

Whatever happened to CUSTOMER SERVICE?

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Next time you lock horns with a surly vendor, take heart. Customer-oriented firms are still out there. Here are some of the best of those serving OEMs, courtesy of our readers.

Time was when service to the customer was the mantra of successful businesses everywhere. The idea has been popularized by such best-sellers as *In Search of Excellence*, and *Good to Great*, which foster the notion that fixating on the needs of customers is a key to business success.

How things have changed. Type “bad customer service” into Google and you get links to about 400,000 pages. And those pages are chock-full of customers who get waited on by lackadaisical fast-food servers, wander through superstores without laying eyes on a store employee, and look in vain for paper towels in public rest rooms. All this might lead some to the conclusion that customer service got derailed somewhere, at least when it comes to consumer goods.

Unfortunately, so-so customer service isn't limited to stores and restaurants. Evidence is mounting that even business-to-business services could use a refresher course in how to treat customers.

But some businesses still “get it” when the topic comes to earning customer loyalty through exemplary service. MACHINE DESIGN decided to find the best of them. To do so, we asked readers to tell us about businesses that had gone the extra mile when it counted.

BUILDING GOOD WILL

Were MACHINE DESIGN readers happy to tell us about businesses that had helped them? You bet. Some, like this reader, are grateful for a vendor's attention and expert help. “Just when we thought out-



standing customer service was a thing of the past, Susan Kelly and Amherst Technologies reminded us there are still companies that understand the value of going the extra mile for the customer,” he

"Within less than a day, the conveyor was up and running and the customer was ecstatic. If we would have waited for the original company to come through several days later, we probably would have lost the project and the customer."

writes. The reader had called the Merrimack, N.H., company in desperation after IT equipment his company bought didn't work, and the original manufacturer washed its hands of the whole matter. Ironically, the MD reader wasn't even an Amherst customer when he called. "Sue went to extreme lengths to help us get what we needed and save our \$300,000 project," our reader relates.

Sometimes, simple business etiquette like returning phone calls is so noteworthy it earns customers' respect. That was the case with a grinding-machine manufacturer and its experience with **Brush Controls**, a manufacturer's rep for motion-control and automation equipment in Grosse Pointe, Mich. "Detroit is an auto-making town and we get many vendors trying to fit us into the carmaking mold. They don't understand us and often don't even understand their own products. Jud Utely at Brush Controls, however, knows we don't make cars and only

shows us relevant products. He's also knowledgeable, professional, and quick to return calls."

Many people blame the lack of customer service on cost pressures from offshore competitors. But cost pressures can make customer service even more important, according to one MD reader. He tells of his experience with **Georgia Automation Inc.**, a distributor based in Conyers, Ga. "They've been much more than a supplier," says the reader, an engineer who designs textile machinery. "They come in

at the beginning of a project and already seem to understand what we're trying to accomplish. They help design the circuit and closely monitor the project. Their application engineers are a hands-on resource. And the owner has personally worked past midnight to complete rush orders for us then delivered them to us personally the next day."

Suppliers also build good will by showing a little trust. One reader was involved in a project that needed some laser-measurement equipment. "We knew of a Keyence laser sensor that we thought could do the job and immediately called their rep, Gibb Gilmore. Within a few minutes they agreed to send us a laser for testing," says the engineer. "Next morning, it arrived with all the power supplies and cables. It was at least several thousand dollars worth of equipment, all loaned free of charge. I can't imagine better service."

DELIVERANCE

One theme pervades readers' stories: Companies that don't deliver on promises make bad impression on customers. A classic example comes from a reader in Florida: "I had asked a sheet-metal supplier for a complex set of cosmetic stainless weldments. They quickly promised delivery, so quickly it made me uneasy. I asked for a set of parts to use for acceptance prior to giving them the production go-ahead."

"The acceptance samples were good and fit the first time," he continues. "So I gave permission for full production with no changes. It was at that point the vendor admitted they couldn't meet the production deadline. Apparently, they were counting on me to request a change."

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But the story has a happy ending. “We eventually asked **Florida Sheet Metal** in West Melbourne, Fla. to quickly make the parts. As busy as people there were, they managed to turn out perfect parts,” our reader relates. “Now I recommend Florida Sheet Metal whenever I get the chance.”

But sometimes, deliveries get delayed. How suppliers respond in such situations truly gives customers insight into their attitude toward service. One reader recounts his experience with **James Spring & Wire Co.** in Frazer, Pa. He needed prototypes — fast. “But the first batch of complex layered-spring prototypes they built were lost as they moved between plants during a hurricane. The company quickly turned out a second set of prototypes, at its cost, and they worked well in the design.”

Another recurring comment from satisfied customers regards companies that come through in the clutch, earning themselves customers for life. One reader recalls the time his company had bid its way into a problem. “We had quoted a hydraulic-crawler drilling machine. But by the time the order was finalized, the engine had become obsolete. We were in a dilemma. We had beaten out stiff international competition to get the order and we would have lost all credibility if we didn’t deliver. But a new engine would mean time lost on validation, plus we would have to ask for a deviation from the specs.”

Once again, a happy ending. “We approached **Cummins** for help,” writes our

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reader. “They had a spare engine which had been earmarked for another customer. They agreed to convert it to our configuration. It was a great gesture. It involved a lot of items which they didn’t have in stock and they had to go out and find.”

PERSEVERANCE AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Another way companies win customer loyalty is by sticking with a project no matter what problems crop up. An aerospace engineer recounts how **Brycoat**, Safety Harbor, Fla., stood behind its claims and helped him develop a method of putting a nitride coating on a spherical aluminum spacecraft shell. “The Brycoat engineers stuck it out through several design iterations, always keeping me updated, until we had a workable solution,” he says. “And they didn’t charge us until the project was finished.”

Engineers also appreciate working with suppliers that have in-house expertise. A reader who works as an engineer in the packing industry recalls how his company made a big push into machine vision to improve quality, an area in which they had little experience. “Fortunately, we hooked up with Randy Carlson at **Cognex Corp.**” he says. “Randy can deal with sales, technical information and support. Unlike some sales people who think they know everything and will even give you false info just to sell a product, Randy admits when a problem’s too big for him and calls in someone who can do the job. And he’s never too busy to take my calls.” **MD**

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Thoughts on customer service

The customer writes your paycheck. That's the primary reason to manage customer service as you would other elements of your organization. Another point to note is that an unhappy customer advertises that fact to as many as 20 people while a happy customer communicates their level of satisfaction to five at most. The question becomes "What message do you want your customers to advertise for you?" Successful companies manage this perception rather than letting it be answered by happenstance.

Creating a customer service culture is more than training. It entails defining your desired customer service culture and identifying your crucial moments of truth or interactions with the customer and deciding how each of these interactions will be managed. A company with a customer-service culture also uses frustrations or breakdowns in customer service as opportunities to add value to the customer while at the same time improving the customer-service delivery system. Important as well is the implementation of an accountability system to ensure employees are using the desired behaviors and the customer is getting the desired level of service.

Organizational change requires two tracks. The first is to define the structural components of the change process. These are the system changes that underwrite customer service, e.g., defining the desired customer service culture, staff meetings to work with moments-of-truth, and measurements. The second track consists of employees adapting behaviors that will improve customer service. Both tracks must be in gear to successfully improve an organization's customer service culture.

— Larry Cole, MD Customer Service Award judge

The panel of judges

Lior Arussy is an author, consultant, and a pioneer of Customer Experience Management (CEM). Arussy's company, Strativity Group Inc., helps Global 2000 organizations and emerging businesses create lasting, profitable relationships with customers and employees. Arussy received his undergraduate degree from Case Western Reserve University and his MBA from Case's Weatherhead School of Management.



John R. Brandt is CEO and founder of The MPI Group. He has spent more than two decades studying leadership in effective, purpose-driven organizations. Brandt advises companies on adapting to customer expectations and new markets.

Larry Cole has a Ph.D. in psychology and is the founder of PeopleMax Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in maximizing people's potential. He is co-founder of PeopleSystems SoftWare Inc. which provides software to maximize working relationships and leadership.



Brad Goldense is President and CEO of Goldense Group, Inc. (GGI), a Needham, Mass. consulting and education firm concentrating in advanced business and technology management practices for line management functions. Mr. Goldense has consulted to over 150 of the Fortune 1000 and has worked on productivity improvement and automation projects in over 400 manufacturing locations.

Dwayne A. Pinnell is vice president of the International Customer Service Association. He presently serves as an ISO 9000 internal auditor for his employer, the Cook Composites and Polymers Co. He currently participates as an advisor on the CQP Leadership Council and Corporate Quality Management Team.



Juli Ann Reynolds is the President & CEO of the Tom Peters Co. In addition to speaking, she juggles the multiple priorities of overseeing the firm's day-to-day operations, marketing its services, managing client and consulting partnerships. She holds an MA from the University of Georgia.

Ron Rosenberg is a Certified Speaking Professional and President of QualityTalk Inc. and founder of *Drive-You-Nuts.com*, a Web site devoted to bettering customer service. His commentary has been featured in publications including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. He has also authored business service titles that include "Double Your Memory in 90 Minutes," and "Breaking Out of the Change Trap."



The best of the best

The problem with most award competitions is that the winners have to nominate themselves. That's not the case with MACHINE DESIGN's customer service awards. The only way to enter this contest is to render service outstanding enough to knock the socks off the recipient. The only way to win an award is to have the recipient do the nominating and impress our judges.

Two companies stood out from the rest in the first annual MACHINE DESIGN customer service awards. Our panel of judges thought **Ingersoll-Rand's Productivity Solutions Div.** and **Georgia Automation Inc.** both stood out from a field of customer-service stories that featured tales of late-night scrambling to meet delivery deadlines, fast response despite hurricanes, and tenacity when other vendors had badly dropped the ball.

Automation distributor Georgia Automation Inc. stuck by a long-time customer through a financial rough patch and, in so doing, earned a customer for

Continued on page 132

Ingersoll-Rand's Southern Pines, N.C., product-management team: left to right, Custom Order Manager Ed Herman, Product Managers Steve Diacumakos, Dan Senff, Ken Boyce, and Leon Maness.



Georgia Automation's Conyers, Ga., inside-sales team. Not pictured: the firm's outside salespeople. When this photo was taken, the GA outside sales staff was busy serving customers.

Continued from page 130

life. "Georgia Automation had a commitment to fully understand its customer's project from the beginning through the point of providing excellent service to exceed the customer's expectations," observed judge Larry Cole.

"It is relatively easy to find a single person at a company who will care enough to make a difference. It is much more difficult to find the spirit of service instilled in the people across the board and an integral part of the company's DNA. The longevity of the support Georgia Automation provided demonstrate that kind of a commitment," says judge Lior Arussy.

"The relationship between customer and supplier has evolved to one of close collaboration," says the MD reader who nominated the company. "Throughout our ordeal, Georgia Automation increased their efforts to help us save money so we could remain a strong contender in the textile machinery market."

The Productivity Solutions Div. of Ingersoll-Rand got kudos for hand-holding a customer through a tough installation problem though there was no direct financial gain to them. "Their service story reads like an action movie," remarked judge Juli Ann Reynolds, president and CEO of the Tom Peters Co. "Mad dashes to ship motors, shipping heartbreaks, certain failure, then Mr. Maness and his team offering to build and ship two new motors ... on a Memorial Day weekend. The customer had not even asked for this. He probably thought it wasn't possible. Mr. Maness and his team made the impossible a reality. The fact that I-R wasn't trying to close some huge new sale but simply to honor its commitment to a current customer makes this story all the more compelling."

All of the companies nominated by MACHINE DESIGN readers, and particularly our top nominees, deserve an atta-boy.

MD

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The customer service honor roll

MACHINE DESIGN readers nominated the following companies for their outstanding customer service.

COMPANY	SERVICE LOCATION
ABC Hobbies	Mojave Valley, Az.
Amherst Technologies	Merrimack, N.H.
BHI Corp.	Houston, Tex.
Brush Controls Inc.	Grosse Pointe, Mich.
Brycoat Inc.	Safety Harbor, Fla.
Cognex Corp.	Grand Rapids, Mich.
Cummins Engine Co. Inc.	India
Florida Sheet Metal	West Melbourne, Fla.
GE Co., Motor Div.	Fort Wayne, Ind.
Georgia Automation Inc.	Conyers, Ga.
Ingersoll-Rand Co. Ltd.	Southern Pines, N.C.
Interlink/Turck	Plymouth, Minn.
James Spring Co.	Frazer, Pa.
Keyence Corp.	Indianapolis, Ind.
Ladd Industries Inc.	Kettering, Ohio
McMaster-Carr Supply Co.	Dayton, N.J.
Newark InOne	Bloomfield, Conn.
Parker Hannifin Corp.	Asheville, N.C.
Pelga Engineering	Hudson, Mass.
Protomold Co. Inc.	Maple Plain, Minn.
RSA Inc.	St. Charles, Ill.
SKF USA Inc.	Atlanta, Ga.
THK America	Irvine, Calif.
Validyne Engineering Sales Corp.	Northridge, Calif.