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**Focusing on the fundamentals**

Powersports Business
Monday July 21, 2008

A lack of answers or even a simple please or thank you from customer service representatives are sometimes leaving consumers so frustrated they're shifting their business to companies that haven't forgotten common courtesy.

"Studies have said the No. 1 reason people have switched to a competitor is poor customer service," said Scott Hornstein, owner of Hornstein Associates, developer of customer-focused marketing programs.

Some of the personal touch has been lost because companies are expecting consumers to be more independent, such as through Internet searches. Customers, however, don't necessarily want that, says Hornstein, leaving companies struggling to find a balance between traditional and modern customer service tactics.

To be successful, companies should build a customer service process into their business plan, such as greeting customers promptly when they walk into a dealership or conducting a standard follow-up, Hornstein says.

"Companies that have been successful have implemented customer care as a strategic product that is both measured and rewarded," he said. "In business, things that are not measured or rewarded simply do not happen. (Successful companies) put customer satisfaction as a corporate strategic policy."

Room for improvement

A 2008 national survey showed the motorcycle industry has room for improvement in traditional customer service areas, including simple tasks like greeting customers and conducting follow-ups. According to a survey conducted by Pied Piper Management Co., motorcycle dealerships, on average, are not performing as well with standard customer service procedures compared to the auto and RV industries.

The survey revealed the average number of customers who were greeted promptly in a motorcycle dealership was about 73 percent. The auto industry was significantly higher, at an estimated 85 percent.

The task of the salesperson introducing him or herself also occurred less often in the motorcycle industry than in the RV and auto industries. The average amount in motorcycle dealerships was about 62 percent while the RV industry was at 85 percent and the auto industry ranked even higher at an estimated 92 percent.

To conduct a standard follow-up with a customer, a dealership must have customer contact information. Unfortunately for the motorcycle industry, obtaining contact information only occurred an average of 36 percent of the time. That was far below the RV industry, 68 percent, and the auto industry, 83 percent.

The fundamentals

The bottom line, Hornstein says, is to create happy customers because they stay longer and buy more.

"It's a viral effect," he said. "Bad news used to travel fast, but today it travels at the speed of light."

How does a dealership prevent negative words from spreading?

Find out what the customers want. Everyone in the company, especially management, should spend a day or week interacting with the customers either by phone or answering general questions via e-mail, Hornstein says. That way every single employee gets a better feel for the company's customers and what they're looking for.

"Change does not happen from the bottom up," he said. "It has to be from the top down."

More often than not, there's a need for adjustments in companies' customer service strategies since technology is constantly changing the way people do business. It has allowed consumers to become more informed, and in turn, companies are holding them to higher standards in obtaining information themselves. David VanAmburg, managing director of ACSI, analysts who rank businesses on customer service, says there has been a lot of service unloaded onto the customer.

"That can work only if first, consumers are competent and second, they want to do it," he said.

Consumers' schedules have become busier, and although information is more accessible, sometimes they don't want to search for the answers. Hornstein says some customer representatives have referred him to the company Web site for answers.

"I did not contact these people for them to tell me to go do it myself," he said. "I understand that we have to educate customers, but we've got to cater to what people want. If I called you on the phone, that usually means I have exhausted all other avenues, or I'm just not friendly with them."

Consumers' dissatisfaction with customer service representatives is what sparked Hornstein to start an annual e-mail survey in 2000. He noticed Web sites springing up that voiced people's frustrations of not receiving answers from some companies' customer service representatives.

"How could people just stiff me? I'm a customer," Hornstein said and added that he started his survey to prove a point. "The question isn't particularly hard. Since 2002, all the results (of companies responding with an answer to a one question e-mail) have consistently gone down. Half the companies don't get back to me at all. We have to start to recognize the people who pay the bills are each individual customer."

Quality customer service is as simple as staying on the phone with each customer until his or her question is answered. Hornstein notes some companies have put a time limit on the amount that can be spent with each customer.

"It's a good cost management tool, but it's not a long-term solution," he said. "In the short term, that's OK if I only care about my balance sheet today, but if you're in it for the long haul, you need to handle what's on the phone no matter what it takes."

The decreasing amount of interaction with customer representatives also has come with decreased politeness, which Hornstein says must not be forgotten to achieve quality customer service.

"We've completely lost the simple courtesy of a please or thank you," he said. "If they don't deserve the investment, they at least deserve common courtesy. And that's been lost. Respect is the soft side of implementing this strategic product. I think people who latch on to this stuff in this very flat world, they're going to distinguish themselves."

Larry Freed, president and CEO of ForeSee Results, an online customer satisfaction measurement and management company, agrees that people will respond more positively to quality customer service due to today's world of long lines and terrible service in call centers.

"There a lot of people out there," he said, "who are willing to pay more to be treated well, online and offline."