

OPINIONS

Customer Service: Where has it gone?

Twenty years ago, good customer service was the norm. Today, it's the exception. A recent study conducted by The Customer Respect Group found that more than one-half of pharmaceutical, healthcare, and healthcare wholesale companies don't respond to Website inquiries from customers.

PharmaVOICE asked: in an age where the customer is king, how can the industry improve its customer relations? What are the biggest customer-services challenges? And what strategies work best to meet customer demands?

(Editor's note: Because of the overwhelming response to this question, the September issue of PharmaVOICE will provide more feedback on this topic.)



An empowered consumer

The idea that the customer is king is not new to our era. Customer service has been the primary goal of most businesses since at least the beginning of 20th century. What's different today is that customers have access to a tremendous amount of information that empowers them to make market decisions very quickly. Some of these decisions are rational and some emotional. Either way, the avalanche of information and information streams have eroded the old customer loyalty upon which businesses once relied. For today's businesses, the key is to be heard above all of the information din. The message has to be clear, it has to resonate, and it has to be sustained.

Paul J. Savidge
VP, REGULATORY AFFAIRS
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Reduced personal involvement

In my opinion, the customer has always been king. It is the industry that has changed. Size and technology have reduced the level of personal involvement, resulting in agencies that — perhaps unwittingly — distance themselves from their clients' needs.

The challenge for most agencies in the healthcare arena is to understand that no two companies are alike. Servicing clients with varying needs and experience is a hands-on job; it cannot be delegated to juniors or conducted electronically.

Meeting the challenge requires not just keeping up with your clients, but staying ahead. That requires first-hand knowledge and flexibility. Knowing your customer's business is essential. Anticipating the unexpected — and being able to turn on a dime in

response to changing market conditions or regulatory issues — is the product of good customer service.

Keeping up with the customer is ideally done face-to-face. My advice to marketers is to meet often — in person if possible or via conference call — and to use e-mail and faxes to confirm those meetings, not substitute for them.

As a senior manager — whether on the client or the agency side — you must stay in touch. Don't delegate customer service. For too many companies, client or customer relations are downgraded by being made the responsibility of someone outside the decision-making group. That makes no sense. Customer service should be part of the job description of everyone who works on the agency team, including the account, creative, and support groups.

Bob Karczewski
EXECUTIVE VP AND GENERAL MANAGER
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The art of listening

As an industry, we often tend to presume that we have the answers, frequently before our clients have even defined their issues. My view is that the art of truly listening is dying. While not an academician on the subject of listening, I can state from 21 years of agency experience that listening is a multifaceted act. It begins with a sense of focus on the part of the listener, which primarily involves clearing one's head to ensure that preconceived notions are not dominating one's thoughts. It then moves to observing nonverbal cues, as the truest indication of tonality can be gleaned from body language, pauses between words, sighs, eye movement, etc. It then concludes with rapid processing of the spoken words, most importantly placing them into situational context (i.e., has this issue inadvertently tapped into a previous problem; is this issue

exacerbated by other nonrelated events of the day, etc.).

By employing these highly active listening techniques, a bond of trust and credibility can be established to a degree not possible with the more common approach of attempting to quickly answer questions that have only been half-heard.

As a measure of true customer satisfaction, I can think of no higher compliment than the fact that I am trusted and respected for my candor, empathy, and understanding.

Stu Klein
PRESIDENT
THE QUANTUM GROUP,
A COMMONHEALTH COMPANY

Training for clinical-patient communication

Our experience at the Bayer Institute has shown that the best way to demonstrate concern for customer welfare is to collaborate with pharma-customer organizations to address fundamental problems that they face over the long term, especially by developing collaborative programs with them that can significantly improve the quality of healthcare.

Our institute was founded in 1987 to improve clinician-patient communication. We work with more than 100 healthcare organizations across the United States and in Canada to conduct training programs for clinicians and nonclinician staff that will improve their communication skills with patients and their families.

Each year the institute's faculty conducts about 1,000 interactive workshops and courses through the interdisciplinary faculty that we have been training since 1990.

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