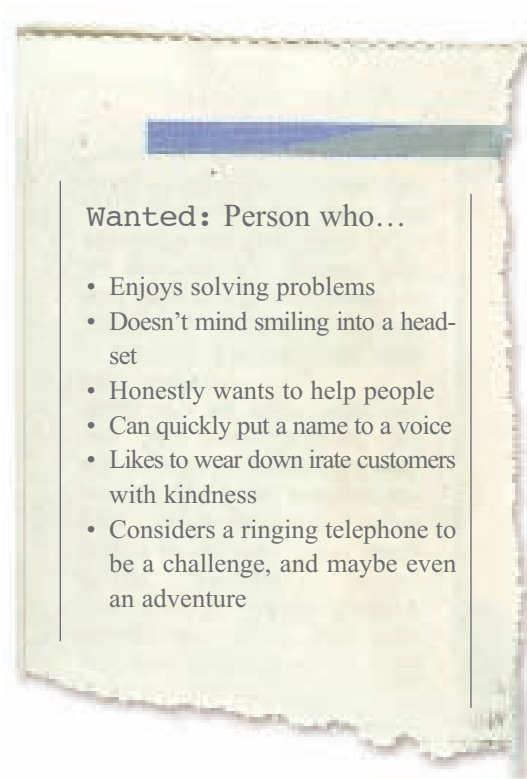


Customer Service Reps we love

Satisfaction is guaranteed.



Not everyone has the makings of a terrific customer service rep. Most sales reps probably can't imagine sitting in a cubicle all day, fielding phone calls, and flipping through computer screens and catalogs. But good reps know that without good customer service reps, they simply wouldn't be as successful as they are.

"This company was built on customer service," says Rich Hawkins, VP of acute care for MMS, an Earth City, Mo.-based distributor. Hawkins should know. Prior to joining MMS, he spent 25 years on the provider side, serving as director of materials management at Alton (Ill.) Memorial Hospital and later with the materials department at BJC HealthCare, of which Alton is part.

"When I was a customer, they always went the extra mile, helping me with backorders, getting information from manufacturers," he says. "Now, when I'm out in the field, they still get me the information I need."

Recently, *Repertoire* asked readers of its *Dail-E News* e-mail news service to comment on customer service reps in their organizations:

• "[Customer service rep Dan Quas] never misses a step, always produces what's needed, is very personable, does more than is required or requested, stays with all projects until completed, takes full responsibility for all matters that touch his desk, is highly motivated to please, and works well with every personality on this planet," says David Brack, Caligor's western regional manager. "He is awesome."

- Cardinal Health ambulatory care rep Candace Lucas said of customer service rep Tracy Conner, “From the time Tracy answers the phone, with a smile in her voice, you know that she is going to do her best to help you. This is providing great customer service!”
- Writing about a customer service rep named Susie, one account manager wrote, “Briefly, I have a very cantankerous customer who needs quite a bit of hand holding. Susie is the only person who can soothe the savage beast.” This is high praise for a customer service rep.

The highs and lows

Penny Hlavaty, who has been with MMS since 1998, clocks her customer service experience from age 16, when she worked as a cashier at a local store. “Doing that, you get to know the faces and the people,” she says. She dons her headset at 8:30 a.m. and answers calls and e-mail messages until 5 p.m., primarily from hospital purchasing and materials management people. She figures she gets at least 50 calls a day.

“If [sales reps] customers are upset, they’re the first who need to know about it.”

– Penny Hlavaty, MMS

“It’s everything,” she says. “People placing orders, asking if we have a certain item or if can we get pricing.” She recognizes the voices of most of those on the other end of the line. “You hear their voice and you know who it is.”

Unlike many customer service reps, Hlavaty has actually met some of her callers face-to-face, either because they have visited the facility, or because they have participated in an annual golf tournament, which she attends. “Sometimes you’re afraid to meet them,” she says. “You have a picture of them, they have a picture of you.” Like all good customer service reps, Hlavaty stays close to her sales reps. “If their customers are upset, they’re the first who need to know about it,” she says. She also serves as the reps’ eyes and ears when they’re on the road, answering questions and apprising them of what’s going on with their customers.

The job has plenty of rewards. “When everything goes well and falls into place, that’s the best part,” she says. “Or if someone is frustrated because they can’t find something, and you find it for them; and just talking to customers every day.” One customer in Wichita, Kan., called or e-mailed her every other day while Hlavaty was battling breast cancer three years ago.

But there’s a frustrating side to the job as well. “When the product doesn’t get out, we’re the butt end of everything,” she says. “Or if you can’t find what they’re looking for, or maybe we don’t distribute the product they want.”

Sometimes things get a little nasty. But what’s nasty to other people, such as getting yelled at by an upset customer, is merely challenging to the best customer service reps. “You try to calm them down, to understand their situation,” says Hlavaty.



Never say die

Cardinal Health's Tracy Conner has her own take on such situations. Conner has been a customer service rep for Cardinal in Stone Mountain, Ga., for two years. Although she didn't have any prior medical industry experience, she'd had her share of working with the public, such working in collections.

"My job is to calm a raging customer," says Conner. In fact, she actually gets energized when doing so. And it doesn't matter whether the person's anger is justified. Conner absolutely refuses to release a phone call if the customer is still upset. "If I have to get someone else involved, I will," she says. "But that customer will definitely be satisfied before they hang up.

"A good day," she says, "is resolving all problems, making sure that on every call I receive, the customer is satisfied and that all products will be available. [A bad day might be] going through all my resources and still not being able to find a product someone needs, whether it has been backordered or is no longer available to us."

There's no secret to success in this job, concludes Conner. "Absolutely loving people" is critical. But it's more than that, she adds, "It's loving what you do; and always wanting to learn more about your job, the people you're with and how your office works."

The tone of voice

Nancy Moyes is a seven-year veteran of McKesson Atlantic Health Care in Westbrook, Maine. An operating room tech by training, Moyes worked as an office nurse for some time before starting her own business, a beauty shop in her home, while raising her kids. This was good training for a future customer service rep.

At Atlantic, 10 customer service reps take calls from physicians' offices up and down the East Coast. As assistant manager of customer service, Moyes not only takes phone calls, but she makes herself available to answer the other customer service reps' questions as well. Her day begins at 8 a.m. and, before it's over, she

"Excellence in customer service goes far beyond responding to emergency situations. Excellence proves itself in day-to-day operations."

— H. Glen Dunn, Cardinal Health

has talked to anywhere from 30 to 50 customers. Add to that the "internal" calls, that is, conversations with others within the company (not just sales reps, but colleagues in accounting, warehousing, etc.).

"It's a team effort here," says Moyes. "We have a super group of customer service reps. Our whole company is a great team: warehousing, purchasing, marketing. Everyone is in it together." When she's one-on-one with a customer, Moyes focuses on staying positive regardless of the nature of the call. "You certainly can't take it personally if somebody gives you an angry tone on the phone," she says. "Mistakes happen, people get frustrated, but you do the best you can. It's important to have a big smile all the time. It comes through in the tone of your voice. Many customers have said to me, 'You sound happy.' They like that."

Broad perspective

Being an excellent customer service rep sometimes calls for more than taking phone calls. That's Robb Cotter's stand. As customer service specialist for Cardinal Health in Obetz, Ohio, Cotter is responsible for servicing the Baptist Healthcare System in Louisville, Ky., which comprises three hospitals and a physician surgery center scattered around the state.

"Excellence in customer service goes far beyond responding to emergency situations," says H. Glen Dunn, Cardinal Health distribution sales representative. "Excellence proves itself in day-to-day operations, and Robb is really, really good, day-by-day.

"Robb not only shows interest in the customer, but also in the customer's operation," continues Dunn. "He works each day to better understand how and why things happen in materials management, surgery and other departments. He

has often used his knowledge of their operation to give advance notice to manufacturing on custom products or to redirect inventory in advance of a crisis."

While doing all this, Cotter never loses sight of the basics. "Perhaps one of his best qualities is his knowledge of the people at Western Baptist (one of Cotter's accounts) and his concern for them," says Dunn. "Robb has a morning talk session with the agents in purchasing that often includes more than business. I am often embarrassed to realize that Robb knows more about the people in my account than I know. His excellence with people is a challenge and reminder to me to also stay close to the people and not just the business."

According to Kay Kimbro of Western Baptist's purchasing department, "It doesn't matter how many times a day I call [Robb], he is always just as pleasant and nice the 10th time as he is the first. When speaking with him, he acts and makes me feel as though I am the only customer he has. I never feel as if I am bothering him or that he is in a hurry to be rid of me."

Retail background

Cotter started his professional career in the retail environment, helping customers select and configure cabinets for kitchen and bathroom remodeling projects. After graduating from The Ohio State University with a degree in production and operations management, he worked for an engineering consulting firm, then a uniform service company. Two years ago, he joined Cardinal Health, where he combines the training he received in school with his skills at interacting with customers.

Cotter maintains a broad perspective of his job, partly due to his own initiative, and partly due to Cardinal Health's culture. "We're accountable for so many

aspects, not just interfacing with the customer, but for accounts receivable, inventory, pricing, just a myriad of different things." Cardinal asks that its customer service reps take some responsibility for fill rates, customers' bad debt and usage of electronic order entry.

Cotter enjoys tracking down hard-to-find products for his customers, resolving billing errors and solving backorder problems. But in some ways, these tasks serve as a springboard for more proactive endeavors. For example, Cotter asked one of his customers if he could have a file of products purchased directly from manufacturers.

"I compared it with our catalog and sent it to my sales rep, who now can go in and bid on some of that business," Cotter says. And he built his own

forecasting tool for Cardinal's custom surgery modules. With it, he forecasts his customers' needs for the upcoming week, and then compares it with available inventory. "If there's a backorder, that customer is in bad shape," he says. "The way I look at, we're trying to add value as a distributor. You have to bring something to the table, and this is one of the ways we can do that. I take pride in coming up with new ideas for our customers.

"A successful customer service rep, in my mind, has to have a self-starter mentality and a general love of people," Cotter continues. "And they absolutely have to be honest and have the ability to follow up on every commitment they make. Honesty and following up on your commitments will get you farther than you realize."

Serving customers is important.

Enjoying working with them is a bonus. "I came into this job thinking, 'Baptist is such a huge, huge organization; how am I going to build a good relationship with the people there and really promote our company's value to them?' I didn't think I would have that type of relationship with them, because the system was so large.

"But now, I really feel like the people I deal with are friends," says Cotter. "We talk so often and work so well, it's a pleasure to come into work. I try to challenge myself to bring something to them. My goal from the get-go was to become an extension of their staff. I want them to rely on me every day. And I think I've succeeded in that challenge. But it all boils down to treating the customer as I would want to be treated."

Now that's spoken like a true customer service rep. **rep**

True stories

Repertoire's Dail-E News readers share stories about their favorite customer service reps.

Lasting impressions

"This is a great opportunity to share with everyone how our customer service representatives are such a tremendous support for us salespeople. There are two individuals who go above and beyond their call of duty: Shari Finestone and Jennifer Ramos."

— Laurie McGratty, *Darby Group, Westbury, N.Y.*

"It would be a disservice to single out a single CSR at my company, Community Surgical. They truly work as a team. Anyone will step up to help us and, more importantly, help our customers. The customer team leader, Linda LiBassi, has done an exceptional job to get it done. What is 'it'? It is all the things that happen in a given day. She arranges quick deliveries, solves the sales representatives' problems, keeps her associates doing the best job possible, and, yet, has time to talk to the reps in the field."

— Frank Stirrup, *Community Surgical Supply, Toms River, N.J.*



True
Stories