

World-class customer service a critical concern

By MARK A. CHINN
 MBJ Contributing Columnist

No business can survive without a fixation on service. Businesses should refocus their attention on service.

No matter how good your product or service, the satisfaction of the customer will be significantly diminished if the delivery of the service is poor.

Focus on client satisfaction

Businesses focus their attention on how to effectively create their product and how to make a profit. For example, a lawyer might focus his full attention on the legal aspects of a case. He will work hard to evaluate the case, obtain the research, investigate and present the case for court. He may present the best case possible. But, if his client does not feel good about the relationship, all of the excellent legal work goes down the drain. The client will later say, "Well, I guess he did a good job for me, but I wouldn't go back to him because he was mean to me."



Chinn

When you discuss the delivery of your product, whether it be a legal product or accounting product, or any other product, learn to ask yourself and the staff, "Is the client (customer) happy?"

For example, my associate is reporting to me on the results of a temporary hearing and saying how the result achieved was within the range of desired results. After examining the results and our firm's actions, I might ask the question, "Is the client happy?" This is an important question, because both attorneys and reasonable clients know that a perfect result is rarely, if ever, possible so client satisfaction with the result is the final arbiter of a satisfactory result for the client. If the answer is that the client is not happy, then it is appropriate to immediately go into action to address the client's concerns and educate the client about the reasonable results which could have been achieved. If the client remains unhappy, then that may be a signal that the relationship should be terminated.

It is imperative in customer service to be constantly asking, "Is the client happy?" and immediately responding if the client is not happy.

The receptionist
 The heartbeat of customer service is the receptionist. Service starts and usually ends with the receptionist. Therefore, great care should be taken in hiring and training a receptionist. Your receptionist should appear, dress, sound, act and talk in a manner which is completely consistent

with the image of your business. The same is probably true for all employees, but it is critical with the receptionist.

Coach your receptionist to look up and immediately smile and acknowledge anyone who enters the reception area. This is critical to ensuring a feeling of welcome. Think about it, if someone came to your home, you would not open the door and not look at them while you talked to someone

else on the phone. Instead, you would tell the person on the phone to hold on, and then you would open the door, smile, say, "hello" and say something like, "I'm on the phone, just give me a minute to take care of this." That is exactly how the receptionist should handle it.



put into the waiting area because this is the client's first impression of the office itself. Design the reception area in a manner which is consistent with the mission of your firm and the clients you serve.

The reception area should always be neat. There should be no clutter, no dirty

Reception room

Much thought and effort should be

Please see SERVICE, next page.

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40

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Please mail your nominations to: *Fast 40*, KPMG LLP, Suite 1100, One Jackson Place, 188 East Capitol Street, Jackson, MS 39201
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Criteria for Nomination
 The Fast 40 Program, co-sponsored by the *Mississippi Business Journal*, KPMG LLP, and Brunini, Grantham, Grower & Hewes, PLLC, honors the state's most dynamic, privately-owned businesses and their contributions to the growth and success of the entire community. Like the INC 500 list of the nation's fastest-growing companies, the Fast 40 list represents the backbone of Mississippi business and industry.

If your company, or a company you are familiar with, qualifies by meeting the following criteria, please complete the nomination form above and mail to KPMG LLP.

Qualifying companies will be ranked based on revenue growth over a three-year period. All revenue figures are subject to verification and will be held in the strictest confidence by KPMG LLP, an international accounting and tax firm, and Brunini, Grantham, Grower & Hewes, PLLC, Attorneys at Law.

Eligible companies must:

1. Be independent and privately held.
2. Have revenue of at least \$1 million in 2004 and have three complete years of operations.
3. Have its home office and principal place of business in Mississippi.

Awards Presentation
 Chief Executive Officers of the Fast 40 will be honored at an awards luncheon on October 20, 2005.

Deadlines for Nominations
 Nominations must be received no later than June 17, 2005.

Service

Continued from previous page.

cups or glasses, no papers or files lying about. Magazines should be maintained at all times in neat stacks. Here are some tips for things you can do to create a great reception area:

- Use fine furniture
- Artwork
- Fountains
- Aquariums
- Fresh Flowers
- Candles
- Potpourri
- Statues
- Historical or family photographs
- Mementoes
- Music

Any reception area should have a selection of magazines. The selection should be designed to interest the customers. The selection should be kept current.

Greeting the customer

Be prompt. Excellent service requires that customers not wait. Make it a rule for yourself and everyone in your office that customers will not wait. If a customer arrives and you are in the middle of crafting some brilliant language in

a letter or brief, STOP, and work on it later. Resist the urge to finish your thought. If you are on a telephone call, tell the person you are talking to that you have to get off the phone because you have an appointment.

If it is inevitable that your customer has to wait for you, walk to the reception area and explain to the client that you got caught in something and need just a minute before you can begin the appointment. If you cannot do this, have a staff member do it.

Meeting the customer

There is no one, right way to greet a customer. Some believe the customer should be escorted to the professionals office or meeting room. This is probably okay. But I prefer to walk to the reception area myself to greet the customer. This conveys to the customer that they are important and that I want to go out of my way to welcome them and take care of them. One thing that should never happen is to simply direct or allow the customer to find a location. I recently stayed at a fine hotel. I was walking around and must have appeared lost.

A supervisor of room cleaning saw me, stopped what she was doing and asked if I needed assistance. I said I was going to the ABA Family Law Section reception, but could not find it. She, "Okay, follow me." I said, "Just tell me where it is." She

smiled and said, "I would be happy to show you the way." And then she showed me the way. As you can see, this level of service was unforgettable for me.

When greeting customers, look directly into their eyes and smile and say, "Hello, I am (your name), I am glad to see you." Then extend your hand and smile again. A smile makes people feel comfortable. However, be careful not to smile too much or to make light of the client's circumstance. After all, someone entering a divorce office has a very serious problem on their hands.

It is very important to look a customer directly in the eyes, but not for too long, as a prolonged stare in the eyes can make a person uncomfortable. But a proper look in someone's eyes conveys many things. It conveys that you are confident in who you are. It conveys that you are comfortable and so should they be comfortable. Finally, it conveys that you care about who the client is. I like to look at someone's eyes long enough to see what color they are.

Treat employees with courtesy

"People treat customers the same way they are treated." If you yell at your employees, it is not likely they are going to turn around and be sweet to your customers. Treat employees exactly the way you would a customer. Treat them as though you fully understand that they are really volunteering to work for you and do not have to there.

Treat everyone with courtesy

Train your staff to treat everyone with courtesy, whether they are friend or foe, customer or client or not. This should take place over the phone, in person and in all other contacts.

Non-customers should be treated with the very same courtesy as customers. It is hard to be courteous to one person and not another.

Create an experience

In the book, "The Experience Economy," the authors state that "experiences" are a fourth economic offering after commodities, goods and services. They trace the beginnings of a dedication

to experience to Walt Disney. They write that "companies stage an experience whenever they engage customers, connecting with them in a personal, memorable way."² Consumers are experiencing "experiences" just about every where they go today. Restaurants, movie theaters, theme parks, beauty salons and spas, and even car dealers are selling an experience. In today's economy, no one is interested in buying a commodity; they buy feelings.³

Businesses and professionals must learn the fundamental rule of customer satisfaction: "The competition is anyone the customer compares you with."⁴ Therefore, you should do what you can to create an experience which is unsurpassed by any other competitor. Creating an "experience" is one way to do that.

How does one create an "experience?" First, take some time and think about the customers you intend to serve. What do they really need? What do they need that they don't even know they need?

Creating an experience in your firm is limited only by your dedication and passion to your clients and your imagination. Look for ways to create your own, unique "experience."


Note: Sources for this column include:

1. Connellan, Tom, Inside the Magic Kingdom, p. 96, (Austin: Bard Press, 1997).
2. Pine, Joseph B., III, and James H. Gilmore, The Experience Economy, p. 3, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).
3. Gerber, Michael, E., The E-Myth Revisited, p. 155, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
4. Connellan, Tom, Inside the Magic Kingdom, p. 23, (Austin: Bard Press, 1997).

Mark A. Chinn operates a six-lawyer firm in Jackson. He is listed in "Best Lawyers in America" and "The Bar Register of Preeminent Lawyers" in the field of family law. He is author of "How to Build and Manage a Family Law Practice" to be published by the American Bar Association.

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