

by Cheryl Crumb

You're no clerk? You're really a manager!

Does the following sound like a reasonable self-description? You've been looking for a job, and finally landed one with a local retail electronics establishment. You don't have a lot of sales experience, but you love technology and you were able to snow your way through the interview. This is your first day, you're suited up, and you've been studying all the TVs, DVDs, MP3s, and sound systems that are in your area. You think that everything would be O.K. except for the "damn customers" who have to enter the equation.

While the job specs were pretty clear on the technical responsibilities of the job, there wasn't much written about dealing with the people element. All you have to rely on is your "common sense" (which ain't common) and your own past experiences as a customer. Unfortunately, as you think back through your millions of customer experiences, none seem memorable or benchmarkable.

So, you figure your job is to answer questions and do paperwork. People know what they want, right? Once they tell you what they want, all you have to do is write up the order and remember how to use the cash

register system. When you're not busy you figure you can mentally zone or talk to the guy who's manning the computer section. Anything to kill time. What do they want for \$7 an hour?

Let's consider that there might be a different way to look at you. To customers, you are the company. Customers don't know your job title, and most wouldn't care if you told them. When a customer enters the store, department or company, it means that they need something....goods, services, information, ideas.... They see you. Their eyes light. Their brain thinks, "thank goodness, here's someone who can help me". They don't ask to see the company organizational chart or ask you about your salary or stock portfolio.

While customers may tell you what they do want, there's a lot more they also need which they don't articulate. They expect you to:

- Be easy to do business with
- Listen to them
- Convey with your words, voice and mannerisms that they're special
- Respond with speed and a "can do" attitude
- Be flexible and open
- Meet all the promises you make
- Be sensitive to their needs
- Willing to help
- Be easily accessible
- Be knowledgeable in your area of expertise
- Be friendly
- Be dependable
- Ensure clear communication on what you can and cannot do
- Be honest when things go wrong
- Use "customer-speak", not jargon or slang

In other words, customers want you to assume three roles while you're serving them. They want you to be an ally, a consultant and a communication

customer. My response to him was that he was a manager... regardless of whether his wages or business card reflected it. His job was really to manage each customer's buying experience, to manage customer's expectations, to manage the commitments he made to customers, to manage actions rather than excuses, to manage his mood if feelings were tending toward resentment or apathy, to manage his time, and to manage the promises that others made to him.

He retaliated by saying that he had no authority... after all, he was "just" a clerk. I responded that formal authority isn't all it's cracked up to be, that it doesn't guarantee success. Senior people I've spoken to always say that there's never enough authority to do what they want to do. Personal accountability, which no one can give you, which only you can assume by conscious choice, is much more powerful. So, it's ownership vs. authority every time. I further lectured that it takes zero organizational authority to smile genuinely at a customer, to ask questions to learn about the customer's unique situation, to promise what you personally will do, to commit to follow up with the customer and provide status updates, to take control of your mood and give yourself a periodic shake, to offer information and alternatives, and to make requests of the formal management team, the manufacturers or colleague "clerks" like yourself.

That's what managing the customer experience looks like.

Oprah Winfrey's emotional support guru, Maya Angelou, offers a very powerful observation: "I have learned that people will forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Remember, no one person or function can totally satisfy a customer. It takes the full team, but any one person or any one function can totally

dissatisfy a customer. It may take months to find a new customer but only seconds to lose one. So, next time you think, you have no power....consider that you could single-handedly lose your organization's premiere customer. Now, that's power!

Look in the mirror again. Who do you see now?



centre. None of these likely shows up on your job description, but it's more critical than a high IQ.

When my son found a part-time job, he announced it to me with the words, "Hey ma, I'm just a clerk". With those six words he diminished his value to himself and the