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May I Help You?

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Do you have established policies for your staff? For example, do you instruct your employees to offer assistance to everyone who enters your business with the same greeting?

I would like to suggest that insisting on the same procedure for all of your customers is possibly sending them to your competitors!

One afternoon I had the unexpected luxury of time between appointments. It created a perfect opportunity to shop in the neighborhood.

The middle of the afternoon, during the week, was an excellent opening to find a great new outfit!

I was looking at items on the clothes racks when I felt a negative energy surrounding me. I looked around and several rows over a sales associate was glaring at me. When I made eye contact she screamed...“may I help you?” “No thank you”, I replied. She reacted by another angry look and stomping away.

Apparently it was the policy in this department store for sales people to approach each potential customer and offer assistance. Because I have a profound hearing loss, I did not realize that someone was asking me a question. However, the sales associate was determined to follow procedure and evidently had asked me several times ... “may I help you?”

When I did not respond in a way that she felt to be appropriate, she became angry and her voice became shrill. Do you believe that a sales associate screaming and glaring at me encouraged me to make a purchase? Of course it didn't. I left the store immediately.

That store is now out of business. I imagine they would have been more successful if they had not chased potential customers away with rudeness!

What is the solution?

Recognize that one course of action does not address all of your customers. Perhaps a person is hard of hearing or that English is not their first language. There are many reasons that a potential customer does not reply exactly as anticipated.

Demanding that a customer respond as expected is creating a communication barrier.

Perhaps you have more enlightened employees. Your people would not scream at customers.

My hearing loss provides me with multiple opportunities for misunderstanding. I was reading the labels on paint cans, in the local hardware store, as I gathered information for a project. Someone tapped me on the arm. I looked up to face a sales associate.

"May I help you?" "No thank you", I replied. This time the sales associate ask me why I was not responding to her. She informed me that she had offered assistance several times and that I had refused to answer, so she approached and tapped my arm.

I explained that I was hard of hearing. She replied that she wondered why I was being rude! Me? I was minding my own business!

Do you consider this an example of wonderful customer service? I don't. I find it to be offensive. When I need assistance, I will request it.

Again, requiring the same procedure for everyone does not provide good customer service but might actually be creating communication barriers.

What can you do?

A flexible policy will address the needs of all of your customers. Offering assistance to people entering your business is effective.

However, if a potential customer does not immediately respond, it would be valuable to have a alternate plan.

Good judgment is important. It is not necessary to force people to respond. Many people resent the intrusion.

Aggressive customer service in the form of screaming, or entering into the personal space of someone, is sending your competitors business.

Offering assistance is a good policy. Even better is recognizing the differences in your customers and responding appropriately.

The key to great customer service is overcoming barriers to effective communication.

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