive impairment. We may be having problems with balance so as we walk in, see and process our relatively unfamiliar surroundings, we are immediately thrown off. Our brain is working overtime to address just the balance issue.

Then, there are so many things in the establishment that we see and our brain has to process. Fluorescent lighting is more difficult for our brains to process, adding more to the overwhelm we are feeling. Next we have to find what we are looking for; we have to scan objects, make decisions.

We have to interact with the office worker or clerk who may be speaking way too fast for us, or mumbling, or speaking with an accent. Constant interruptions throw us off. Everything becomes more difficult. When someone asks us a question, it may take us a few moments to respond. Many times, because we have not yet responded, the person asking the question will not pause for very long before asking again and trying a different approach. Not good—we need some quiet moments to gather our thoughts and get them out our mouth. Constant talking interferes with our ability to think.

The Get-Me-Out-of-Here Web Sites

Busy, busy web sites are everywhere. People with injured and diseased brains have loads of issues with these web sites. Remember, many of us have problems processing visual input. Our brains have to process the words we see and comprehend their meanings. Our brains have to process the moving components on the page. We have to process the choices we need to make from the menus. We have to process every bit of it, just like a computer processes every step of a routine.

Flashy sites with many graphics and moving components are everywhere. It seems that the flashier, the better, but not for many for us. We have problems with many types, sizes and colors of fonts covering the pages. There are actually fonts that are easier for our brains to process, but it is usually not a consideration when a web site is built. Sites with dark or brightly colored backgrounds can be very difficult to look at and visually process.

My brain injury caused problems with visual processing. I could not look at some sites without getting dizzy, almost nauseous. I could not look for more than a few moments. When I did stick with it, trying to find

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or understand the content was painful. I could not think because of the visual effects of the web page. There was one site I did visit fairly often, but it had a moving graphic, which I covered by taping paper to my screen.

As you can see, I am now a different kind of customer. I look fine. I'm much better than a few years ago but I still have problems, like with that young man yesterday who spoke too, too fast and actually made me feel dizzy and not see straight. I had to ask him several times to repeat himself. My brain just does not take in the information that quickly.

I now see that there is a whole different set of customers that I never considered that deserve some acknowledgement. I am one of them. We use your services. We buy your products. We visit your web sites. We use your help desks. We pay you money. Perhaps you can learn more about those of us with cognitive impairments so you have more awareness of our needs. There are so many of us, the imperfect customer. ■

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injury. Managed IT support and service delivery in a large, geographically disbursed organization. Responsible for daily operations and developing IT strategies for help desk services, enterprise identity management, web content management, knowledge management, change management, service level agreements, and other IT programs. Project manager of numerous and varied IT efforts. Financial and professional level accounting experience in the finance department of a major Colorado municipality. HDI certified Help Desk Manager and Knowledge Management.

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Service Statistics

Employer Attitude Decides Vacation Use

A recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in collaboration with and commissioned by the U.S. Travel Association found that:

- 86% of employees have sufficient tenure to accrue between 6 and 20 vacation days annually.
- 55% of organization offer paid vacation plans.
- 45% offer paid time off plans that combine vacation and sick days.
- New employees with 1 year of service on average receive 11 paid vacation days.
- 61% of employees have at least 3 unused vacation days each year.
- 62% of organizations allow employees to roll over vacation days.
- 54% limit the rollover.
- 8% provide unlimited rollover.
- 38% require employees to use all of their vacation days each year or lose them.

So what is this telling us?

The bottom line is that vacation time is typically part of the benefit package that drew candidates to your organization in the first place and may have been the tipping factor in accepting the job offer. Now your job as the employer is to assure that duty assignments are established so that all employees (including Leadership!) can comfortably take time off and feel that their critical functions will be sufficiently covered while they are gone to allow them the opportunity to truly "get away". Creating an atmosphere that may (unintentionally or intentionally?) cause people to put off taking vacation does not allow your employees to refresh themselves and come back more ready than ever to produce for you at an even higher quality. Beyond that, from a fiscal perspective, it leaves a liability "on the books" that has to be constantly funded and never used in any other fashion.

So do your due diligence and monitor employee vacation use, facilitate employees taking their allotted time (leaving a little in the bank for emergencies) and assure that Leadership is on board with your philosophy that employees have earned the privilege of paid time off and you want them to take advantage of it. ■



Taking Care of the Front Door

BY GLEN KAMPS, DICK POND ATHLETICS, INC. AND NIVI NAGIEL, NCSA

In August 1969 before there were shopping malls, mail-order megastores and Niketown, accomplished high school distance runner and All-American from Western Michigan University, Dick Pond had a dream and brought it to fruition. In 1969 running shoes were primarily available from overseas. Pond wanted to offer quality running shoes locally and at an affordable price with a focus on exceptional customer service. He also wanted enough money to buy a fishing boat! And so...Dick Pond Athletics, Inc. (DPAI) was born in his garage with distribution from his car. It ran out of his home for 15 years.

DPAI maintains the same commitment to excellent customer service today within their six retail locations, four traveling "shoemobiles" and a booming mail-order business as they did in 1969 where customers would come late at night to the Ponds' home to be outfitted with the right running shoes. They pride themselves in being a one-stop destination for running gear with a huge selection of running shoes including trainers, racing flats, track and cross-country spikes, and field event shoes as well as a great selection of track and cross country uniforms including singlets, shorts, speedsuits, and warm-ups, plus a huge line of accessories to outfit any sports team. They also have expanded to carry a great selection of wrestling products.

But this growth would not have been possible, according to the DPAI St. Charles, Illinois store Manager, Glen Kamps, without the commitment to exceptional internal and external customer service. Beyond Dick Pond himself, DPAI's first official employee was Kamps who started with the first store in Carol Stream, Illinois in 1985. Since then, Kamps has worked at four of the six DPAI stores. Kamps reminds us that, "Little things that don't seem to matter much end up as big things and can't be overlooked". That, in essence, is the customer service philosophy present at every Dick Pond Athletics store and with every one of its employees.



The St. Charles, Illinois store which is proud to have doubled in size in the last ten years.

Still owned by Dick Pond's children, DPAI has 70 employees. While store Managers carry a diverse set of responsibilities and can work some long hours, Kamps says he enjoys the diversity of functions and the challenges but, most of all, appreciates how he is treated by the DPAI Leadership. Having left a teaching position, Kamps has stayed with DPAI because of the customer service opportunities. "I can actually change people's lives in a big way. It is amazing how impacting even the right shoelace can be. When the customer wins, we all win." says Kamps.

According to Kamps, the company's Leadership shows its caring about him as a person every day—"they are always friendly, don't take credit for successes but rather give that credit to the staff and Managers." Being treated respectfully by DPAI leadership encourages and guides him to treat his staff in the same way. Kamps feels that "This store is no more mine than the high schoolers who are here twice a week. It is OUR store. Trust your staff. They are the ones interacting with the customers. I have found that their ideas are

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just as good as mine and by using their ideas, I, additionally, get their investment in the success of the store." Clearly, DPAI's devotion to excellent internal customer service is the obvious precursor for very satisfied external customers. They have the equation right!

DPAI hires people both full and part-time staff who have a passion for running which increases the product knowledge base and better ensures that customers are guided by employees who are personally as well as professionally able to assist them in selecting what they need. When Kamps hires staff, he looks for the right personality and energy with the belief that they can be trained on the technical information.

The staff's attitude with customers is to "help them achieve the goals they have—whatever they might be", says Kamps. DPAI's "culture" toward customer service is to assist the customer in buying the right products for them. "We help people get what they need and don't try to sell them something they don't



Glen Kamps doing what he does best—taking all the time needed to get a runner in the right shoes.

need. While DPAI is a for-profit business, we find that by concentrating on the individual customer's needs—not sales quotas—we win and they win." Staff training focuses on the DPAI philosophy and products. Attention to detail is expected and supported.

To assure that all employees know what is expected of them in interactions with customers, every staff member is required to review and sign the "Mandatory Steps to Customer Service". [See Sidebar.] So, right up front, new hires understand that to work at DPAI, you must value customer service excellence with every interaction. They see that same behavior in their Managers and corporate Leadership as well. DPAI is an excellent example of the "trickle down" theory—that Leadership behavior is the role model for staff behaviors. It is obviously working at DPAI.

Kamps reports that we are "genuine and care about each customer. The products sell themselves but when we have a positive relationship with the customer, when they truly trust us to give them the best recommendation for what they need, we always meet our quotas." The Pond family philosophy at DPAI is to hire the best Managers which, then, attracts people with similar qualities as fellow employees. DPAI's main values are excellent customer service, always being honest, and serving each customer individually. "We help customers transition to other products but only when it meets their needs", says Kamps.

Managers assure that they are constantly interacting with their staff so that they get what they need to do their job well with every customer interaction. Staff are empowered in a variety of ways, for instance, going directly to buyers with suggestions on products. Once a quarter, all staff at all stores gather together to get company up-dates and to share ideas for appropriate improvements and/or growth of business. Kamps reports that "Everyone's input is sought, considered and appropriately used".

DPAI tracks customer preferences and history through their computer data base system and provides coupons to reward customers for their business. So that they don't overwhelm their customers, DPAI

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consolidates its notices to once or twice a month about sales, events, etc. To provide even greater service to their customers, they offer free injury screenings with local doctors periodically at their stores. DPAI wants to assure that their customers can enjoy running at the level that is best for them and so they also offer a 'Walk2Run' program free-of-charge which facilitates customers in enhancing their running to the level best for them. Currently, approximately 500 participants have been a part of 'Walk2Run'. Kamps has personally been very involved in the development of the Fox Valley Marathon which had 4,000 participants right outside their store.

Personalized customer service takes on a whole new meaning at DPAI—shoe fittings can take from ten minutes to two hours depending on the needs of the customer! Sales associates are encouraged to be patient and spend all the time needed to assure the customer is satisfied with the product they purchase. The end result is that very few DPAI customers complain about service and/or the products purchased. "It's easy to sell our products because we are all very proud of them. We don't just 'sell shoes'-we know what questions to ask and assure each customer gets what they truly need", says Kamps.

Of course, DPAI has its difficult customers too. They rarely have to end a customer relationship because "we do everything we can to provide what the customer needs—clear, respectful communication at all times. When it is obvious that all of our efforts will not satisfy the customer, we are not hesitant to refer them to other sources for what they feel they



Dick Pond Athletics proudly supports numerous running/walking clubs throughout the Chicago-land area.

want/need and try to part respectfully." Kamps reports that the Pond family Leadership always stands behind the Managers and staff on decisions made. Once again, putting their faith in those whom they have hired with actions and not just words.

Because DPAI is a "small business", promotional opportunities are limited but the positive and supportive culture offers intrapersonal growth which larger businesses with more vertical ladders don't necessarily have. Kamps says that "the Pond family are wonderful people to partner with". To

acknowledge staff excellent customer service "we buy lunch or gift cards and share customer compliments with all staff".

DPAI also has 'Secret Shoppers' who report back to the ownership which helps the Store Managers monitor culture. Kamps says, "When you are in a family, you don't want to mess up. You don't want parents or siblings to be disappointed or hurt so we work hard to set a good example every day with every interaction. We have a real commitment to each other and respect others' opinions." Regardless of how much an employee works or how long they have been at DPAI, Kamps sees his time with them as a stair step to greater growth and feels responsible to teach them how to be accountable to customers and the culture.

DPAI and Kamps in particular also walk the talk regarding their values. They give shoes to kids who very much want to run track and field at their school but can't afford the shoes. Kamps has personally driven shoes several hours away so that the coach will have them for a meet.

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DPAI also shows its community spirit by donating 5% of high school team equipment purchases back to the school. Again, behaving excellent customer service vs. just talking it. "The ultimate compliment is when former employees continue to come back to our stores for their running shoes and other products or just to visit", Kamps reports. "We have an inviting and welcoming atmosphere that assures individual, knowledgeable service and a personal relationship with customers that brings former employees as well as potential and on-going customers to our doors", says Kamps.

Ultimately, Dick Pond Athletics, Inc. wants to create a "memorable experience based on becoming one with the customer's needs. We are here to change lives through running", says Kamps. "Relationship building is what makes us special. We want our customers to be better people for having shopped here in addition to better runners. We are America's Oldest Running Specialty Store. That is a responsibility we don't take

lightly. We are lucky to work in a field and for employers that we like. Why would I shop or work anywhere else?"

Kamps closes with a wonderful reminder to us all when it comes to life in general and certainly to customer service: "I met a blind man many years ago who said to me, 'I did not work in a prestigious position so I brought prestige to that position'." Mr. Rosen folded towels and gave them out to health club members as they arrived at the club. Soon, he knew everyone by their voices. Then he knew their names and their children's names. It went on and on until meeting him was the highlight of everyone's club experience. Club membership soared because of Mr. Rosen, "The Towel Man".

On behalf of Mr. Rosen and Mr. Kamps--bring prestige to all that you do! ■

Glen Kamps is the DPAI Store Manager in St. Charles, IL.
Nivi Nagiel is an NCSA Editor.



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Taking it Step-By-Step to Achieve Excellence



MANDATORY STEPS TO EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

Greet the Customers warmly within one minute of their entering of the store.

If you are busy with customers, assure the customer you will be with them shortly.
You don't get a second chance to make a first impression.

Interview the customer.

- Do your very best to find out why they are there. Remember the issues and address every one of them.
- What is the reason for their arrival?
- How often do they run/walk?
- How far?
- Training for a race?
- Any injuries customer is currently having?
- Did they enjoy previous purchase? What changes would they like to have in their gear?

Evaluate Foot and Gait - Match what you've heard with what you see.

- Measure foot standing
- Look at old shoe wear patterns
- Watch customer walk/run on treadmill and evaluate visually
- Utilize Dartfish analysis system
- Explain observations to customer

Present Shoes - No more than three pairs to start.

- Check shoe fit
- Assist customer while trying on shoes, if appropriate
- Allow time for customer comparisons

Suggest Socks.

- Offering a quality, clean technical trial sock immediately shows expertise and develops trust.

Mention *at least one of the following* - Take the opportunity to enhance the customer relationship.

- Apparel opportunities
- Current sales or promotions
- Upcoming store events
- Store running clubs
- Runners' Rewards Program

Get Contact Information - This is your last chance to keep them as a future customer.

- "Thank you for your business"
- Email address and street address

A clean and appropriately issued Dick Pond Athletics top will be worn with staff name tag.

I have read and understand the above 8 steps to exceptional customer service.
I agree to abide with all of the above with every Dick Pond Athletics' customer.

Name _____ Signature _____

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*Millward Brown Study, 2013.

**Ace Hardware received the highest numerical score among retail stores in the proprietary J.D. Power & Associates 2007–2013 Home Improvement Retail Store StudiesSM, 2013 study based on responses from 4,129 consumers measuring six stores and opinions of consumers who purchased a home improvement product or service within the previous 12 months. Proprietary study results are based on experiences and perceptions of consumers surveyed January–February 2013. Your experiences may vary. Visit jdpower.com.



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Service Reminder

Dealing with Angry Customers

- LISTEN fully to what the customer has to say—only then are you able to provide possible solutions
- Speak in a calming voice—softly and deliberately
- Empathize with the customer—acknowledge their feelings; show that you care
- Focus on the problem not the person—avoid “you” statements
- This is not about you—do not take comments personally
- YOU are the Service Professional—be patient and remain in control of the conversation



...the last word

*Do what you do so well
that they will want to see it again
and bring their friends.*

~ Walt Disney

Customers experience the "results" of all of your employees' collective efforts—not just the "direct contact" employees. To provide that "keep them coming back" customer experience, it takes all employees doing their best—regardless of their role (serving the external customer directly or serving someone who serves the external customer) in the organization. Know your job, make sure all your employees know their jobs and the importance of their role in the organization's success. Support your employees in executing their duties to the very best of their ability. Your customers will recognize your efforts by returning again and again. ■



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