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## **REAL Customer Service The Neglected Competitive Advantage**

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During the past year's scramble responding to an increasingly zero-sum sales game, a key element of long-term growth, brand strength and sales performance has taken a back seat. Genuine interest and attention to serving customer real needs has given way to a frantic short-term focus on "making the numbers". The long-term cost for this short-term thinking is now proving to be very high.

### **Last Century**

True, no current sales training program is complete without a nod to "relationship selling, value selling or Customer Service".

Unfortunately most of these well intentioned concepts are poorly understood and even more poorly implemented and end up as fashionable packaging for the same outdated "push the numbers" sales approach that evolved a century ago.

### **This Century**

Fast forward to the 21st century where market communication is instant, brand value must be re-earned daily, customer loyalty is an illusion and every product or service is quickly commoditized by hungry competitors. In this volatile sales environment, the principal long-term differentiator is no longer the product, brand...or even the price. Today, the most powerful long-term competitive differentiator is genuine interest and company-wide commitment to actively serving current and evolving customer needs. Clearly demonstrating that unwavering commitment through uncompromising Customer Service that penetrates every level of the organization is now the principal difference between market-leading companies and their lagging competitors.

### **What Is Customer Service?**

Like it or not, Customer Service is now the primary business that every company is in. Customer Service is not simply a department that happens to have that name or fresh-faced exterior packaging for an otherwise unchanged, inward-focused business operation. The governing principal of Customer

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Service is in the name...combining genuine commitment to helping the customer get what they want coupled with a transaction process that is easy to engage, respectful, trustworthy, consistent, thorough, and ideally...enjoyable.

### **Sales Teams Take the Lead**

While the sales team can not make up for Customer Service deficiencies in other parts of an organization, it is essential for the company's most public face, be fully committed to a genuine interest in their customers' success, (here's the tough part) irrespective of the outcome of any individual sale.

For the individual sales person and the sales team as a whole, when Customer Service changes from a tactical tool to close individual sales, to a deeply imbedded philosophy (please excuse lofty concept) that drives how and why the sales person is engaged with the customer, the sales person (team) is released from the role as "engaged adversary" to begin building a relationship as a partner with a mutual interest in solving a mutual problem. The fundamental integrity that comes with the changed role is immediately noticed by most customers.

### **Miracle on 34th Street**

In George Seaton's classic film, Miracle on 34th Street, Macys genuine interest in helping holiday shoppers find what they wanted was harshly contrasted by Gimbels cynical approach of superficially helping without really knowing why. As simple and perhaps corny as this sounds...the long-term results will astound.

### **The Changes**

By removing the underlying quick, one-time sale agenda, the questions the sales person asks are no longer obviously self-serving. Responses to customer questions will no longer be transparently manipulative. The drive to force a specific short-term outcome will no longer twist the exchange of information. A much greater portion of the sales persons' vast knowledge becomes available to help the customer address the customer buying concerns.

### **Results**

Most customers will sense the change immediately, though it may take awhile to convince them the change is real. Typically, customers respond with more openness, greater access to information and an increasing level of trust...A trust that must never be violated. As trust grows, so does the sales persons' contribution to a positive result and the importance of that sales person (not just the product or price) to the customer. While there is no guaranteed outcome to an individual sales situation, increased long-term sales volume and consistency typically follow close behind.

### **Is It Really That Simple?**

Of course not. But counter-intuitive as it may seem, one thing is certain. Putting the interest and service to the customer ahead of the outcome of any individual sale is the essential first step for a sales person, sales team or company to achieve long-term Competitive Advantage in today's volatile marketplace and gain a position ahead of the pack. **SP**

Stratus Partners is business advisory firm helping middle-market growth companies enhance sales effectiveness and strengthen competitive advantage.

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