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Reprint

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"Debunking the Myth of 'Over Servicing' Customers"

DITY Weekly Reader

The workable, practical guide to Do IT Yourself

The only way you can exceed customer expectations is by doing what you agreed to do, and to treat customers with dignity and respect as you do so!

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By Hank Marquis

We have all heard about service. You have probably had your own management telling you the need to "go above and beyond the call of duty" to give "110%" and "over deliver" in order to "exceed customer expectations" and establish "customer delight."

That sure sounds good, and I bet you want some of it too! But what does this actually mean? How does one actually measure it? If you can't measure it I am certain you cannot get it.

100% of a day is 24 hours, so if I am going to give 110% where does the extra 2.4 hours come from? And while were on the topic, why should anyone ever "over deliver" on anything?

The last time I bought a car I was very happy with it. The salesperson didn't over deliver – I didn't get a free upgrade to the next model, free leather interior, unlimited gas for life, or anything beyond what I purchased. Nor did I expect it. They did everything they agreed to do for me, and delivered exactly what they said they would deliver, and they did so with courtesy and respect. I got what I paid for and I was happy, as was my car dealer, win-win.

Contrary to what you might expect the result of "over servicing the customer" is usually an IT organization in chaos – one lacking in quality, un-aligned with business, inefficient, and costing too much.

The IT Infrastructure Library® (ITIL®) does offer hope here however. Based on my experience with IT organizations experiencing issues providing service to customers, this article debunks the myth of over servicing the customer, describes what customers really want, explains why it is wrong to try to give "110%", and shows how to really "exceed customer expectations."

Over Servicing is Bad Business

Over servicing customers is bad for business. Think about it. You sell two products, called service "A" and service "B." "A" has sub-second response time, 99.999% availability, and 1 hour resolution time. "B" has 5 to 10 second response time, 98.5% availability, and 24 hour resolution time.

If you deliver "A" quality for "B" prices you will soon go out of business because it costs a lot more to deliver service "A" than "B." Yet this is just how IT operates most of the time! Over-servicing the customer is often a code phrase that really means the organization is unable to deliver required services as defined, so they treat every single incident or problem as a top priority.

Let me explain by way of a true story from a client of mine (the names and details have been changed to protect the guilty!)

> The service desk got lots of calls, they implemented some tracking software to log calls and make sure nothing fell through the cracks. The other reason for the software (which workers were not aware of) was for management to understand their organizational staffing needs. About the same time an "exceed customer expectations" program also went into

> affect.
>
> Agents used the software, but it took time to complete a record for every call, and the phone was always ringing. So, in order to “exceed customer expectations” and “over deliver” agents stopped opening tickets for every call, losing valuable knowledge and management information.
>
> Agents went from call to call without using the system because they felt this was the way to “customer delight.” In effect they had totally stopped worrying about the type or level of service they delivered in order to give “110%” and "exceed customer expectations."
>
> Toward the end of the year the manager wanted to hire more staff because the agents were all so busy working hard. (*Of course, the reason they were working so hard was due to loss of organizational knowledge, lack of process control, and failure to follow service level agreements.*) But senior management makes decisions on data, not instinct, and the ticket logs did not justify more workers, in fact the data showed IT was not doing much at all. Instead of a staff increase, they got a staff reduction. Now they had to work even harder. This is when worker job satisfaction and retention really began to tumble, which created turmoil and reduced quality as well.
>
> This is about when corporate sales and marketing got involved because business trend analysis had started to show that they were selling much less of their premium flagship “A” service. Sales and profits were down and had raised the attention of senior leaders. Of course, it turned out that IT was responsible for these “sales prevention” activities. All of these bad things happened in the pursuit of customer satisfaction and while trying to “do the right thing.”

So, in their pursuit of “going above and beyond the call of duty”, well-meaning and diligent workers got exactly what they did not want – so much for the myth of over servicing the customer. And hopefully now you can see the importance of doing what you said you were going to do – nothing more and nothing less.

So just why does the average IT department almost always have “over deliver” and “over servicing” as a goal? The answer is because they don’t have a clear vision of what they ought to be doing, and thus are not able to communicate to the customer what they should be getting. This is compounded by a lack of financial understanding of the costs involved with sustaining their services.

In other words, they have no Service Level Management or Financial Management. Together, these issues result in the need for IT staff to apply maximum force to every activity.

In such a situation, the solution that seems best is to simply do the best you can all the time, and that means offering more than the customer wants. But there are at least three reasons why this obvious and simple solution is just plain wrong:

1. **You undermine yourself.** If you sell two products “A” and “B” as mentioned before, and you always offer “A” quality regardless of what the customer purchased, you wont sell a lot of “A” after a while. Customers are very smart. They will learn that you give them “A” service for

"B" price, so why should they pay you for "A" – soon, "A" stops selling.

2. **You can't afford it.** You are not budgeted or staffed to deliver "A" to all customers, but soon you have to because you have established an expectation, and due to what psychologists call neural adaptation, customers now think they are entitled to "A" service regardless of what they purchased (moral: no good deed goes unpunished!)

3. **It's unfair to IT staff.** Essentially the "110%" mentality requires every worker to operate and full capacity all the time. This is sort of like running a car at the red line every time you drive, we all know this car won't last. Its the same for staff as well, and its not uncommon to see high turnover in these types of organizations.

What Customers Really Want

So what do customers want then? First off, the do not want you to over deliver. They simply want what they need -- which is what they "purchased" and what you "sold them." Finally, they want to be treated with respect and dignity.

No reasonable person expects or demands more than that. But since so few organizations actually do what they say they are going to do, expectations of customers are seldom met. This results in customer expectations which are set low. Thus, the average customer expects to be disappointed, and this is the case for most IT organizations. Today, meeting expectations is exceeding expectations. It is professional, manageable, and the right thing to do from a business perspective.

So how do you meet and exceed customer expectations of IT without exceeding your budget? To "exceed customer expectations" what you really need to do is what you said you were going to do, nothing more, and nothing less. When was the last time you sat down to eat a meal at a restaurant and the food and the service was excellent (as you expected). Were you "over serviced" or were your expectations simply met?

In a culture where mediocrity reigns supreme and most decisions are on cost instead of quality, the surest way to exceed customer expectations is to perform as advertised. In other words, all customers want is for you to do what you said you were going to do, and to do so in a professional manner. If you do this, you will be exceeding their expectations. This requires establishing levels of service, methods for controlling the costs of service, and providing the service with professionalism and as agreed.

- Establish Service Definitions and a Service Catalog (see "IT Service Catalogs in 5 Steps")
- Get going with Service Level Management (see "7 Secrets to Successful Service Level Management")
- Get a grip on costs and services (see "Overcoming the Isolation of IT: Financial Management and the Cost of Service"
- Establish a service culture. Remember what customers really want? 1) They want what they need, which is what you agreed to deliver, and 2) They want to be treated with respect and dignity. Doing what you agreed to do in a professional manner is by definition a service culture.

Summary

By way of analogy, if you are in the business of selling Chevy's and Cadillac's, and you give people a Cadillac when they buy a Chevy, you wont sell many Cadillac's. In fact, you will soon go broke delivering expensive items for less than they cost. When somebody buys a Chevy, then giving them a Chevy is totally acceptable! IT is no different.

Thus it is perfectly acceptable, and I would argue required, to log one call completely before answering the next call at the service desk (if there was not some form of dire life threatening emergency.) If this means hold time increases then so be it. It is also perfectly acceptable to call back a customer in 18 hours if the agreed call back time was within 24 hours, especially if there is another service with a shorter call back window. In other words, doing what you agreed to do is what is appropriate and expected, and critical when you offer grades of service.

What is not ever acceptable is to treat customers poorly, regardless of the level of service they have purchased. This is where many disconnects occur in “customer satisfaction” campaigns. Often, “important” customers get the courteous treatment, and “normal” customers get the curt treatment. Virtually every IT department can benefit from some improved communications skills and a focus on equity of service based on agreed SLAs.

So, the next time you hear about “going the extra mile”, think about what that really means. It does not mean delivering a Cadillac when they bought a Chevy. If they buy a Chevy it means giving them a clean, shiny, ready-to-use Chevy on time, defect free, with smile and without apologizing! Nothing more and nothing less.

The only way you can exceed customer expectations is by doing what you agreed to do, and to treat customers with dignity and respect as you do so!

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Related articles:

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- 7 Secrets to Successful Service Level Management covers the main issues underpinning success with SLM
- Overcoming the Isolation of IT: Financial Management and the Cost of Service describes

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