



Special for *Automated Builder Magazine*: **Customer Service Even More Important Today**

By Rene A. Henry
Corporate Communication Consultant

SEATTLE, WA—There is nothing magic about customer service. It's just basic, common sense — street smarts. Treat people the way you want to be treated, only better. Don't just meet, but exceed your customers' expectations.

In today's economy, customer service is more important than ever before. It can be the difference between a sale and a lost sale. Or even a crisis.

Communication is the key to great customer service. All too many crises happen or exacerbate because of a lack of communication. With the continued advances of electronic technology we now have a multitude of diverse tools available to communicate with but the sense and importance of communicating seems to rapidly diminish with each generation.

"A customer is the most important visitor on our premises," said Gandhi. "He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interrupter of our work, but the purpose of it."

Lou Holtz, a Hall of Fame football coach, television analyst and motivational speaker, also has important advice about customer service, "Customers do us a favor when they call; we don't do them favors by letting them." He adds, "Customers are the most important people in our business."

"Today, satisfying the needs of your customers by providing fast, efficient service is no longer enough," says Deborah Gardner of Compete Better Now!, a Phoenix, AZ speaker, author and consultant on customer service. "You must move beyond customer satisfaction and engage your customers in memorable experiences that are

consistent with your brand promise," she notes.

It is critical to return every call and answer every letter, e-mail and fax. Some years ago, one of the nation's leading home builders learned this the hard way. An administrative assistant ignored repeated calls from a recent home buyer who wanted a dishwasher fixed before a weekend dinner party. By the time the assistant's boss got the message Monday morning, a class action law suit had already been filed to rescind the sales of 1,500 new homes in the community. The assistant's ignorance cost the home builder millions of dollars.

Overzealous assistants and gate guardians also create problems for CEOs. If a letter is short-stopped and not sent to the CEO the assistant needs to let the sender know to whom the letter is being sent to resolve the problem. Customer service starts at the top. CEOs should take a few minutes each week to randomly select and read letters from customers. Harry S Truman said it best: "The buck stops here."

Every employee of a company must be committed to customer service. Carl Sewell of Dallas, TX became the #1 Cadillac dealer in the world because of customer service. He instilled in his employees that the customer is always right, even if she or he is wrong. His commandments included to always under-promise and over-deliver and whatever the customer asks the answer is always yes.

Establish a communications policy in the company. When someone is going to be out of town or on vacation say so with a voice message on the answering machine and also for an automatic

e-mail response. Establish deadlines when all calls and inquiries must be answered.

Listen to the customer and hear what is being said. Be accountable. Accept responsibility.

People today have less patience than before. Several years ago McDonald's found that rude employees in its restaurants cost it \$750 million one year in lost sales. Customer service goes straight to the bottom line.

Here are some basics for good customer service:

1. Have a communications policy.
2. Answer every inquiry.
3. Listen.
4. Be accountable and accept responsibility.
5. Apologize and say "I'm sorry."
6. Empower employees to resolve problems.
7. Follow-up to guarantee the customer is satisfied.
8. Establish your own company customer service principles.

Rene A. Henry is a Seattle, WA author, columnist and consultant. His latest book, "Communicating in a Crisis," has a chapter on customer service. He helped found and for 10 years was executive director of the Council of Housing Producers, an organization of the 15 largest home builders and community developers in the U.S., and from 1986-1988 was president and CEO of the National Institute of Building Sciences. Many of his widely published commentaries and articles are posted on his website at www.renehenry.com. Henry may be reached at 206.329.4422.