

Developing a Culture of Customer Service

As equipment distribution continues to evolve, what will differentiate you from your competition?

WRITTEN BY **MARY SEDOR**

At 30,000 feet, every dealership is the same – they sell, service and rent some type of construction equipment. But on closer inspection, the dealers who provide exemplary service are outperforming the competition and will be the ones to survive whatever the future holds for the industry.

“Today’s customer has become more demanding than ever,” says Christine Corelli, of Christine Corelli & Associates. “The customer is the person who decides to what extent your parts and service departments will succeed or fail.

To stay ahead of the competition, you must have top-notch customer service. Achieving legendary customer service will probably require a shift in your dealership’s culture.

“Providing exceptional service is not optional – it’s critical to your success,” says Corelli. “It’s the key to remaining profitable in an increasingly service-oriented and competitive business climate.”

Relationship Builders

You know the story: The phone rings in your parts department. An employee answers the phone, finds the answer to the customer’s question and hangs up.

What’s wrong with that?

Everything, says Barry Himmel, vice president of Signature Worldwide Business and Training Solutions.

“So much of the interaction dealers have is over the phone,” he says. “People just don’t have time to stop in anymore. You only have three or four minutes in a phone conversation to make a great impression.”

To try to develop a relationship with the customer your employee should at least get the customer’s name, company and phone number.

“Equipment dealers operate in a very competitive landscape,” says Himmel. “There are a lot of options for customers in terms of servicing the equipment. The person that gives the

greatest amount of value wins.”

Phone interactions should always be professional, focused and customer-driven.

“Dealers often assume they know everyone who’s calling,” says Himmel. “If they just provide an answer to an inquiry, they can’t call that person back or pass along their name.”

When interacting with customers, dealers should:

- Have a good greeting
- Think about how to establish a relationship in a minimal amount of time
- Be engaged in the conversation

“Dealers should think of customer service in terms of ROI,” says Himmel. “If you are able to close one additional order per day, that can mean the world for your business.”

Whether the interaction is face to face or over the phone, your employees must know that what they say and do has an effect on the customer and the reputation of your business.

“Everyone must understand the



The bottom line: customer service is about building a culture.



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importance of providing exceptional service and consistently act as ambassadors promoting good will," says Corelli.

Great Culture, Great Service

The bottom line is that customer service is about building a culture in your organization.

"Dealers are always going to be in the customer service business," says Himmel. "Their ability to deliver a high level of customer service is a skill that will consistently add value."

Think about it – when you call your bank or another service provider, you remember whether that interaction was pleasant or painful. Maybe you drive out of your way to go to a certain dry cleaners because they know your name. Or go to a certain sandwich shop because you're a regular and they know what you're going to order when you walk in the door.

"When you deliver great customer service and have a great product, people aren't as price sensitive," says Himmel. "That's why Disney can get

away with charging \$100 per person per day and why Starbucks can charge so much for their coffee – it's because of the experience."

Starbucks has done an excellent job of cultivating an experience when purchasing coffee.

"Employees at Starbucks – called partners – are given extensive training in product knowledge, guiding principles for success, personal empowerment, and the importance of creating warm customer experiences," says Joseph A. Michelli, author of *The Starbucks Experience*.

Starbucks spends more on training than advertising. That training is designed to retain employees, maintain connections with customers and attract new customers.

"Starbucks management recognizes that people flock to the company's stores for the total Starbucks experience," says Michelli. "In essence, people come into a comfortable setting where they are valued on a personal level, and where a meaningful connection is made. Everything the company does is intended to give the customer a positive, perhaps uplifting, experience."

Michelli spent 18 months observing Starbucks and boiled down the company's success into five key principles:

1. Make it your own
2. Everything matters
3. Surprise and delight
4. Embrace resistance
5. Leave your mark

"Starting with a vision of what your business would be if it were truly operating at its best, you and your team can expose the roadblocks that keep it from consistently performing at an optimal level," says Michelli.

"These factors may surface in the customer satisfaction, product quality,

training or social involvement aspects of your organization."

Make It Your Own

Starbucks works to balance a uniform customer experience while allowing employees to express their individuality.

"Companies benefit when all employees understand business priorities and look for ways to bring their individual creativity and passion to meet those objectives," says Michelli.

The *Green Apron Book* instructs employees on how to inspire customers: be welcoming, genuine, considerate, knowledgeable and involved.

- By being welcoming, Starbucks forges a bond that invites customers back to visit.
- To be genuine means to connect, discover and respond. Listening is just one part of creating a connection with customers. Businesses also need to discover each customer's needs and unique situation and then find ways to meet those needs.
- Being considerate is less about being polite and more about being mindful of the needs of others while creating win/win situations.
- Be knowledgeable – love what you do and share that knowledge with others.
- Be involved – in your store or office, in the company or the community.

A great cup of coffee is only part of the Starbucks equation. Starbucks pays diligent attention to everything that goes into the customer's visit. Just like everything in your parts and service department is important – from the fixtures to the merchandise displays, it's all important for creating a positive experience for your customers, says Michelli.

When you surprise and delight your customers, your customers are engaged and will definitely return, says Michelli.

ASC made a fundamental shift in the way they view parts and service.

- The most effective events are natural and spontaneous, not artificial or forced. Look first for a need, then step in and fill it.
- Surprise can be as simple as offering a little guidance and then getting out of the way as people search for what brings them joy.
- When breakdowns occur, businesses can still delight customers by making things right.

Changing a Dealership's Culture

A culture shift might sound impossible, but that's just what happened at ASC Construction Equipment in Charlotte, N.C. Today their main goal is to be the best in customer service and they're reaching it by working to shift their culture.

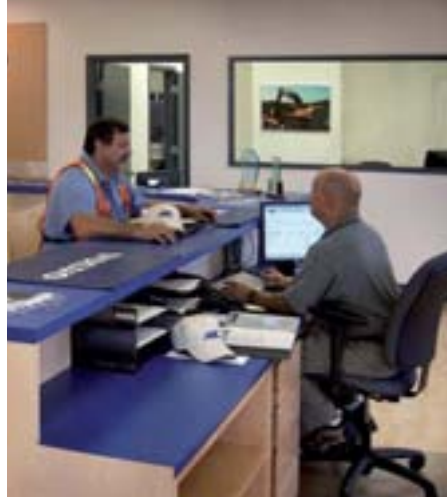
"Providing the customer with the right attitude is important," says Bruce Mooneyham, vice president of customer support. "It's not just a function of more parts inventory or more technicians, it's first about the relationship your customer feels they have with your employees and your dealership."

When ASC made a fundamental shift in the way it viewed parts and service functions, they renamed the department "Customer Service." And PSSRs are now called CSR's, customer support representatives.

"We feel this is more reflective of our commitment to the customer's best interest," says Mooneyham.

"Everyone has referred to the parts and service functions as product support, but we as a dealer support the customer and all of the equipment they own and operate."

Last year, all managers were required to read *Customer Service is More Than a Department, It's an Attitude* by Tom Reilly. After each manager read the book, they shared it with their staffs and discussed it.



ASC made key changes in the service department - including changing its name — all to enhance customer service.

"All of our parts counter personnel and CSR's now share the same attitude and understanding about customer service," says Mooneyham.

ASC also incorporated the book as mandatory reading in their in-house technician training.

"Our technicians are our best ambassadors – or they can very easily become our customer's worst experiences," says Mooneyham. "If you're going to put customer service back into the service department, it takes more than a trained technician – it takes one with the right attitude."

The customer service attitude also extends to lube techs.

"Our Lube Techs now work with our CSR's when a unit requires additional attention," says Mooneyham. "At their request, our CSR's perform a "Gold Star Inspection" and give the customer an estimate prior to a unit needing repair. This proactive approach allows the customer to consider the cost of repair before it actually occurs and plan the downtime." Gold Star Inspections are also provided for all equipment that enters the shop.

ASC has changed CSR's from parts order takers and delivery service to the primary liaison between the customer and all departments.

"The underlying intent was to cultivate and develop an ongoing relationship with the customer and provide them with someone that could address their questions or concerns," says Mooneyham.

CSR's now accompany all new machine deliveries and explain agreements and warranty coverage. They provide contact information and offer themselves as liaisons.

"Our ultimate goal of being the best in customer support is supported by financial commitments in facilities, parts inventories, service trucks, tooling & equipment, just like every other dealer in the business," says Mooneyham. "However, it's our employees and their customer service attitude that we think really makes the difference."

Expert Advice

So what can you do to implement a culture change and improve your customer service?

- Don't assume your employees instinctively know how to do it, says Himmel. You must provide training. Observe what they're doing now so you can gauge improvement.
- Be consistent: That's key when trying to build a new culture, says Himmel. Seek ways to improve processes and exceed customer expectations.
- Put yourself in your customer's shoes and treat them as VIPs, says Corelli. Establish principles on how your dealership will treat customers and make sure everyone adheres to them.

It won't happen overnight; culture change takes time. But the results are well worth it.