

Hey, Can I Get Some Service Here?

by Kevin W. Footer

There have been few experiences as disappointing as writing this column about customer service.

You would have thought it were a premeditated plot: not only did my research turn up case after case of poor customer service, but the reputed experts which I tried to contact for their opinions often ended up confirming my worst fears. Surly secretaries; unreturned phone calls; endless bureaucracy. And here I was trying to make them famous!

Each of us stands on both sides of the line. Part of the time, we provide service to our customers; other times, we are customers ourselves. The relation is constantly overlapping and shifting. When we answer the phone at work, we are serving our clients, but when we go out for lunch or contract computer repair services we are on the client side.

Writing this article was frustrating in the extreme. I even called up the president of a local company (who was held up as a model of customer service excellence by an international management guru) and that man's harried secretary hung up on me before I could explain the purpose of my call. That company president may be devoted to customer service, but his passion hasn't penetrated very far into the organization.

Then I called a renowned international consulting firm. After having left voice mail messages for my contact repeatedly, I finally reached a live voice in her assistant. "She's in a meeting," I was told. "Didn't you leave a message for her before? She'll be responding to your call," she said in a tone which suggested: "She'll respond to your call when she darn well pleases" and "what temerity you have for not waiting patiently by your phone." She never called.

And what happened with the third expert in customer service? A partner at yet another prestigious international consulting firm? His secretary set up a conference call after hours. I stayed waiting at my desk pointlessly: the call never came.

If these are the experts, what can we expect of the rest?



Poor service is, unfortunately, rampant in Argentina. Each of us experiences it over and over every day. We take it for granted and are sincerely surprised when we are actually treated well. Poor service is of course the legacy of years of little or no real competition. With a closed economy, incentives for good service are limited. Good companies which value their clients are not saints – they just want to trounce their competitors. For them, good service is not a luxury: it is a way to keep clients from going elsewhere.

Which means that many companies in Argentina face a tremendous strategic risk: it is enough that a competitor discovers the secret to providing good service and their clients will start hemorrhaging away.

To be fair, there are places where service is excellent. Many restaurants and cafés have long known that clients want more than food and drink. Many small, owner-operated stores are real aces at providing excellent service, but it seems that when the company gets big, the customer often gets left behind.

Why is this? For one, the rigid structure of most companies in Argentina means that the people on the front lines serving clients are rarely empowered to solve problems; and often they do not see the connection between how they do their jobs and keeping clients.

Larry Weiner of the law firm Muñoz de Toro and Muñoz de Toro says his young firm learned early on that in order to carve out a space for itself in Buenos Aires it had to differentiate its service from that of its competitors. Great attention was paid to returning calls promptly, having receptionists address callers by name, and all the little niceties that normally get overlooked.

"This firm has grown *because* of customer service," he says flatly.

How many firms would dare make the same claim? And, even more importantly, how many clients would agree?

The magazine is going off to the printers today. I'm still waiting for the experts to return my calls.

Please send your response to kfooter@amchamar.com.ar

