



Turning Customer Complaints Into Customer Loyalty.....

By Monte Guitar, Programming and Research Coordinator mguitar@pmpa.org

In a 2000 National League play-off game between the St. Louis Cardinals and Atlanta Braves, Cardinal southpaw Rick Ankiel tossed five wild pitches to the backstop in one inning. Other than Cardinal fans and baseball junkies, not many people will remember that Ankiel was one of the most promising young pitchers in baseball. His 11-7 record and 3.50 ERA going into that fateful game was testament to his potential. Unfortunately, the memory attributable to Ankiel will be the manner by which he could no longer get the job done.

You may have 100 percent on-time delivery performance, zero parts per million defective and no complaints received within the year. Will you still maintain your customer's confidence when a nonconforming issue is identified? "What have you done for me lately" is the hat rack where many of today's buyers will toss his or her cap.



When a nonconforming issue is brought to your attention, how can you ensure that you are viewed as a supplier who is still on top of your game?

Being responsive to a nonconformance might be the biggest opportunity you have to demonstrate your commitment to customer satisfaction. It is an opportunity to show how you differentiate yourself from your competition.

Of course, the best way to prove value is to remain at zero parts per million and not have any of these great "opportunities." However, realistically, there will always be either product or process complaints for you to address. View these nonconforming issues that come your way as opportunities to build upon your relationships with your customers.

How can you change these complaints to further your credibility? Define the response requirements

that set you apart from your competitors. Let your customers know through your actions that your company culture holds to a response policy that includes the following:

Response commitment. Your customer deserves to be contacted immediately so that the facts can be assimilated and the corrective action process can begin. Have your quality contact get on the phone within 24 hours of being made aware of an issue. Nothing has more impact than a personal verbal commitment to your customer that you intend to resolve the problem.

Inform your customer that your entire organization—from the plant manager to the shop personnel—will understand the issue at hand. Your customer will see that you solve your problems where they occur and not in some closed-door, corrective-action, creative-writing room.

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Provide a written "Action Plan" to your customer within 1 week of the occurrence. This plan should detail exactly how you intend to resolve the problem. This response does not equate to an admission of guilt; rather, you are acknowledging that you have a process to arrive at a resolution based on facts. If your corrective action team determines that the fact-finding mission will take longer than 5 days, indicate this on your plan.

Internal actions. "Inspection" is an unpopular word for most of us in process-oriented companies. There is a place, however, for implementing inspection as part of an immediate containment process. It is imperative that you understand when to implement a more rigorous inspection plan.

Assemble a cross-functional team to solve the issue. Make sure that the team has both the authority and the responsibility to take needed corrective action. Ensure that the steps taken to resolve the issue are applied systemically to all areas

of the organization where a similar problem could occur. Post the team's results at your facility and be sure that the customer understands your commitment to communication.

Long-term relationships. Follow up on the Action Plan that you have submitted. Put a trigger within your calendar that identifies when you indicated that you would have an effective resolution. This follow-up will ensure that you are providing responsive customer service.

Additionally, this follow-up will be of service to your customer's quality system. Your call provides the mechanism for your customer to "ensure that the actions of the corrective actions are effective." Your relationship with the customer will grow and your word will be trusted.

The external issue also serves as an educational tool for your employees. Effective corrective actions will improve your process and provide the communication tool to make your employees more aware of problems. They will thereby be

more likely to "own" their jobs.

These corrective action notifications will spread the learning opportunity to every function within your organization, not only those functions directly responsible for resolution. The end result is a learning, continuously improving organization.

Conclusion. Will Rick Ankiel be remembered for his career as one of the most promising young pitchers in major league baseball? Or, will he be thought of as Nuke LaLoosh from the movie "Bull Durham," who frequently pelted the team mascot with fastballs no matter where the creature roamed?

Will complaints be a small footnote in your quest to continue to build your relationships with your customers? Or, will they remain a source of doubt and lack of confidence with your customers no matter how the issue was resolved? Turn complaints into credibility by adopting a quick, interactive policy for all customer issues.

Where Is Your Backup Data?

By Miles Free, Director, Technology Services mfree@pmpa.org

I have a friend who owns a small business in southern Florida. He was lucky when Hurricane Wilma hit the state last year. His roof and windows held, therefore, he didn't lose any paper or computer records.

However, his neighbor was not so lucky. He lost both paper records and computers in the fifteenth hurricane to hit Florida in 15 months. The real surprise, though, was that the backup data the neighbor had counted on was lost as well. The backup tapes he was relying on were located across
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