

Extraordinary Service

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN on the receiving end of extraordinary service? If you have, you're almost certainly a repeat customer. And you've found a business that is just about guaranteed to do well.

An incident involving Jim, our general sales manager, describes such service. The fact that I didn't hear about it until months later made it all the more special. Even then, it came up casually, in connection with something unrelated.

Jim had learned that one of our smaller customers had placed insufficient orders and was out of a particular part. Even though it was over the Christmas holidays, they had hoped to run their factory. But without the parts from us, they would have to shut down. Unknown to anyone but his wife, and unheralded within our company, Jim drove a hundred miles one way through a snowstorm, the parts in the back of his car, to keep the customer in operation. Needless to say, Jim's unselfish initiative cemented

an already good customer relationship.

The idea of serving is firmly rooted in the Scriptures, particularly in New Testament Christianity. Those cultures which have been most impacted by the gospel generally have a strong underlying ethic of service. Conversely, in many cultures the idea of serving a customer doesn't even exist. The closest term to *customer* in the Russian language is *user of production!*

The Model Servant

Jesus is our unexcelled example of true servanthood. In his own words he makes it clear that he came to serve, not to be served. The apostle Paul cites this aspect of the Lord's character and encourages us to have a similar outlook. One paraphrase of Paul's letter to the Philippians is especially descriptive:

Let Christ Jesus be your example as to what your attitude should be. For he, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And, having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.

Here we see the true nature of servanthood. The Lord came to earth in complete humility, even though he is the Author and Sustainer of all creation. His servant nature was evident beginning at his birth, which took place in a rude feeding trough for animals. He lived modestly, holding virtually nothing in his possession, but he gave to others lavishly and continuously.

Jesus made himself so available to others that he often had to stay up through the night to get time to pray. He resisted every attempt by his fellow Jews to promote him to the role of a ruling monarch. At the end, he was falsely accused, made an open spectacle, sentenced unjustly under intense pressure from an unruly mob—and he died on a cross, a crude and shameful form of execution.

In all that Jesus did he was a model. His impeccable example was embraced and lived out by his early followers, who understood the joy in sacrifice and the reward in serving. Theirs was not a life of comfort or convenience, but they turned the world upside down through extending themselves on behalf of others. Nor did it stop there. Throughout history, Christ's life has reproduced in his followers the fruit of extraordinary sacrifice, extensive volunteerism and immeasurable benefit to others, on a scale no other religion or philosophy can demonstrate.

The Serving Organization

How realistic is it to expect to apply the concept of biblically based service in today's often harsh, always demanding business environment? In our company, a starting point has been to make our expectations clear, as expressed in our Corporate Roadmap, a printed statement of our core beliefs and values that we use to provide direction for our entire workforce:

We commit to being very attentive to our customers, going beyond servicing them to satisfying their highest expectations. We pledge to be responsive, following through on commitments while avoiding any kind of arrogance or indifference.

We desire to be predictable, reliable and trustworthy, willing to go the extra mile for something we believe in.

We don't have to look far for ways in which to follow through. The tone in which phones are answered, how we handle the irritated customer, how aggressive we are in remedying problems, all knit together to define our service character or its lack. Jan Carlson, former CEO of SAS Airlines, describes these encounters as "moments of truth"—occasions, if we choose, for extraordinary service.

Here are some of the specific ways we've sought to bring a higher level of service to others:

- We expect our internal as well as our external customers to be well served. An "internal customer" is anyone who receives services from another, such as a manager who receives a letter typed by a secretary, or an employee who receives a performance review from the boss, or a person in final assembly who receives a part from the welding or paint department. Each such transaction—and they are occurring between people in business all the time—provides a prime opportunity to serve one another.
- We find we must keep our external customers visible throughout the organization. Occasionally our production employees visit customers' plant facilities. There they can meet their plant-floor counterparts and ask them directly about ways to improve what we do for them.
- Uncompromising quality goes hand in hand with service. We have put sophisticated quality systems in place to help assure that we are delivering substance, not hype.
- An Employee-of-the-Month is nominated and selected by

fellow employees, based in part on unselfish cooperation with others. The employee is recognized by a professionally made photograph which is prominently displayed, a biographical article in our monthly newsletter, and verbal commendation at periodic companywide meetings.

□ Our supervisors are specifically trained to “serve” their employees: facilitating, not demanding; coaching, not bossing; teaching, not criticizing. We keep a very flat organizational structure with a total of four levels to encourage lateral transactions and discourage hierarchy.

□ We try to do lots of listening—the most important aspect of communication. We regularly survey customers. Employees meet in “roundtables” with management to discuss key issues, keeping us from being content with the status quo.

Serving—a Powerful Force

Posturing the enterprise toward service takes work. Most of us would rather be served; serving others often cuts across the grain. But for those companies and individuals who make the effort, the results can be dramatic.

I saw an impressive example of this during a business meeting held at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Palm Springs, California. Noticing the exceptional courtesy and willingness of the staff to help, I inquired of the manager: “How do you achieve this with your people?”

He pulled from his pocket the principles by which the Ritz hotels are managed and explained the extensive training that surrounds these principles. He then made a fascinating statement.

“Mr. Beckett," (he had somehow managed to learn my name!) “when we came to this valley a few years ago, there was hardly any notion of customer service. Now it seems to be everywhere, from the fast-food restaurant to the auto repair shop. People are asking what they can do to help and are following up on the quality of their service. I believe we planted some seeds that are sprouting all over. It’s very gratifying.”

Guess where I’d like to stay when I return to Palm Springs!

The concept of serving is a powerful force, especially when motivations are sincere and in keeping with the biblical root. The truths of Jesus’ example are relevant today—in our individual lives and in the workplace. They are emulated when leadership puts on the mantle of the servant. They are nurtured by those who put others first, who—with warmth and sincerity—provide and keep providing extraordinary service.