

You got served

Delivering the ultimate in customer service

Given the ever-growing requirements, expectations and demands among today's logistics shoppers, customer service has become much more than merely scheduling a pickup, expediting a shipment across the country or rerouting the delivery of your customer's commodities on a moment's notice.

Its link to logistics can best be defined by proactive communication — keeping customers constantly apprised of shipment timelines, status updates, service options and transit times. Exercising effective communication practices also means ensuring that you are notifying customers of any potential service failures or delays before they are informed by their own customer or consignee.

“Engaging in a detailed discussion with customers about their cost parameters, delivery requirements and commodity considerations is a critical component in defining customer service,” says Jim Couch, customer service manager for AIT Worldwide Logistics. “Not only does this dialogue demonstrate how much you value their business, but probing them about their needs also drastically minimizes any potential pitfalls in forecasting and designing their transportation plan. What do they need, how do they need it and when? The more you know about your customer and his or her various logistics needs, the more your relationship is respected and valued.”

Smart Business sat down with Couch to discuss how customer service practices can make or break your logistics business.

Describe key concepts related to customer service and the overall logistics organization.

One of the most pivotal concepts involves communication integration within the entire organization. Internal information flow is equally as crucial as external information flow. All departments — operations, claims, sales, finance and marketing — must function as one cohesive unit in order to accurately, efficiently and consistently update all internal operating systems. Customer service levels have an incremental impact on your company's overall revenue, logistics costs and profitability.



Jim Couch
Customer service manager
AIT Worldwide Logistics, Inc.

Regardless of our job descriptions and titles, every single aspect of a transportation and logistics company involves some fundamental element of customer service. The sales pitch within our industry doesn't involve a tangible product; instead, we are selling our service excellence in transporting commodities along the global supply chain. Our goal is ultimately the same: to collectively develop flexible, comprehensive and well-crafted logistical solutions that satisfy the needs and expectations of our customers, vendors and partners.

The mantra I frequently use with my team is, 'If we don't service the customer, someone else will.' In essence, customer service has got to be the No. 1 competitive point of differentiation for your business.

Describe the positive and negative impact a customer service representative has throughout the life cycle of a shipment.

Your team has the entire impact on a customer experience — more often than not, the power to keep customers coming back lies in your employees' hands. In speaking with customers on a daily basis, you are essentially

attaching a familiar voice to your corporate identity and personalizing your company's marketing brand. Therefore, it is absolutely critical to maintain a proactive, polite, friendly and can-do attitude. Engage in a little personal chitchat — ask them about their holidays or weekends. Remove the word 'can't' from your vocabulary — instead, tell the customer the very best you can do for him or her.

Making assumptions frequently leads to making mistakes. For instance, assuming that your partner's shipping facility closes at 5 p.m. when it really closes at 3:30 p.m. — you have just missed out on the delivery date that was originally promised to the customer.

Your treatment and follow-through with customers in damage control or crisis situations is also a determining factor on whether or not their experience is a positive one. If their commodities are delayed at origin or sitting on a warehouse dock somewhere, notify them immediately. Be straightforward and honest. Offer multiple alternative delivery options and give them the decision-making power to determine the next course of action.

How can customer service performance be measured?

I strongly feel that because this is a teachable business, there is not a direct correlation between our industry and education — just because a particular candidate holds a college degree in logistics doesn't mean he or she is the most qualified person for the job.

Train and empower intelligent, hardworking and outgoing self-starters to do the job and to do it well. If you find yourself in a position where you are constantly monitoring their progress, spot-checking their quotes, micromanaging their desks or operating with an 'iron fist,' so to speak, it ultimately becomes a reflection on your job and not theirs.

I have discovered that the most effective way to motivate and encourage employees to excel and find a sense of value in their jobs is by operating under the adage, 'Praise publicly, reprimand privately.' <<

JIM COUCH is the customer service manager for AIT Worldwide Logistics, Inc., headquartered in Itasca, Ill. Spanning numerous nationwide locations and an ever-increasing network of international partnerships, the global transportation and logistics provider delivers tailored solutions for a wide variety of vertical markets and industries. Reach him at jcouch@aitworldwide.com or (800) 669-4AIT.

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