BEHIND THE MASK

Uncovering the Secrets of a Good Customer Service Manager

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Often when we think of good customer service, we think of someone who is a “people person.” We know the type – helpful, smiling, always says the right thing. However, a lot more goes into truly beneficial customer service. A successful customer service manager will have skills that extend beyond superficial qualities.

A CSM must be adaptable to differing situations. Often a CSM may switch industries, and must recraft what they have learned to their new clientele. Because of this, the ability and desire to learn new things is essential. It would be difficult to earn the trust of a laundry operator when selling a product or service but not possessing an in-depth knowledge of either, or even worse, how a laundry facility operates. If a CSM is coming from a different industry, the first step would be to absorb as much information as possible. This involves asking questions and having genuine interest in what clients have to say.

As a CSM in the laundry industry, working knowledge will also change from facility to facility. Wilma Johnston, RLLD, Customer Relations of Maple Springs Laundry in Hickory, North Carolina, says her company is a customer owned goods healthcare laundry service provider which serves over fifty accounts. Her duties not only include making sure there are no issues, but she also serves on Linen Committees for several facilities.

“I also handle all customer complaints and or inquiries,” Johnston says. “Such inquires might include information or reports on pounds processed, invoices, manifests, titration results etc. I conduct plant tours for customers and other approved visitors from our customer accounts. I provide education to customers who need it through Linen Awareness Days and other industry-available programs…Basically, my responsibilities to the customer are doing whatever I can to meet their needs.”

Angela Skinner, Linen Asset Manager for Clarus Linen Systems in Spartanburg, South Carolina says her duties include, “Tracking scrub losses, linen management
education with customers and rounding the hospital units educating hospital staff, tracking soil to clean ratios and keeping the customers informed of any problems in low soil to clean percentages, and managing linen room inventories.”

Because the needs of customers in this industry are so varied, general knowledge is not sufficient. Specific, customer-based education is needed. “It’s very important I have at least a working knowledge of laundry processing, production and textiles,” says Johnston.

Skinner agrees: “It is extremely important to have plant experience in order to communicate to the customer when equipment goes down, the effect it has on the plant when soil is not returned, what results occur to plant employees when sharps, red bags, hazardous, etc., comes in with the soil linens and the effect it has in the plant when the hospital staff damages the linen resulting in higher replacement cost.”

Patience and empathy are also vital. Often customers will run into issues that threaten the success of their operations. In those moments, their only priority is getting those issues resolved quickly. While a CSM with many clients can see the big picture, knowing that each client is not the only one having problems, each client can only see their own problem, and in that context it is the only thing that matters to them. Being able to work with them on that level will make them feel as if their needs are being heard and addressed. No one wants to feel as if they are just a number.

“I always do my best to answer customer questions or share information in a way that is informative but is not condescending,” says Johnston. “I don’t talk laundry jargon unless I know the customer understands the terminology. I also readily admit it if I just don’t know but assure them I will get them an answer or I’ll refer them to someone who can answer the question or provide the needed information.”

This means a CSM employs active listening, which is more than smiling, head nodding, and spouting promises. Active listening means understanding the customer’s concerns and taking that knowledge forward into action, not just in the immediate situation, but for future situations. If a problem is resolved, but a customer has to revisit the issue if and when it happens again, they will not feel as if they had been heard correctly the first time.

Note that most of the skills to this point involve a one way directional flow of information from client to CSM. The relationship between customer and CSM may at times seem lopsided, but this is normal. It will not always be necessary for the CSM to act on behalf of the customer. In fact, it is important that the CSM know when to act and when to simply be there for the client.

When it comes time to act, the CSM must be tenacious and prompt on behalf of the client. Sometimes this may even mean suggesting a solution the customer may initially resist, in which

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case the CSM must be tactful, but firm. Even if a customer resists, they want to see their CSM as someone who is strong in their convictions. If a CSM caves or waffles, the customer will quickly lose faith. This arguably the hardest set of skills to learn.

Since a CSM’s purpose is to help the customer improve outcomes, sometimes it will take a bit of persuasion and patience to turn their thinking around about a product or process that will benefit in the long run but goes against the status quo. Sometimes that thinking won’t be changed at all, and the CSM must determine if it’s better to back off and let go of that particular battle. These are skills that are only honed through experience and communication with the customer.

A CSM must have strong analytical and problem solving skills. Often a customer will know there is a problem, but not the cause or the solution. The CSM may have to employ surveys, long-term observation, and other means to understand what is not working, and the present the results to the customer in such a way that it is clear and concise, along with practical solutions. It is enough to say “Equipment XYZ needs to be replaced to reduce rewash” or “employees need to be retrained to boost production.” Whenever a significant change or improvement must be made, this equals dollars out of the customer’s pocket, dollars they are often loath to part with. Giving them hard numbers and scenarios will go a long way in getting them on board with needed changes.

In the end, respect for the customer is the most important asset to a CSM. Understanding that when issues or problems occurs, it threatens not just productivity, but the livelihood of everyone in that facility. Improperly processed linens, especially in healthcare, can have far-reaching repercussions.

Johnston sums it up perfectly: “As a former linen distribution manager, I am able to help the laundry understand customer needs and desires, and I am able to help the customer since I’ve personally been in their shoes try to help them understand that laundry processing and linen distribution are one team and the more they know about each other’s processes, the better off the ultimate customer is (the end user, i.e. patients).”

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