

How May I Train You? (Aug 06)

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The people who answer when an outraged customer is on the line or a disgruntled shopper is in the store can break your business fairly easily. How they're trained is vital. If they're not taught to empathize rather than argue, there will be few return guests, shoppers or diners. Effective customer service training not only makes a difference to the end users of your products or services; it's also one of the clearest ways good instruction can boost the bottom line.

By Margery Weinstein

For Choice Hotels, customer-service training is a way of life. Virtual classes and e-learning augment live class time for customer service personnel, says hotel performance training director John Thompson. Training kits with tools such as workbooks and interactive CD-ROMs or DVDs on topics such as professional manners are shipped to the Silver Spring, Md.-based company's 5,000-plus worldwide hotels. The kits are supplemented by not only pre- and post e-learning work but also regional live events as well.

One of the keys to success for Choice has been the plethora of, well, choices, it gives its front-line workers when it comes to training. "We have to cover the basics quite a bit because a lot of our hotels have a high turnover rate," Thompson says.

"We want to get into the advanced stuff on how to deliver exceptional customer service, but we have to make sure we're also including basics for those individuals who may be new to the hotel. That's why, as often as we can, we try to offer levels of training."

Such "basics" the company might give a tutorial on include a policy of first welcoming new guests rather than just immediately asking if they're checking in. But it also accounts for workers' various skill levels, so, a computer savvy front desk representative won't have to sit through the same property-management-system training session that a less knowledgeable peer might find beneficial.

Regardless of the level, an emphasis is placed in such sessions on how to use the property-management system to enhance their interactions with guests. For example, Thompson says, learners might each be placed behind computers in a classroom with the instructor asking them what information they need to look up in the system based on a guest's request. The hypothetical guest might be, for instance, someone who has stayed in the hotel before and wants the same room and the same rate he previously enjoyed. Or, learners may have to demonstrate they know how to look up data in the system's concierge tool, which features information such as local restaurants and driving directions.

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Vancouver, Wash.-based electric, water and waste-water service provider Clark Public Utilities also knows the benefits that can be reaped by adding e-learning to the standard customer-service prep regimen. The company bolstered programming by incorporating e-learning from St. George, Utah-based LearnKey in December. "Technology also helps meet the need of different learning levels," says quality service manager Mike McClean.

Another benefit of customer-service training is teaching corporate culture. At Choice, along with the intricacies of the hotel's computer system and the proper way to treat guests, workers are trained in the importance of taking ownership of their work. "If a guest comes to you with an issue," Thompson says, "you don't pass the buck, you don't hand it off to someone else and hope it gets taken care of."

Lessons on the proper behavior workers should display while on the job are sometimes taught through e-learning such as scenario-based, role-playing simulations. The program might begin, for instance, by setting the scene: a guest walks up to the desk unhappy with the room they've been assigned. From there, the student would be given options as to how he or she would respond. After processing the response, the system then would give tips on "how you can still deliver great service even if the scenario

is less than positive," Thompson notes. "If they have a problem or issue they bring to you, that doesn't mean you still can't win them over and deliver exceptional service." This e-learning, though vital, would be coupled with live activities such as role-play.

The blended approach that Choice favors is essential given their guests' ever-growing standards, Thompson says. "The customer expectations are continually increasing for guest service," he says of the company's mostly mid-scale hotels. "Ten years ago, the expectations of service at some of these mid-scale hotels weren't as high as what they are today, so one of our goals in training has to be that we're helping the front desk staff learn to deliver better service to meet and exceed these expectations. We can't assume that just because it's a mid-scale hotel, we're going to deliver mid-scale service. That's not going to fly in this day and age."

Clark Public Utilities also has noted the need to diversify training approaches. "Each year, as we serve more customers," McClean says, "the use of technology becomes more important to help limit large group training sessions, which, in turn, helps us achieve our service goals."

Just in Time to Serve

With phones ringing nonstop and requests for new orders, information and repairs coming in constantly, customer service is probably one of the fastest-paced jobs in an organization. For that reason, training is often best when it's gotten on the fly, just at the moment your reps and frontline workers need it most.

Software that allows employees to look up answers to questions while the customer is waiting on telephone line, for instance, can be invaluable, says Harvey Singh, CEO and founder of Cary, N.C.-based on-demand technology provider Instancy. Companies, he says, are increasingly combining on-demand solutions that allow on-the-job training with structured e-learning courseware in which classes are completed online separate from the time they spend answering calls or waiting on customers. "The volume of content that a lot of these customer service reps need to deal with is ever-expanding," Singh says. "Products are getting more complex if you look at [business-to-business] devices or even consumer type of products." And with more product features to choose from come more questions reps are expected to handle. They need a system with searching flexibility, Singh says.

It's also critical that your on-demand system speak your customer's language, meaning it shouldn't require reps to translate customer questions into jargon or techno-talk before information can be located, says Ghenno Senbetta, president of Chicago-based performance technology services provider Powered Performance. "What you find a lot of the time is the systems themselves are not designed with the customer language in mind," Senbetta says. "They are designed with more of a technical developer language in mind, which is really a mismatch because customers use very different language than technicians."

Design can even negate the need for training. The key is finding the right designer. "Put somebody with usability and user-experience design skills as part of the team that would develop the software itself," Senbetta recommends. "A lot of times the end-user advocate is not necessarily represented as part of the system development process, and, unfortunately, training becomes a compensation for the badly designed system. Why would you have to train people on something that should really be intuitive?"

Sometimes on-demand answers are arrived at through less technological means. Atlanta-based home improvement supply chain The Home Depot, for one, provides in-store associates with a tri-folded legal size sheet of paper featuring primers on its products, says Chris Greenwald, senior manager of the Customers First Team. "It's basically just a loose-leaf brochure associates can grab and put in their apron," he says. An employee who isn't sure which kind of wood would be best for which type of home repair, for instance, can refer to the tip sheet for an explanation on the difference between whitewood boards and pressure-treated lumber.

The Home Depot call center department, however, has tentative plans to purchase an on-demand

system, says Chip Lindsay, learning manager for customer contact centers. "Because [the call center department is] relatively small at this point, but growing, that is in the plan to implement," he says. "Some version of that is on our 2007 plan."

Customer Feedback Fuels Programs

The Home Depot lets customers tell the company how to better the service they're receiving, says Roger Anderson, director of learning of the Store Associate Learning Institute. "We've gone out and asked the customer, 'What's important to you from the standpoint of an excellent shopping experience?' " Anderson says of the company's Voice of the Customer program. "We've been able to go back then and tailor the training to match that. We're telling the associates, 'These are the important customer measures, and [this is] how you address those uniquely in each of your stores.' " To gather the data, the company invites recent store customers to visit a Web site to take a survey that will qualify them to win a \$5,000 Home Depot gift card.

Those buying over the phone also are invited to take the survey. After the call is complete, the reps ask customers if they would like to participate and then transfer those who would to an automated phone-response system.

When Home Depot noticed from survey responses that customers were too frequently unable to find items, the company realized it needed to institute a new inventory labeling system that would require training, Greenwald says. The learning and back-end operations teams coordinated to deploy an e-learning solution that taught store and inventory management associates how to use the new system, "even down to the point of, 'How do I deal with a customer in an out-of-stock situation?' " Anderson explains.

The Voice of the Customer program, launched about two years ago, also has shaped orientation. The first course new associates take, "Creating Customers for Life," was heavily influenced by survey responses, Anderson says. That three- to four-hour instructor-led course, which all hourly associates complete as part of their on-boarding, is coupled with a Web-based course called "Creating a Service Environment," which "further explains what the Voice of the Customer components are [that] we measure, and what the customers are telling us is important," Anderson says.

"It really talks about how all the positions within the store work together to create a service environment so that customer experience is that excellent customer service."

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