# Who Stole Customer Service?

by Ken West, President of AOB

For the longest time, business people have been paying lip service to "customer service." Books promising the secrets of "knock 'em dead" customer service flood bookstore shelves. Yet the horror stories of bad or nonexistent customer service continue daily in stores, restaurants, hotels, and wherever we try to spend money.

**The fundamental problem is not with the customer service foot soldiers of business, the front line employees.** They are the recipients of a corrupt, nonworkable and unrewarding concept of customer service. To put it bluntly, customer service has been mired in an altruistic swampland for decades.

**The good news is that Ayn Rand's philosophy can provide solid ground to recreate customer service.**

Let me quickly lay out my customer service credentials. For the first fifteen years of my working life I held positions as a front line salesperson, sales supervisor, department manager, and assistant manager for a variety of top notch retailers. I dealt with every conceivable customer service situation. (I even had a guy pull a gun on me because he was upset with the service. I told him to put away the gun... and he did.)

Later, as a customer service training manager, I hired, tested, and trained hundreds of customer service representatives from all walks of life, ages 16 to 75.

There have always been people who are just good at helping customers. They like people, show it, and have a positive attitude. But it doesn't take long for even these exemplary employees to lose their zest for the job when they are faced with the altruistic platitudes that pass for customer service training.

These **platitudes don't motivate**; they kill motivation, especially in salespeople or service reps who do not work on commission. The most blatant example of this is a customer service credo which many of us have seen or used in our own businesses. It's called "A Customer". (I'm not sure of its author.) There are eleven slogans in this credo about who the customer is. Some are certainly true and most people would not find fault with them. But the tone of the credo is one sided. Let me give you a few examples:

"A Customer is doing us a favor when he calls -- we are not doing him a favor by servicing him."

"A Customer is a person who brings us his wants -- it is our job to fill those wants..."

"A Customer is not dependent on us -- we are dependent on him."

**As business owners or executives, we have a good selfish reason to keep our customers satisfied.** But the defect in these and other customer service slogans of its kind is that they have no power to motivate front line employees. The tone and gist of the above credo says to the salesperson, receptionist, customer service representative, and all who serve customers directly, **"You are nothing; the customer is everything." That is pure altruism, the belief that one's primary obligation is to others, not oneself.** This fundamental philosophical belief still exerts its destructive influence today. **Altruism stole the concept of customer service from its rightful owner... the principle of the trader.**

Motivation (and training) is extremely critical to customer service. Those who sell our products and provide the service must see **what's in it for them as well as what's in it for the customer**. **They need to see themselves as *traders* and not selfless servants.** (Their jobs are ultimately dependent on the success of the business in finding and retaining customers. But this long range scenario doesn't motivate employees who may be gone long before the disastrous effects of bad service are felt.)

Smart businesses know this and they empower their front line people to be proactive problem solvers for the customer.. and they are rewarded correspondingly. They train their employees to find the personal motivation to excel at their job. **These employees view the customer, not as a superior being, but rather as an equal partner in trade.**

What did Ayn Rand have to say specifically about "service?":

"The concept of "service" has been turned into a collectivist "package-deal" by means of a crude equivocation and a cruder evasion. In the language of economics, the word "service" means *work* offered for trade on a free market, to be paid for by those who choose to by it. ...and all values -- whether goods or services -- are *traded*, not given away. ... to an altruist, "service" means unrewarded, self-sacrificial, unilateral *giving*, while receiving nothing in return." (Ayn Rand Lexicon, p. 457)



Ayn Rand's most eloquent statement on this issue is the "trader principle" fully outlined in Atlas Shrugged.

**Customer service providers must be treated with the same respect that is granted to the customer.** It's true that they are hired to "serve the customer," but to have them perform at peak efficiency day after day (often at low wages) requires that they find the personal selfish motivation to do so. They need to know "what's in it for them" besides their hourly wage.

An individual service provider's reward may not be financial. A few years ago I developed a short but comprehensive course for retail sales clerks to help them discover not only how to serve the customer, but (and this is the key) why it is in their own self-interest to provide superior customer service. **In essence, they need to discover the personal motivation to excel.**

There is a subtle but powerful shift in focus when a company's customer service policy and training is based on the trader principle. Let me give an example directly from AOB member Harris Kenner. Mr. Kenner's company, M.W. Dunton, of West Warwick, Rhode Island, manufactures and sells products for the plumbing industry. Let me quote from Mr. Kenner's President's message to his customers in his *Nokorode* Soldering Product Catalog 6C-1:

"Ayn Rand (champion of individual rights and author of Capitalism, The Unknown Ideal) once wrote about the noble profession of "the trader" and his contribution to civilization. In opposition to the ideals of her time, she discussed how both parties always benefited from any exchange, any trade, as long as there was no force, fraud, or government interference involved."

"I am proud to recognize and uphold this principle of justice by seeing that my company does all it can to keep this relationship noble; we are PARTNERS IN TRADE with you, our customer."

"As our customer, you are recognized and treated as our equal partner, and we intend and expect all parties to benefit from each and every transaction."

"As traders, we offer the values we produce in exchange for your judgment of our worth. It is in our self-interest to supply you with high quality products in a timely, efficient and friendly manner. Our goal is to satisfy you such that you choose to maintain a long-term business relationship with us."

"In addition to offering you these values, we take pride in our work and hope to profit from it. After all, a profit is society's way of saying 'well done!'"

**Mr. Kenner's message to his customers is a superb example of integrating a key element of Ayn Rand's philosophy, the trader principle, into one's business policy and communication**. Kenner's product catalog also contains a long quote from Ayn Rand on the difference between a career focus and a job focus. And remember, this is in a catalog highlighting soldering products for the plumbing industry. A truly remarkable example!

My initial motivation for this article was a response I got to a question posed in the AOB member survey last year. I had referred to "an Objectivist perspective on customer service" and the respondent thought that this was a dubious assertion. I disagree.

Objectivism is a comprehensive philosophy for living on this earth and enjoying this life. **It speaks to every human endeavor... including customer service.**

*(Ken West, President of the Association of Objectivist Businessmen, is a writer and speaker.)*

*Coming in our next bimonthly issue...*

## *How to Get it Back...*

**#1**
**Learn exactly what "customer service" is and how to create it.**

**#2**
**Consistently hire, train, supervise, and manage your customer service providers.**

**#3**
**Help your employees to find and develop the internal motivation to serve the customer.**

*(For more information on training programs, booklets and tapes on a rational approach to customer service, contact Ken West at (508) 922-4381 or Fax:(508)922-4810 or E-Mail: CLGAOB@aol.com)*

**AOB Member Offers Fax-on-Demand**

Francesco Moriconi of Prometheus Rising Consultants has instituted an Objectivist fax-on-demand service. AOB now has information on this service. Call (from your fax machine) 1-804-743-2547 to get a list of Objectivist documents currently available.