

Soft Skills at Work: There are folks out there providing extraordinary customer service

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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I experienced what I thought was exceptional service at Shopper's market in Pasadena last month. After loading my groceries into the trunk, I started driving out of the parking lot.

As I was about to turn, I noticed Linda Shacklock, the cashier who had helped me, walking toward my car with a bag.

"I didn't want you to leave without your coffee," Linda said.

This was a Saturday morning and Linda could have easily set it aside, waiting for me to discover the coffee was missing. Instead, she thought of me, her customer, who would be very happy to not have to come back to the store.

Gene Roles, the store director, told me this was not unusual for Linda.

"She has been 'Employee of the Month' several times," Gene said. "Linda is always customer friendly. She exemplifies that."

Thoughtful acts, such as the one Linda demonstrated, really are memorable, and are apt to be shared with others. I was happy when just a week later, I experienced extraordinary service again.

I had an appointment with Pete Albert, owner of Pete Albert Photography, in Annapolis to get a picture taken. He took several shots and I selected the one I thought was the best.

The next day the photo appeared in my inbox. While the quality of the photo was superior, my facial expression was not what I wanted. Since I had made the selection and completed the transaction, I wasn't certain it was possible to take the picture again.

Pete's enthusiastic response to my inquiry silenced my doubt.

"It's possible to try again!" he said. "Let me know when you want to reshoot!"

I went to his studio later that week where he spent even more time with me, especially noteworthy in that he had an airplane to catch. In a few days I had the finished product and one I really liked.

Pete had a very satisfied customer in me, but it was not based solely on the quality of the picture. He left me happy with the experience too. I was so impressed that I talked with him about it.

"The customer has to be delighted in every way," Pete said. "You take the ego out of it. Let's go back and get it right."

Pete told me he looks at retail outlets and determines which ones are most accommodating, such as providing free shipping, and to what extent they go to deliver excellent service. According to Pete, the successful stores understand a fundamental principle.

"It's about keeping the client," he said. "People do business with people they trust."

I asked Pete for his advice about how to make interactions memorable for the customer.

"Do extra things for them at no charge," he said.

He talked about one client who needed a video done. While this is not a service Pete provides, he told them if he wasn't booked, they were welcome to use his studio and he would help them. Pete has built that relationship to the extent that his company's website link appears in the footer on the client's site increasing his organic ranking.

I really like how Pete characterized his customer service philosophy.

"Cultivate relationships," he said. "Farm instead of hunt."

I couldn't agree more.

CONNECT! Coalition

Extraordinary customer service is often a topic of conversation at CONNECT! Steering Committee meetings as well.

Susan Gallagher, project manager of the CACHE Institute for Environmental Careers at Anne Arundel Community College, told me of an experience that wasn't directed at her, but left her feeling really good about the business.

"A few weeks ago I had lunch at the Chipotle Mexican Grill in the Village of Waugh Chapel in Gambrills," Sue said. "I was alone, and as I was sitting there eating my excellent salad, I noticed the couple and their small child in the booth in front of me. When they left, a young employee came to clean off their table. He picked up a small brightly colored box - obviously some sort of child-oriented product.

"He quickly glanced toward the door, but the family was already out of sight. He opened the box, apparently to see if it might just be the empty container that they had intended to discard. But no, it was still full of markers. He immediately took off running out the door to catch up with the family.

"This was certainly beyond his job description. And no one (except me) would have noticed if he had just set the markers aside or thrown them away. But I'm sure he made that little girl happy to get her markers back. What began as just a tasty meal ended with an affirmation of my faith in human nature. And I will be reminded every time I pass that shopping center."

From the customer's perspective, these thoughtful acts make all the difference.

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