

# The Total Customer Service Experience

What is a quality product? This is not an idle question. In the Darwinian business world in which we operate, knowing the answer to this question is key to our survival. A whole library of standards and benchmarks is available to help us gage how we're doing, but they don't really tell the whole story.

From a customer's point of view, buying an AGMA 14 gear is only part of "quality." The entire experience with the product is what will determine customers' perceptions. This is the conclusion of Crispin Brown of Ingersoll Engineers International in his brief article "The Service Chain," which appeared in the newsletter *Manufacturing Insight*.

In this thought-provoking article, Brown suggests that customers don't evaluate the quality of their experience on the basis of the product alone. They instead judge in the context of their entire buying/use/disposal experience with that product. I think what he means is this: It's not enough that the product works as promised with little or no repair or breakdown time. People will not buy (at least not more than once) the best product in the world if delivery is unreliable, if their contact with the supplier is a negative experience, if the installation manual is a nightmare or if disposal is a hassle. Their entire experience with the product, from the moment of first contact with the salesperson to the time the worn-out product is disposed of, is what the customer evaluates when he or she decides what "quality" is.

What this means for manufacturers—including those of us in the gear business—is that we have to look to more than AGMA ratings or ISO 9000 rules to build a quality product. We have to look to our entire organization to see how closely we're keeping our eye on the ball: our customers. They determine the success or failure of our business. They pay our wages; they cover our expenses; they provide our profit, if any. No matter

what our product or "core competency," giving the customer what he or she wants is what we have to do.

This means keeping tabs on some obvious things. Do we have a friendly, helpful person answering the phones, or does our automated phone answering system put callers in an endless loop where conversation with a live person is impossible? Do we deliver what our salespeople promise when they promise it? Will our tech support personnel go the extra mile to get a customer's machines up and running the way they're supposed to?

But there are other, more subtle elements in the buying experience to be considered. What does our advertising say about the kind of company we are? What impression do we leave with potential customers who, for whatever reason, aren't buying right now? Is our company's name one they will think of in six months when they are ready? More to the point, will they think of us as potential suppliers or as an organization they wouldn't do business with on pain of death?

What about the "little" things we don't think of as part of the customer service equation? Brown uses the image of the sofa box in his article. Are we willing to haul away the "sofa box" after the product is delivered, or do we build a great product packed in layers of annoying, wasteful material that is at best a nuisance and at worst a major disposal problem? What about the disposal of the product itself at the end of its useful life? Do we want to leave our customer, after 5 or 6 years of good service from our product, with the final experience of a major hassle with the EPA? We can't, of course, eliminate all disposal problems, but customer-centered thinking at the design stage might alleviate some of them.

Customer-centered manufacturing also means providing customers with what they want, even when they don't know that they want it. That's called creativity in product design. It's also called listen-

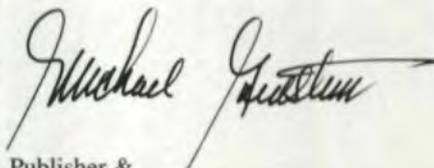
ing to the customers, being aware of their problems and being first out of the blocks to solve them.

Part of our job is to help make our customers successful, because when they're successful, so are we. Understanding their businesses and their needs and taking the time to listen and learn from them are all part of an overall satisfactory customer experience.

We cannot afford the luxury of doing business like Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery in Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon, MN. Ralph's motto is, "If you can't find it here, you probably didn't need it anyway." The motto isn't working very well for Ralph now that the megamall has opened the next town over, and it won't work very well for us either.

Customer-centered thinking is not a fuzzy, "feel-good" flavor-of-the-month management guru trick. It's fundamental to running a successful business. If you don't think so, remember, you have a whole list of competitors who will be more than glad to prove how wrong you are.

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