

Improve Your Organization's Results

by Getting Inside the Head and Heart of Your Customers



by Laverne Dees Webb and Steve Cooperman

A successful auto repair chain on the East Coast that regularly surveyed its customers found that 92% of its customers were satisfied with the quality of service they received. Recognizing the importance of always getting better, managers decided to talk to some of the 8% of the customers who were dissatisfied to find out what the chain was doing wrong. They took what they heard from the dissatisfied customers and shared the results with the rest of the organization. This seems like a logical approach to improving customer service. Find out what you're doing wrong, and stop doing it. But what happened defied expectations - instead of improving, customer satisfaction decreased!

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Actually, this result is not so surprising when seen through the lens of an innovative approach to transforming customer service work called Affirmative Customer Service (ACS). Instead of beginning with the question, "What problems are we having with our customer ser-

vice?", with ACS we ask, "What successes are we having?" and "How can we do more of it?" The goal of ACS is to seek the root cause of success, not the root cause of failure. ACS engages people in an organization in a dialogue, with each other and with the customer, about what is working to satisfy the customer, and about how to make that happen more often. The result is a learning organization- one in which everyone is focused on improving customer service by sharing stories of best practices throughout the organization.

The ACS Model is based on solid science and research about how people learn and change. Its foundation is Appreciative Inquiry, a leading-edge philosophy and approach to organizational change and human development. Simply stated, this philosophy holds that: organizations move in the direction of the images they hold of

the future, organizations tend to find what they look for, where we think we are going is where we end up.

As with the auto repair chain, organizations that look for problems find, and get, more problems. On the other hand, organizations that focus on their successes and on imagining positive possibilities get more of what they want.

The ACS Model was recently introduced to 40 people from the private and health care sectors at a Loras College-sponsored workshop. Here is what workshop participants learned:

Customer Service As Mission Critical

Most businesses are well aware of the effect of customer service performance on the bottom line. According to one study, indifferent customer service costs the average company 15-30% of gross sales.

Unfortunately, the current state of customer service is pretty dismal, based on the research. For instance, nearly half of all consumers believe service is mediocre and getting worse. Many consumers are not putting up with it: the average US corporation loses half of its customers every five years, and the number one reason customers give for changing suppliers is poor service. In addition, the typical corpora-

tion never hears from 96% of its unhappy customers, while a customer who has a service problem tells 9-10 people on average. So not only are customers who have had service experiences going

somewhere else, they are telling everyone about their experience - everyone, that is, except you.

The emphasis, however, is no longer on just satisfying customers, but building customer loyalty. Loyal customers mean improved cash flow and profitability - they buy more, take less of a company's time, are less price sensitive, bring in new customers, and have no acquisition or start-up cost.

There are two keys to creating loyal customers. Get to know what is most important to your customers, by getting inside their head and heart. And have everyone in your organization own the goal of making each customer contact with your company an exceptional experience.

Getting Inside The Customer's Head and Heart

Typically, companies try to find out what is important to their customers through surveys. However, most surveys don't get to the depth of what is important to customers. In an attempt to get quantitative data, we often strip away the meaning that will allow us to truly understand what is important to our customers. Also, people's responses aren't always honest or accurate, e.g., they aren't comfortable revealing what they really think and feel.

In ACS, we ask a series of open-ended questions that really get inside the head and heart of the customer to reveal what is most important to them. In these Appreciative Interviews we ask them to tell us stories about their best customer service experiences, with their company or with another company, their values, and their wishes for how we could make exceptional customer service happen more of the time. Stories reveal more depth and meaning, while the positive orientation of the questions opens up the customers to

share personal thoughts and feelings about what really matters to them that they might not otherwise share.

As ACS participants collect and share stories, common themes begin to emerge. At

the Loras College workshop, for example, stories were told one after the other in which a customer service representative went "the extra mile" and did something far beyond their job description.

Owning Exceptional Customer Service

Companies, with only the best intentions, often exhort employees to put the customer first, e.g., through training and mission statements. Unfortunately, one of the unintended consequences is that employees feel they are being told, "You are the problem" so they are less open to the message. As the saying goes, people don't resist change, they resist being changed. Therefore, employees feel no ownership and responsibility.

With ACS, employees conduct Appreciative Interviews with each other and with customers, then look for common themes that reveal what it will take to deliver exceptional customer service and build customer loyalty. In this way, they are learning from the customer and each other, rather than looking for trainers, consultants, and management to tell them how they should do their jobs. As a result, employees have a deeper understanding of, and stake in, exceptional customer service.

Also, hearing customers' positive stories energizes employees and brings them closer together. Improving customer service often requires lots of energy, and people pulling together, not moving apart. We hear the energizing effect of ACS reflected in the comments of participants, who commonly use words like "energizing", "engaging", "validating", and "insightful" to describe their experience of the process. As for bringing people together, one of the Loras College workshop participants said she felt "appreciation for the human race!"

In contrast, pointing out problems and

deficiencies deenergizes and fragments employees. This is what happened with the auto repair chain - hearing about customer problems sent employee morale spiraling downward, with predictable effects on customer service and productivity.

What You Can Do

To summarize, here are some ideas on what you can do starting tomorrow to apply the concepts of ACS and improve customer service in your business or organization:

- Accentuate the Positive: Focus your attention on what works well now, and what has worked well in the past.

- Do "Appreciative Interviews" with 5-10 people inside and outside your company.

- Ask them to tell you a story about the best customer service experience they have had with your company.

- Listen for what made the "best" possible.

- Ask, "If you had three wishes to make more of the "best" possible, what would they be?"

Listen and Learn

- Use the interview information to find the key themes about what matters most to your customers (internal and external).

- Initiate a dialogue with employees about what everyone can do to create more "bests" through best practices in every part of the business.

- Make these conversations a regular part of how you do business.

- Make "appreciative inquiries" into other key areas of your business, e.g., quality, team effectiveness, etc.

Create Positive Images of the Future

- Involve everyone in your organization in creating shared images of where you want to be. Powerful, positive images create a gravitational force that pulls us in their direction.

- Collectively create a statement about what the "best" would look like, written as if you already have it (i.e., in the present tense).

- Look at the language used in your conversations and in your business' existing documents. Is it one of deficits and deficiencies? If so, change it to align with your positive images of the future.

[Editor's note: Webb is president of the Webb Alliance, Management Consultants. Cooperman is president of SUN Partners.]❖