

## **Perception versus Reality: Building Better Customer Service** by Linda Hanson, CMC

While thousands of books have been published on customer service, many studies show that despite all that has been written on the subject, customer service is not improving in North American businesses. Most customers are struggling with the same disappointment: too many companies promising service excellence and not delivering. While many organizations know what they should be doing to provide excellent customer service, there is a gap between perception and reality. Closing the gap requires employee involvement. In that vein, CEOs and managers should consider the following:

**One:** Customer service must be thought of as a company wide issue. Involve employees by seeking their input on your customer service strategy as it is being developed. If you can't do that, once it has been developed, get them talking and thinking about how it applies to their day-to-day work.

**Two:** Base decisions on your customer service strategy. Every time you ask an employee to do something, be sure it is in line with the customer service direction. Ensure tasks support the strategy so people will work towards a common goal.

**Three:** Lead by example. Your work style and the work style of the other executives down the hall, sends a strong signal regarding about your customer service strategy. If employees see you and other executives working in line with the strategy you will get the necessary commitment from them. People grasp what they experience and see.

**Four:** Tie rewards to employee teamwork and customer service. Year-end bonuses should be based on how well employees succeed in implementing the customer service strategy through teamwork.

Organizations that are committed to being service oriented begin by building principles and standards in their strategic plan and evaluating performance and changes based upon it. Re-evaluating the appropriateness of your strategic plan with an eye to customer service and employee teamwork is a good place to start whether you are establishing new policies for delivering customer service or whether you are re-evaluating your current customer service practices. Make your service standards clear, concise, measurable, and realistic by checking to see if they are aligned with your strategic plan. Once established, make sure everyone in your company understands the importance of operating by the standards and monitor them often. Acknowledge those who live by them, and set an expectation that sends a strong message to everyone in your organization that you are serious about providing good customer service.

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