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Customer service can help or harm sales effort

By BRIAN SNADER and RANDY SCHWALKE*

S your customer service aligned to support your sales effort — or is it sabotaging it? That's a provocative question, but poor customer service can undo all the work that went into getting a new relationship or destroy a long-term relationship.

Simply put: Your service professionals are often the primary day-to-day point of contact with your customers, and every interaction they have is an opportunity to cement — or potentially destroy — customer loyalty and satisfaction.

The fact is that your counter staff, warehouse personnel, drivers, credit department, tech support and others who interact with customers influence not just retention but future sales and revenue opportunities as well.

However, most don't view themselves as having anything even close to a "sales" role. If you ask them how they define service, they would probably say it's about understanding and responding to customer needs and problems. If you ask them to describe selling, however, they might say things like being pushy, manipulative and focused on getting product out the door. It's not a good image.

Even so, many leaders recognize the untapped sales opportunities that lie within reach of their support personnel, so they'll put them through some sales training. All too often, though, the training ends up reinforcing this negative view of selling.

Ignoring the connection between sales and service isn't the answer, but neither is sending customer service people to training that focuses strictly on selling techniques and skills with an underlying message that sales is something you do "to" a customer instead of "for and with" them. You can't bridge the gap between service and selling until you break through the mindset barriers that create resistance at each step of the way.

So, where do you begin? Three criti-

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cal facdressed to bring service and selling together:

1. Redefine selling (it's not what they think it is). Your best customer service people are focused on making sure customers' needs are addressed in the most satisfying way. That's the mindset they bring to their job role.

What they need to recognize is that selling is no different. It's not the one-sided, manipulative process they may have experienced (or been trained on) at some point in their career. Instead, it's another way to understand and fill customer needs. In fact, it can be a way to serve those needs even better.

Aligning the definitions of service and selling is the critical first step to bridge the service/selling gap. Why not define service as "a process of identifying and filling customers' wants or needs and creating value for them"? How is this any different from the true definition for selling?

2. Understand that attitudes and beliefs make the difference. Sure, you may tell them that selling is an extension of good service, but do they believe it? You can't just change the definition of selling and expect people to change their attitudes and beliefs that are deep rooted due to a myriad of life experiences.

Think about the qualities and traits of your top performers: What do you see? Our research from around the world

shows that close to 85% of the traits are attributed a person's attitude, values and beliefs. Attitudes, values and beliefs matter, yet most traditional "sales training" focuses on skills and doesn't address these important factors.

This is not a question of "you either have a sales/service mindset, or you don't." You can change attitudes and beliefs, but it requires time, teaching people skills that reflect a positive definition of selling and providing managers with appropriate coaching resources.

This mindset can be reinforced through having a strong statement of your expectations about service and selling. One way to do this is by having a standard set of "needs-focused values" that both sales and service personnel are expected to apply and that complement what your best service professionals have been doing all along.

3. Train people with appropriate skills to practice needs-focused selling. We often say, "You can't teach people to sell by teaching people to sell." This is particularly true if the skills they are being asked to perform are not aligned with their values and beliefs.

If you want to teach people to sell, provide them with a process that supports the customer-focused values of your organization. Whether you're talking about your sales team or your customer service team, traditional sales training that focuses on scripted or aggressive selling

techniques isn't going to fit that requirement, and it isn't going to create the behavior change you need for a long-term impact.

Lasting change

There's no point in making the decision to bridge the gap between service and selling if you don't also make plans to ensure that the change really sticks. Getting sustainable results requires a well-thought-out strategy at the outset.

Through our research, we've identified five best practices that are the critical components for getting lasting behavior change and improving long-term performance:

- 1. Allocate the time and resources necessary for a culture change. If you short-change the process, your results will be short term, too.
- 2. Provide appropriate training. Choose a sales/service process that aligns with the values of your organization and allows for incremental growth as your people's belief boundaries expand.
- 3. Develop managers who can model the behaviors, see the potential within their employees and coach to the process. Don't discount the pivotal role they play
- 4. Get the right people on the bus. Hire for attitudes and beliefs as well as skills and experience.
 - 5. Align internal processes and sys-

tems to support the application of new behaviors. Engage marketing, human resources, information technology and other departments along the way.

Many organizations list "integrity" among their core values. This development process will assist your people in bridging the gap between what you say your company does (mission, vision and values) and the action your employees take to deliver on that promise.

Finally, keep in mind that culture change is a journey. Some journeys are short; others take more time. As you embark on this journey, use the ideas suggested, and maintain a steadfast focus on reaching your long-term goal to build a strong service/sales culture.