

# What Is Customer Service?

**W**hen we ask retailers what it is that separates their business from the competition, they almost always make reference to their exemplary customer service. "We put the customer first," "We go the extra mile to make sure the customer is happy," and "Our sales staff is really trained in taking care of customers" are just a few of the phrases that are regularly invoked to illustrate a deep and abiding concern for the purchaser's well-being.

M.I. retailers aren't the only ones who reflexively cite "customer service" as their critical competitive advantage. Wal-Mart claims to "set the standard" in customer service. To back up the assertion, they reference pictures of smiling greeters and a very liberal return policy. Costco, where it's not uncommon to see someone struggling to balance a 200-lb. treadmill on a shopping cart, also is proud of its customer service. A J.D. Power survey says Costco customers are "extremely" satisfied. Even Amazon.com, where talking to a real person is about as easy as getting an audience with the Pope, plays up its customer service in p.r. material. "The customer always comes first at Amazon."

These claims of exceptional customer service call to mind Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, "where all the children are above average." If every retailer offers extraordinary "customer service," what exactly is customer service anyway? Is it a well-stocked store with low prices? Is it speedy delivery? Is it attentive salespeople who fuss over the customer? Is it a convenient location? We suspect that all of the above can be components in the customer service equation. But there's more to it than that.

This question of defining customer service takes on new urgency as m.i. products become available through a growing number of distribution channels. In the "post-Google" world, where prices and purchasing information are just a click away, what kind of service can a local store offer that will actually mean something to the buying public? Louis Armstrong once said that he couldn't define jazz, but he knew it when he heard it, and we feel the same way about customer service. It's easier to identify than define with precision.



A recent experience helps identify one viable approach to customer service. On a Saturday in late November, I watched a guy walk into the local garden equipment store, asking for service on a Sears leaf-blower that wouldn't start. "We don't have access to parts for Sears stuff," came the reply from behind the counter. "You'll have to

take it to Sears and see if they can help." From the sinking expression on the customer's face, it was pretty easy to figure out what he was thinking: "This is the last weekend I have to get the leaves off the yard, getting this thing fixed at Sears will be like a day in Motor Vehicle Department hell, standing in endless lines, filling out forms, and talking to people who don't know anything. Anyway you look at it, my day is shot." The store manager had obviously seen the same look before and wasted no time pointing out a sharp new Toro leaf blower for only \$389, complete with a five-year warranty. Despite the fact that within a five-mile radius there were two Home Depots, a Wal-Mart, and the aforementioned Sears, the guy walked out with the Toro leaf blower and smile on his face.

The parallel with the m.i. business is pretty obvious. For all their heft, buying power, advertising muscle, etc., mass merchants are also not without limitations. (Just remember, anything that's not a cash and carry transaction gets problematic.) We have no doubt that, with a little resourcefulness, m.i. dealers who can respond with an alternative version of customer service will be eminently recognizable by the public at large.

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