Customer Service..

How to Get it Back!

by Ken West, President of AOB

(Editor's note: Last month's article, "Who Stole Customer Service," got the greatest response of any article published in AOB News since I became editor in May of 1994. I had numerous requests for more information, which quite frankly caught me by surprise. To those who contacted me and to others who might be interested, I will have more information on potential training programs, booklets, and tapes on a rational approach to customer service in the near future. I am also in the process of revising and updating previous programs. My announcement at the end of my first article was missing the very important qualifying word, "potential," leaving the impression that these products were ready for shipment. I wish they were. Thanks to all who called.)

In the last issue of *AOB News* (July/August) we solved a major crime -- the theft of the concept of customer service. The crook was altruism -- the belief that ones' primary obligation is to others, not ones' self. Translated into an implicit customer service credo it becomes: "You, the front line service providers, are nothing, the customer is everything." Why should it surprise anyone that all the platitudes about quality service don't motivate employees whose job it is to serve the customer?

(Quoting from my article, "Who Stole 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 as selfless servants."**

The answer to poor customer service is to anchor it to realty and reason... and consequently Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism. Rand articulated the primary key of all human relationships -- **the trader principle** -- that can also save customer service from the altruistic swamp that it's been mired in for so long.

A trader, according to Rand, "does not treat men as masters or slaves, but as independent equals. He deals with men by means of a free, voluntary, unforced, uncoerced exchange -- an exchange which benefits both parties by their own independent judgement." ("The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness,* p.31).

Our task now is to apply the trader principle and other Objectivist principles, to the issue of customer service. As I stated in *AOB News* (July/August), to get back customer service requires a three-pronged effort: 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 find and develop the internal motivation to serve the customer. The rest of this article will address these steps as we apply Objectivist principles to each.

1) What is Customer Service?

Customer service is the work we do to create and keep a customer. It is comprised of three essential ingredients: **Awareness, product knowledge, and courtesy**. In addition, quality customer service dramatically improves with friendliness, teamwork, timing, and the willingness to "go the extra mile" to help solve customer problems. I will briefly cover the three essentials for this present article.

Awareness: The lack of awareness is the first sign of bad customer service and a business in decline. You can't serve your customers if you're not aware of them and show that awareness. You must also be aware of what they consider to be outstanding service. You've got to know your customer, their problems and needs.

Customer awareness is **an outward focus.** It is an active process, not a passive one. It requires an active, thinking mind.

Product Knowledge: We have products and services that can help solve the customer's problems or make their lives more interesting and productive. It's our job to help the customer discover this. Knowledge of our product's features is the first step. But more importantly, we must know how to translate those features into benefits for the customer. This can only be done by being aware of the customer's problems and desires.

Those who sell to and provide service to customers must be able to ask questions and listen to what the customer says. Only then will they be able to translate the product's features into usable benefits for the customer.

Courtesy: Courtesy is good manners in action. It gives life to the first two ingredients of awareness and product knowledge. Courtesy is treating customers the way you would like to be treated -- as your partner in trade. It is a benevolent sense of life made real.

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

Customer service does not happen by accident. You must establish the causes that will create outstanding service. It begins with hiring the best customer service employees you can find. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking that a customer service provider is a low level employee. They can make or break your business! Ability matters.

The fundamental characteristic you should be looking for in any customer service representative is an active mind. During the interviewing process you are looking specifically for people who can reason, who can ask questions, and seem to have a benevolent sense of life and a positive attitude.

During a time in my career when I interviewed, hired, and trained hundreds of people, I gave potential employees various hypothetical situations (taken directly from real life examples) and asked them how they might approach the solution to such problems or situations. I didn't expect them to have all the answers. Rather, I was looking for how they would approach such problems.

A key factor I was looking for was their ability to ask relevant questions -- an essential quality in all good customer service and sales people.

The next vital factor was their ability to listen. During the interview I role-played as a difficult customer. It was important that the potential employee show that they had the ability to listen and try to handle the situation diplomatically.

Through this process, I was able to predict with a good degree of accuracy, who would become outstanding employees -- given the right training and supervision.

During their initial training, I would further build upon their ability to ask questions, listen, and propose solutions. They would first be given a thorough overview of the business and its products, to gain a basic understanding of how their job related to the rest of the business enterprise. They would also have a safe learning environment in which they could expand their knowledge without a paralyzing fear of making mistakes.

The quickest way to sour good employees is to have inconsistent and irrational training, supervision, and management. The best way to develop good employees is to create a rational work environment where ability matters... and is rewarded.

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

Your job as a trainer, supervisor, or manager is to utilize good customer service principles with your employees. You have a good selfish reason for this -- you want to keep them working at their highest level of ability. **You need to treat them as you treat your customers**: 1) Be aware of them and what they want; 2) Know what your company can do for them, not only in direct benefits but in short and long range skill development; 3) Find out what their goals are. Then show them how the skills they are developing can help them achieve their goals.

For example, show them how their job is actually a laboratory for learning to deal with people, solving problems, communicating effectively, gaining knowledge, coping with stress, managing time, negotiating, and selling. These and other skills developed on the job are highly valued in the world of work and can help to make them a lot of money throughout their lifetime.

In every productive interaction between two or more people, there is a trading of thought and effort to achieve some result. Help your employees to realize that it is in their best interests to excel at their job. Challenge them to demand the best from themselves. **You will benefit. They will benefit. And the customer will benefit.**

If you would like to be notified of upcoming customer service booklets, newsletters, tapes, training programs, and seminars please send us information about yourself and your particular needs. Send to Capitalist Leadership Group, P.O. Box 370, Beverly, MA 01915 or (E-Mail) clgaob@aol.com or (phone) 508-922-4381 or (fax) 508-922-4810.

"The symbol of all relationships among such men, the moral symbol of respect for human beings, is *the trader.* We, who live by values, not by loot, are traders, both in matter and in spirit. A trader is a man who earns what he gets and does not give or take the undeserved."
- Ayn Rand, Atlas Shrugged