

Always People. Always

Last Word

By Scott M. Paton

Quality is about people.

Two months ago, I wrote of some of my experiences with Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer. I even got Wal-Mart's attention. See the letter from Barbara Brown, Wal-Mart's vice president of customer service, in this month's "Letters" section on page 6.

When relating my experiences, I wrote about some rather unhelpful Wal-Mart employees who didn't have a very good grasp of the English language. Although the majority of the many letters we received agreed with my perspective, a few found my comments to be racist.

I think that racism and discrimination are alive and well in America today. Neither of them should be tolerated anywhere, at any time, by anyone, particularly in a business setting.

Having said this, I think that those few letter-writers who found my comments to be racist need to check their Webster's for the meaning of the word "racism." Commenting on someone's ability to communicate doesn't make one a racist. If I had written that the employee didn't perform his or her job well because of his or her race, national origin, religion, sexual preference/identity, gender or age, then I would have been guilty of discrimination and/or racism.

Those who found my comments to be racist missed the point. A person who cannot communicate well in the native language of the majority of his or her customers does not belong in a customer contact position. I don't care if the person is red, white, black, blue or green. I've had terrific service from Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans, Pacific Islanders, Caucasians and just about every other ethnic group. (I say "just about" because I haven't met every ethnic group yet.)

My other point was that the employees were either unable or unwilling to help. The cashier was unable to help because of a policy that prevented her from opening her drawer to give me change. The Wal-Mart employee who wouldn't help me at the service desk was either a jerk or unable to help because of management's requirement that something other than assisting a customer was a priority.

All this talk of racism and poor customer service may leave you wondering what this column is doing in a quality magazine. It has everything to do with quality because quality is about people.

People run coordinate measuring machines, design software, interpret data, build processes, deliver service, take orders, hire, set policy, audit, report, and on and on.

Organizations in this country still tend to think of quality in terms of manufacturing: "How many defect-free widgets can we manufacture this quarter?" OR, in terms of delivery: "How many on-time deliveries can we make from the distribution center to the store this quarter?" They still don't see the interaction between employee and customer as a process that's every bit, if not more, vital than the process that manufactured or delivered the part that the customer is buying.

Let's look at Wal-Mart again. Sam's baby has state-of-the art software systems that manage its distribution. It has talented people who decided where to locate its stores for maximum return. It knows exactly how much of each product to order to maximize sales and minimize inventory. Yet

when I walk into a Wal-Mart at midnight and I can't get my questions answered or can't find what I'm looking for, those state-of-the-art systems are worthless.

If quality is conformance to requirements, then Wal-Mart is succeeding at one level and failing on another. It's doing a terrific job of keeping products in stock, selling them for low prices and generating a decent return on its investments. But it's failing to meet the requirement espoused by Barbara Brown in her letter this month: "Regardless of how late at night you shop at a Wal-Mart store, our expectation is the same: We're here to serve the customer. We want you to be satisfied every time you walk through our doors."

Will employing an individual who can't or won't answer my questions satisfy me? Will inane policies that prevent employees from assisting me satisfy me? Will closing the customer service desk at 11 p.m. in a store that's open 24 hours a day satisfy me? What's Wal-Mart's definition of customer satisfaction, anyway?

Speaking of customer service, several of our letter-writers mentioned that there is no customer service or complaint link at www.walmart.com. This isn't entirely true. There is a customer service link for Wal-Mart shoppers who buy online. Those of you really interested in Wal-Mart should check out www.walmartfacts.com. It's Wal-Mart's response to it multitude of critics.

Wal-Mart's slogan is "Always Low Prices. Always." Perhaps Wal-Mart should rethink that slogan. How about: "Always Excellent Service. Always." Or, "Always Excellent People. Always." That might give it a focus it's so sorely lacking.

I don't mean to pick on Wal-Mart. There are many other organizations that I could mention as well. But, frankly, the reaction to my Wal-Mart editorial was so incredible that there must be a lot of people out there who feel the same as I do.

I look forward to your comments. Let me know what you think about the people element of quality and what organizations such as Wal-Mart can do to improve.

Next month – just for a change – I'll tell you what I do like.

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