

Issue: No. 10 –Summer 2006

President: Evelyn Arnette
Treasurer: Nova Sipe
Communications Director: Christy Jones



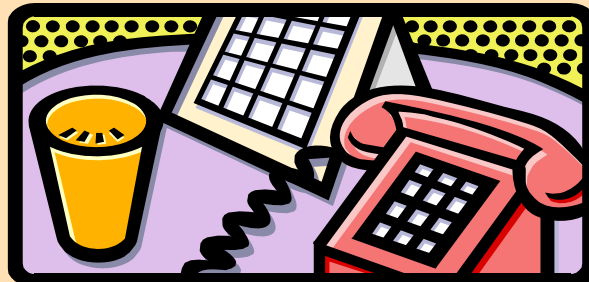
A Note from your Communications Director

Please join me in a virtual round of applause for Salli Bruell, our outgoing Treasurer. She has made significant and wonderful contributions to our organization over the years and is much appreciated!

Things are sizzling down here in Florida but the good news is we are hurricane-free and it's already the end of August! As summer draws to a close I hope each of you have had a chance to kick back and enjoy life.

Christy Jones

IASE Communications Director



Newsletter Schedule

We have just one issue remaining for this year's newsletters. Please be sure to submit your article by the date listed below.

Fall – Submissions due November 1st

Sallie Bruell
Wayne Moberly
Janet F. Sipe
Nova Sipe
Maggie Setler (optional)



IMPROVE SHOPPERS' INSTRUCTIONS—GET BETTER REPORTS

by Judith Rappold

If a project is underway and I'm not satisfied with the quality of the reports that are coming in, I have found it's worth taking some time to ask some questions. What errors are happening with the most frequency? Are these situations addressed clearly and completely in the instructions? Sometimes I can find a direct correlation between the errors that are occurring in the reports and the way the instructions are written. Sometimes the connection is less clear. But frequently when the instructions are improved, the errors are fewer.

Here are a few of the rules I try to keep in mind when writing or revising instructions:

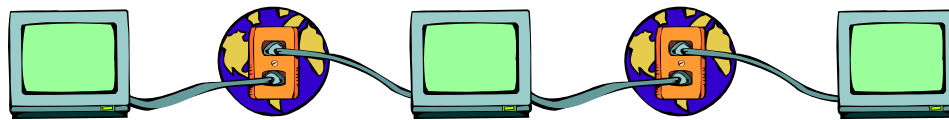
- 1 Keep your directions as short as possible without sacrificing content. Shoppers are always more likely to read a one-page document with care and interest than a document of several pages.
2. Direct attention to the most important points in your instructions with color, bold, underlining, and other formatting. But make sure you do this selectively. Too much formatting is worse than none at all.
3. To achieve clarity and save words, use specific examples of what to enter or say. **For example**, "in the amount blank enter a single amount for your tip and your expenditure. Enter \$6.00 for a \$5.50 purchase with a \$.50 tip."
4. Use pictures in place of words when you can. We give our Sonic Shoppers a picture of the "courtesy tray" rather than trying to describe this tray in words so they can recognize it.



5. Use bulleted lists when you have a series of instructions that are not sequential.
6. Use numbered lists when a series of instructions must be performed in a time sequence.

7. For a complex shop where the shopper makes choices and pursues different courses of action depending on the choices, consider using a flow chart to give directions or illustrate alternatives.
8. Include lots of white space so that the information on the page is easy to read.
9. Whenever possible, build instructions into the form the shopper will be completing. Of course, you must make sure they don't get too long. For example, we shop some stores that require a phone call as well as a store visit. Our client was not happy when shoppers made the visit before the phone call. So on the part of the evaluation form for reporting the results of the phone call, we added a reminder. **"Make this call before you visit the store."**
10. Use the written instructions to create short tests to qualify shoppers. Contractors who must pass a test will read their instructions with more care. Keep the questions on the tests focused on things that are important and keep them short. You may want to make them a series of true or false choices. For example: "Sonic reports must be entered on the website within 48 hours of your store visit." This would be false as the reports are due in 24 hours.

In our office, instructions are never finished. We find that helps us keep the quality of the work we receive high.



On the Web

Poor Customer Service and the Internet

By Christy Jones

A recent article in our local paper addressed the power of the internet to spotlight poor customer service in a way that can be accessed by millions. Recent web postings, including video clips, regarding the difficulty of canceling AOL service and a bad experience with cable provider, ComCast have been making the rounds. There are several websites that provide the consumer a creative outlet or a tool to vent frustration: YouTube.com, consumerist.com, RipOffReport.com and ConsumerAffairs.com. YouTube.com is the site documenting the AOL and ComCast incidents. A word of caution regarding these sites: some postings are not for the easily offended.

Each of these sites listed provide a different perspective but their reach is undeniable. Our existing clients, and potential clients, can all benefit from the use of mystery shopping to detect and correct any poor customer service experiences before the client becomes the subject of an internet posting for the entire world to see.



Eliminating the ‘mystery’ in Customer Service Evaluation

as told by a professional Consumer Perceptions Inc. Customer Service Evaluator (C.S.E.)

I’ve been in the mall store for over ten minutes, and I wonder if I’m invisible. There’s a strange odor wafting from the stockroom – probably someone’s exotic lunch. Two male associates are hanging out at the cash desk, where one is entertaining the other by loudly describing last weekend’s conquest. As I navigate the crowded, stock-laden aisles, a female counterpart appears from somewhere, glances at me, and then draws a long noisy slurp from her extra-large coffee. I offer her a friendly smile, hoping she will approach and offer me some assistance, but no, she spots the guys and flashes Romeo a wide smile as she sprints to their location, leaving me in her dust. I make the first of many mental notes I will make in the next thirty minutes. I am a customer service evaluator (also known by some as a ‘secret’ or ‘mystery’ shopper) and I am on assignment, carrying out the first observation for a brand-new client.

The role of a C.S.E. is to produce honest, un-biased reports on all aspects of client’s consumer-related businesses, including, but not limited to, customer service. Our job is not to ‘spy on’ and ‘turn in’ unsuspecting associates who may be having a bad day; rather, our goal is to report as honestly as we can everything we are able to observe while on premise. Usually, we are asked to report only what we actually witness, and to prepare a concise, nonjudgmental report for management that will allow it to form its own opinion on how well, or poorly, it is meeting the company standards of customer service, competitive pricing, store appeal and even cleanliness. The client’s goal in hiring our company is to establish a systematic approach to enable their staff to better understand their customer service standards and to evaluate and to reward staffers who perform to expectation and beyond. Using information we gather and report, the client will be able to increase efficiency, curb-appeal and profitability and most importantly customer retention. Although I am not in the store as a ‘real’ customer, I do have a scenario preplanned that will require service assistance and I am also there to report in detail exactly what I see, hear, smell and sometimes taste. “Just the facts, Ma’am!” is a phrase that will run in my head as I later create my evaluation report.

Before *my* job begins, my management staff will have held in-depth discussions with the client, to agree on exactly which goals and evaluation tools to implement. But let’s go back to the store and my assignment. I’ve given the three associates every opportunity to offer their help. I’ve cruised the aisles with what I hope is a ‘puzzled’ countenance. I’ve glanced at them several times, and tried to catch an eye, but these three are pros at customer evasion! I wonder who is ‘in charge’, if that phrase is at all

appropriate. Finally, I approach the desk, clear my throat and wait while they continue their conversation.

"I'd like some help, please," I begin, interrupting a fit of giggles from Coffee Girl.

"Yes?" she asks, leaning over the desk and revealing far too much skin.

"I need a" and I launch into today's scenario. I give her one piece of information about my needs and hope she will follow through with some good discovery questions. She does not.

"Try over there - everything over there is good," she responds, waving vaguely to the far side of the store. I decide to try again.

"Perhaps you could show me something that other customers have purchased in a similar situation," I persist, but am interrupted by Romeo, as he shouts a loud "Hey Bob!" to a passing mall pedestrian. I've lost Coffee Girl's attention again, as she waves and jiggles at 'Bob'. None of this action is lost on the other male associate, and he eyes me and his co-workers uneasily.

"I think I can give you a few suggestions," he begins somewhat tentatively. I remind myself that I am not here to *judge* the conduct of the staff (just the facts, Ma'am!), but to accurately remember and report what I have just seen and heard. I thank him with a smile, and he smiles back, as he leads me to a different section of the store. Mercifully, he begins to ask me questions regarding the expectations I have, whether or not I have brand preferences, and determines if I am interested in the 'top of line' or something mainstream – a good discovery is being conducted, and I am pleased. Now I will have something positive to report! He retrieves a product from the shelf, hands it to me and encourages me to give it a try.

"Go on," he urges, "It's really great! Try it! Look, I'll show you how it works!" His enthusiasm is contagious. He demonstrates, and I laugh out loud. He's right – it *is* great – and it's *perfect* for my scenario. He's really into it now, and he continues. "If you would like a few more additional uses, you could add this!" he enthuses, selecting another item from the shelf. "They go together perfectly, and together could provide you with so many more possibilities".

I'm sold. What started out so badly has turned around, because one associate had the foresight to gather information, draw me into his presentation, and make me feel that I am important as his customer. *This* is very good customer service.

It's probably not that the other two don't know how to provide good customer service – it's just that today they chose not to. 'My hero' leads me back to the cash desk, and asks if I'd like an extended warranty to go with my purchase. He also tells me that he is expecting a shipment of new and exciting merchandise within the same line later in the week, and wonders if I'd like a phone call to let me know when it arrives. He has my attention now and I gladly provide my telephone number as I hand over my money, and as I ready myself to leave the store, he thanks me genuinely, and says he hopes he'll see me again soon. *This* is excellent customer service.

My report will reflect everything I have just witnessed. It will inform management about the cluttered (and dangerous) aisles in the store, the unpleasant smell of leftover lunch and the inappropriate behavior and dress of some staff. But it will also tell the story of one associate who really tried – and succeeded – to provide good customer service. I, or one of my fellow C.S.E.'s, will be back to this store again and again, and a pattern will emerge. Working with companies over an extended period of time develops comprehensive systems to provide feedback on operations as well as customer service, sales skills, loss prevention and on actual customer experiences. C.S.E.'s add a dimension that could not possibly be observed by the company on its own. We help clients see what their customers experience while in their stores, restaurants, or virtually in any business that interacts with a customer. As professional evaluators, our commitment in maintaining our company's high standards of ethics provides the client with honest, unbiased and confidential feedback that leads to an evolution of systems that can only ensure company success.

'My hero' will score well on his evaluation - not perfectly, but very well. He will be able to better his performance based on my observation of areas that need improvement. The other two associates will not score as well, but, based on the overall analysis provided to the client, a coaching opportunity has been created, and their overall performance will improve. As a C.S.E. my most rewarding experience is to return and re-evaluate employees who initially did not score well and to witness and report their improvement.



Mystery Shopping in Health Care

by Christy Jones

An August 8th article in the *Wall Street Journal* spotlighted the recent surge in interest in using mystery shopping to evaluate various areas of healthcare from sole practitioners to hospital emergency rooms. The article highlighted some of the concerns that have always been an issue, chiefly that mystery shoppers take attention away from legitimate customers. This takes on new weight, however, in the health care arena when people's lives can be at stake. Although health care mystery shopping is just 2% of the \$600 million mystery shopping business as of 2004 that percentage may be increasing.

On October 1 of this year the US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid will begin measuring patient satisfaction at hospitals throughout the nation. This data will be made public. If hospitals have not already started some sort of evaluation program on their own, this new satisfaction initiative is likely to convince them some sort of evaluation program is appropriate to determine their baseline satisfaction and work toward improvements. Some information regarding care can already be viewed at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov. This website is quite interesting and has information a variety of topics. Check it out for your state. For our international members, even though the web site only covers the United States, you may find some valuable general information of benefit such as the hospital checklist which has a list of questions one should ask when choosing a hospital.

The article also addressed one mystery shopping company devoted entirely to mystery shopping the medical field: Examine Your Practice located in Las Vegas, Nevada. Check out their website at www.examineyourpractice.com.

Some of our members already have clients in health care. Given these recent developments more of us will likely be contacted to provide mystery shopping in this field.

In today's competitive business environment success means keeping your customers. Price war and thin margins will only do that favor for you up to a certain point, where you hardly break even. After that point, keeping customers is a function of ensuring a great experience for them. When thinking about a brand we all have an idea of how it feels to experience it. When we do, we either feel satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Whether we stay with the given brand or switch to another depends on the level of satisfaction. But What is satisfaction in the first place? It is the extent, to which a brand has lived up to our expectations. And how does math come in the picture? Let's find out!


$$\text{Brand Experience} < \text{Brand Promise}$$

Mathematics is where equations abound. The level of customer satisfaction can well be depicted by simple equations. In case our experience of a brand does not live up to what we expected based on the TV ad, we feel **dissatisfaction**. If for instance, we were not treated very kindly at Mc Donald's, although the old slogan was "every time a good time", we will feel dissatisfaction. What is more, we will most likely tell 3 friends about our disappointment and probably switch to a competitor.


$$\text{Brand Experience} = \text{Brand Promise}$$

The case is a lot better if we get what we came for. Home Depot says "You can do it. We can help." Say we went to Home Depot looking for 2 x 4-s for the deck we are building. We have no idea where they are in the huge store, plus the best type of wood is also a mystery to us. If someone can help us find the right pieces of wood, we will feel **satisfaction**. In this case we will not tell friends about disappointment or about any thrills. We remain silently satisfied and we may still consider competitors.


$$\text{Brand Experience} > \text{Brand Promise}$$

Then again there are occasions, when customer service simply overrides the boundary of our expectations. This usually happens when an employee takes the initiative to act proactively in terms of customer service. Champ's Restaurants give their servers the option to surprise their first timer guests with a free "messy Sundae" dessert. The unexpected surprise exceeds expectations, has guests **thrilled** and most important of all wins customer loyalty. Thrilled guests are sure to return and they bring others along.

Obviously, this is the way all companies want to go, yet a lot of them get lost in the process. This is relevant in the B2B just as much as in the B2C aspect of service. In business to customer it means that front line staff shall do more than the bare minimum to win customer loyalty. There is no explicit rule of how to do so, there are multiple ways. A basic one is showing customer appreciation by saying "thank you for your purchase" and inviting the buyer back for a next visit. There are unique ones as well. To give an example, a European carpet and floor retailer called DIEGO expects front line staff to invite each customer for a coffee. For this they set up coffee machines and the unexpected invitation has people returning and speaking about the experience.

The B2B aspect of customer service is very much relevant to the lives of Mystery Shopping companies. Shopper firms shall not only speak great customer service, but shall lead by example. Exceeding the expectations of client companies wins loyalty or in other words long term business relationship. One simple way to exceed client expectations is to submit projects well ahead of the deadline. In this case it is essential to set a broad timeframe. For example by adding 4-5 days to what the project really requires. This way you can do the job well and still exceed expectations time wise. Another thing is giving a bit more than agreed on for no up charge. A 2 page Executive Summary of the main findings, or a trend diagram (including all results of an ongoing Mystery Shopping program) showing the progress made can do the job with low extra effort and high added value.

All in all, Philip Kotler Marketing Expert is right in the matter that "the best way to obtain a lucrative business is repeat selling". Nevertheless repeat selling requires exceeding expectations and going for the thrills.