

# thinktwice<sup>®</sup> Today

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Customer Service in Crisis — Getting Back to Basics



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## ASK THE COACH

**Q:** A recent customer survey showed that many customers don't think we understand their needs. We think we *do*. Where's the disconnect?

**A:** Remember that it's the customer's perception that counts. They think you don't understand, and that's a problem. Make sure that you're not assuming you know what customers need. And make sure every customer-contact person in your company knows these rules:

Don't assume that...

- You know what your customers want.
- Your customers like what you like.
- You know what customers are going to say, because "you've heard it all before."

Build a culture in which employees ask questions and listen to each customer, as if he or she were your *only* customer.

-Phyllis Roteman is  
TLG's President.



## Think Like Your Customer

You don't have to feel your customers' pain to empathize with them, but it helps. Here are five questions that will get you thinking like your customers...and feeling some of the pain inflicted on them by poor service.

**What do your company's communication processes say about you?** Can customers easily access the information they need from you, in formats that are convenient for them (versus what's convenient for you)? For example, if you make customers hunt on your website for a customer service contact phone number, you send the message that you don't want to hear from them...and that it's inconvenient for *you* if they call.

**How easy is it to navigate your customer "touch points" such as your company web site and phone system?** Ask customers to test your systems before going "live". Testing prior to launching is not a new concept, but many companies, under pressure to launch projects quickly, shortcut this step. Think about the cost of launching a flawed system and the potential for customer frustration, versus the benefit of meeting an internal deadline.

**If you were a customer, why would you buy from your competitor?** Teach your employees to respect, rather than bash, your competitors. Make sure everyone in your company understands what's good about your competitors and why customers might buy from them. This will prevent your employees from bad-mouthing the competition, something that is a turn-off to most

customers. Competition-bashing is unprofessional and insulting to customers who have shopped your competition.

**Have you experienced what your customers feel?** In a recent [training](#) for new airline flight attendants, the trainer simulated bumping a service cart into the trainees, to show them how passengers felt. Watch and think about what annoys your customers — then let your employees experience it first hand. It's a lot easier to empathize with customers when you've walked in their shoes...or felt their frustration.

**What can the "service-best" teach you about your customers?**

When the U.S. was ranked as the world's most unfriendly to visitors in a survey of travelers from 16 nations recently, who did the government turn to for a [solution](#)? Walt Disney, Anheuser-Busch and Universal Studios of course!

The government asked the "best" at creating a friendly first impression—major theme park operators—to give feedback and ideas. They know how to look through customers' eyes and create a welcoming experience. Who outside your industry really understands their customers? What can you learn from them?

—Mary Altuvilla is a TLG Associate specializing in sales, management and customer service.



## President's Perspective

U.S. business is in a *customer service crisis*. You know what I mean if you've gotten the run-around from a tech support hotline, been ignored by a distracted cashier or talked down to by a patronizing nurse at a hospital—as I have recently. Companies often try to fix the problem with customer service training or with employee recognition programs. But this alone won't fix the problem, which goes much deeper. Call it a *human interaction crisis*. Americans are so busy, so distracted, so immersed in technology...many of us are losing the basic art of interpersonal communication and along with it, the ability to empathize with others. Empathy, caring and focusing on others are the basics of customer service. This month's issue is dedicated to getting back to customer service basics—and how to create an organization of people who care.

## Customer Service? Phone Home!

According to a 2006 [BusinessWeek article](#), call center jobs aren't just moving to Asia. More are moving to U.S workers' homes, where employers get high-quality, loyal workers for less cost.

<u>Work Force</u>	<u>Call Center</u>	<u>Home-Based</u>
% of agents with some college	20%	75%
Avg. age	18-29	35-45
Avg. yrs of work experience	5-7 years	10-15 years
Annual attrition	100%	20-30%

## Whose Feedback Aren't You Hearing?

According to research by the [International Customer Management Institute](#):

- 52% of service centers don't survey customers who fax them.
- 43% don't survey customers who email them.
- 30% don't survey customers who complete web self-service transactions.

**Are you reaching out to all of your customers? Who are you missing?**

## Coming Next Month: Motivating and Engaging Your Workforce

- Motivating for Less—Ideas that Cost Almost Nothing
- How Manager Behavior Impacts Employee Engagement
- New Year, New Opportunity...How to Set the Tone for 2007

For more information, visit us at [www.theloyaltygroup.com](http://www.theloyaltygroup.com). We welcome all comments, suggestions and questions! Please email our thinktwice® Today editor Mitzi Chollampel at [info@theloyaltygroup.com](mailto:info@theloyaltygroup.com).

## Help Wanted: People Who Care

A [USA Today article](#) describes a recent increase in customer service training in hotel companies such as Starwood, Intercontinental and Choice Hotels.

Customer service training teaches people how to say the right words and take the right actions when interacting with customers. But coming from the wrong person, these words and actions can seem mechanical, patronizing or insincere.

How can companies address sincerity, sensitivity and a helpful attitude — the personal traits critical to customer service that *you can't teach* in training?

### It's Who You Hire

Companies must be diligent in recruiting and hiring customer contact employees who *enjoy* helping customers and possess fundamental customer service traits. Here are some interview questions to ask (and what to look for), when interviewing customer service candidates. These tips will help you spot candidates who inherently have those customer service "it factors" — caring, empathy and patience.

**"Tell me about a time when someone became angry or frustrated with you."** This question gauges candidates' reactions to stressful interactions. What's their first reaction when confronted by others? Can they recognize when to empathize and when to offer solutions? Ask follow-up questions to uncover how candidates felt when confronted, and what specifically they said or did in response.

**"Tell me about a time when you went beyond the call of duty to give great customer service."** This question gives you insight into candidates' definitions of great customer service. Does it match the expectations of your company? Are candidates willing to do extra, without being told, to make a customer happy?

**"Describe a time when you placed your trust in someone and it didn't work out."** While this question might seem a bit unusual for a customer service position, the answer will give you an insight into how candidates view others. Do they view people with suspicion and doubt, or do they generally like people and think the best of them? Ask follow-up questions to discover what they learned from this experience, and how they feel about it. Are they bitter, or are they forgiving?

Questions about personal traits, such as these, are the most important questions you can ask when interviewing for customer contact positions. They give you an idea of how candidate view people and what their motivations are.

—Mitzi Chollampel is TLG's Manager of Customer Loyalty



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— The Loyalty Group, Inc.

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