

Take Control of Your Service Outcomes

Your Responses Make All the Difference

By *Kim Hofmann, RD, LD*

So often at work, you are frustrated by the lack of control you have over the situations you find yourself in. People, rules and regulations seem to dictate what you can and cannot do. But there is one occasion in particular over which you have much more control, and that's the customer service transaction.

The Nature of Service

Every service transaction consists of two participants: the customer, who brings his or her need to the encounter, and the service provider, who hopefully is able to satisfy that need. Exchanges occur in real-time, with the results being affected by the attitudes of the two people involved. However, as the service provider, you can greatly influence the outcome.

The components of a customer service transaction can be summarized in the following way:

$$E + R = O$$

$$\text{Event} + \text{Response} = \text{Outcome}^1$$

In other words, how you respond to a customer interaction will affect that transaction's ultimate outcome. If you are angry, frustrated or short-tempered, chances are the results will be bad. If you are helpful, constructive and kind, the outcome will most likely be good.

Jan Carlzon, the former chief executive officer of Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), famously called service events "Moments of Truth," which he defined as "any transaction that creates a negative or positive impression in the mind of a customer."

Anything and everything can be a moment of truth. How long it takes for a student to go through a serving line is a moment of truth. How a cashier treats a student paying for a meal is a moment of truth. How you handle a teacher who openly criticizes your school lunch program is a moment of truth. In other words, how you respond to any event can determine the quality of the transaction.

And it's amazing how quickly customers form impressions of you and your organization. Experts say that in the first seven seconds of a transaction, a customer will judge you on 11 points. They'll decide whether you or your facility are:

- Clean
- Attractive
- Credible
- Knowledgeable
- Responsive
- Friendly
- Helpful
- Understanding
- Courteous
- Confident
- Professional

There's no denying that customers can expect a lot from you. To them, you ARE the organization. They presume you can answer all their questions, solve all their problems, or at least point them in the right direction. And these same customers want to know they're being heard, understood, respected and appreciated by you.

Remember, customers don't know how things get done in your department, nor do they understand your responsibilities. They don't know your job description, and what you can or cannot do for them. And in truth, they don't really care. That's your business, not theirs. All they care about is getting what they came for in as efficient and pleasant a manner as possible.

The Nature of Your Response

When things go badly in a service transaction, some service providers blame the event for the poor results. They play the blame game, saying it's the fault of a rude customer, an unfair rule, or even a piece of equipment. But the outside circumstances aren't what make an interaction work or not: it is you who does. If you change your Response (R) to an Event (E), you will produce a different Outcome (O).

Individual's responses to situations are often based on old habits, or on long-held beliefs. From your previous experience, you know if your reflex reactions are getting you into trouble. If they are, you need to find ways to change them. Here is a helpful way to visualize that process:



Ask yourself the following questions: "Would I choose to do business with me, and be happy with the experience? Would it help if I changed my attitude toward the customer?" If you can't answer "yes" to these questions, then your service approach needs improving.

Great customer service is simple, but it's not easy. It's not a one-time experience. It's an ongoing program. Think of your service approach as a regular fitness program that takes time, repetition, consistency and reinforcement. When you do, everyone wins, especially you.

¹ Jack Canfield, *The Success Principles*