

# **Experience Matters**

empowering the 50+

**Mike is a recently retired partner of a major accounting firm who now has a portfolio of public and private sector roles where his experience can add value.**

## **Customers want service from people who know what it is**

As we come out of the recession, hopefully, we know that business will need to be able to deal with customer demands without running out of cash (more businesses usually fail coming out of a recession than fail when we go into one) and, with that demand being very lumpy and unpredictable (as most businesses will want to respond to demand that they are confident about not what they hope will come). Experience matters if you want to deliver customer service of a standard that a customer expects and some life experience makes a significant difference. I will again look at three factors that support this.

How often are you served by young people that seem to have no concept of your personal space and seem to have no concept of showing you some respect by paying attention to you. You will have a sense of what sort of behaviour customers expect you to show. It is really so straight forward- a youngster in a restaurant will often reach across you without saying a single word let alone 'please excuse me'. They seem to be focussed on what they have to do and not on the people they are serving. In the same way do you notice that young people behind a till often keep a conversation going with a colleague when they are taking your money?

So the message here is quite simple- your experience has taught you to show respect and good manners to everyone let alone a customer. So if a business wants to thrive, it needs folk like you to generate customer satisfaction and loyalty by serving the customer as someone who matters- who you show respect to- not just someone you hand goods to and take money from. Interestingly when I was very young and a student I worked as with a coal merchant delivering coal to people's houses. My colleague on the lorry was an 'old chap' who had been on the coal all his working life. He taught me that the one thing you always did was to ask - in those days - the housewife for a broom to sweep up when you had finished the delivery. That always brought a smile and usually a tip!

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That leads me straight to my second point which is that experience teaches you to look at matters from the other person's point of view. When we are taught about marketing we are told to look at the benefits of a product or service to a customer not its features. This is exactly what this tip is about- looking at what the customer wants and will get from what you are offering. The benefit to the organisation is that the customer will come back for more and will often not quibble about the price.

In my introduction I mentioned that the challenge may well be to get paid and to deal with lumpy demand. Looking at things from the customer perspective will help get you through this. All you have to do is think about what you take into account when buying any item. It goes back to basics- does it do what I want it to do, is it of good quality, will I get it on time and can I afford it? All customers think this but younger people often forget as they will be thinking about what they can get out of the customer to help meet their target or more often than not they seem to want the customer to do all the work. Your experience (sorry to overuse this word but there is no substitute for it) will tell you that you need to listen to the customer to find out exactly what they are looking for and to use gentle questions to tease out what their concerns are. The best training I have ever seen on this is with car dealerships where they tend not to sell you the car but to find out what you can pay and then match their offering to it- and they have plenty of aspects to play with- trade-in price, finance deal, extras that you must have, insurance deals, service intervals and so on. The maxim is to take the time to find out what the customer really wants and what it will take to make them delighted with what you have to offer.

The third obvious statement is -know what it is you are selling. We all know that B&Q made a big thing a few years ago about hiring older workers because they were more likely to know what their customers needed to decorate a room or grow vegetables. Product knowledge can be taught and with some products young people do have a much greater knowledge than older people- for example with smart phones - but even with some of these products older people may intimidate customers less because they have a better idea of what the product can do for the customer- its benefits- not what the latest gizmo has as features which some younger customers are perhaps interested in. I have found that with buying computer hardware and software- my local dealer is great at finding out what I want to use the product for and then proposing a solution- so for example I do not have a lap top with a mega memory because I am not into gaming- I do not need that specification- and

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that local shop has many staff older than me. Of course what is needed is what we all know - a blend where the inexperienced learn from the experienced and together they form the team that delivers what the customer needs and wants for what they can pay.

I have talked about what experience offers as an edge with customer service and I am sure you will look at it as pretty obvious stuff. But I am sure you have seen examples where a lack of experience - perhaps a polite way of saying rudeness and ignorance- have really annoyed you and made you take your business elsewhere. What I am not saying of course is that only experienced people can give great customer experience, what I would contend though is that any organisation needs experience on its books to give the customer an experience that makes for delighted customers who come back for more.

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