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# A Word or Two About Customer Satisfaction

by *Chris Graesser*

The University of Michigan recently announced a survey of customer satisfaction among the retail industry, <http://www.bus.umich.edu/research/nqrc>. The survey links consumer spending with customer satisfaction and argues that successful companies such as clothing retailer Nordstrom and grocer Publix can attribute much of their profits to customer service.

Coming back to legal publishing, it is safe to say that customer service is crucial to a company's relationship with its customer base. Yet I have seen time and again that some publishers fail to fully appreciate the scope of impact that positive and negative customer satisfaction can have on a company's bottom line. The amount of time spent by a publisher to rectify a problem depends entirely on the effectiveness of its customer service and, of course, time is money. Even if the publisher feels it has a captive market, the cumulative effect of negative experiences for the customer can result in a permanent reservoir of ill will. These customers come to expect the worst and will be much harder to please.

Customer satisfaction goes well beyond providing an 800 number. A company's automation system has a major impact on how well a customer-service department can deliver services to its customers. More often than not, when the Committee on Relations with Information Vendors has investigated complaints concerning accounts, billing and even unsolicited shipments, the Committee found that almost all such problems can be traced to a system problem. Publishers need to take their system requirements seriously and listen to their customers when they are considering a systems change. Systems demand a huge investment of time, staff and money, which should not be wasted on something that will not make customers reasonably happy.

Some of you may have seen a commercial for IBM in which the chief executive officer gathers his lieutenants to announce an impending merger. Asked if they are prepared, all the beancounters dutifully answer "check." Meanwhile one woman becomes increasingly alarmed and suddenly blurts out that the company's system is inadequate to handle all the new business. Then the punchline: "That's when you realize, you're SO ready for IBM." Whether or not IBM is the answer, it has been apparent to law librarians that when many legal publishers went through their metamorphoses in the '90s, they were SO NOT ready to provide adequate customer service. Mergers and acquisitions can have a disastrous effect on systems compatibility and, in turn, on customer satisfaction. If customer service was a top priority for these companies, we did not see it.

Some companies did learn from the mistakes of their fellow publishers and did plan their transitions carefully, consulting AALL and individual librarians along the way. The merger phenomenon is no longer new, so publishers really do not have an excuse for shoddy transition planning. AALL, particularly the CRIV, welcomes the opportunity to partner with publishers in planning transitions when new companies are brought into the fold. We do not presume to tell publishers how to conduct their businesses, and we do not have all the answers, but an ongoing dialogue can go a long way towards reducing problems or avoiding them altogether.

What the CRIV hears time and again is the difficulty in keeping good personnel and recruiting new people. There is no mystery here; customer service is traditionally the low rung on the corporate totem pole. The staff in this area have to deal with unhappy people all day long, and unlike sales representatives, can't take customers out to lunch to

make them feel better. Effective employees are rewarded by promotion out of customer service. Perhaps companies should consider creating a career ladder within customer service so that particularly good employees are rewarded within the department. Some companies have created senior account managers to handle particular libraries, which seems to be a successful model.

Please, companies, spend more time training your customer-service people! If I had a dollar for every time I heard a complaint about a customer-service representative who was rude or didn't have the right answer, well, I would not be sitting at this desk right now — I'd be sipping a cold one on the beach in Cabo San Lucas. And for cryin' out loud, pay 'em more than entry level — they have as much to do with retaining business as the sales representatives. We hear over and over how customer satisfaction is the top concern of legal publishers. We have seen admirable improvements in some companies and alarming declines in others. To the second group I say, put your money where your mouth is.

## And Now, Some Thanks

This will be my last article as CRIV chair, so I want to thank all the CRIV members I have had the privilege to work with over the last four years. Working with the CRIV has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life and my fellow Committee members were the best part of it. Keep up the good work.

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