



Great Customer Service

*A critical success factor
in good times or bad*

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One of the things I like best about writing these *Insights* is that I never know from month to month what I'll write about or where the idea will come from. Sometimes it comes from an IT article, a book or journal that has no relationship to IT, and frequently from past experiences from the days when I walked in your shoes.

This month, the idea came from a visit with Dan Morreale, Vice President and CIO of Atlanticare Health System in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The topic is customer service. More specifically, what is great customer service? And, does great customer service have to be sacrificed when you're in budget-cutting mode?

During my visit with Dan, I was impressed by the following two electronic slides in his lobby.

*Great service
inspires stories:
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The Simple Truths of Great Service

- **Great service inspires stories:** Aim for great service and success will follow.
- **Great service uses outside-the-box-thinking:** The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.
- **Great service is a choice:** Always give customers more than they expect.
- **Great service starts with a clear vision:** Some see things as they are and ask, "Why?" Others dream things that never were and ask, "Why not?"
- **Great service requires that everyone catch the vision:** Cherish your visions and your dreams.
- **Great service surprises people:** We don't remember days. We remember moments in our lives.
- **Great service begins with anyone:** Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.
- **Great service brings customers back:** A customer is the most important visitor on our premises.
- And finally, **great service comes from the heart.**



Service level measurements become a matter of pride, providing a sense of accomplishment for staff who don't frequently garner the accolades and recognition of other positions on the front lines, such as doctors and nurses.

Great Service Goes the Extra Mile

“And then some.” These three little words are the secret to success. They are the difference between average people and top people in most companies.

- The top people always do what is expected . . . *and then some.*
- They are thoughtful of others, and are considerate and kind . . . *and then some.*
- They meet their responsibilities fairly and squarely . . . *and then some.*
- They are good friends and helpful neighbors . . . *and then some.*
- They can be counted on in an emergency . . . *and then some.*

I am thankful for people like this, for they make the world a better place. Their spirit of service is summed up in three little words: **“And then some.”**

Great customer service doesn't just happen. It has to be encouraged and expected. It has to be defined in terms that customers can appreciate and that help them do their jobs better.

Measuring great customer service

Not only should great customer service be expected, it should also be measured. You don't need to identify a large number of service level measurements (SLMs). You need to have only a few for each component of your team. Everyone can then observe and measure performance . . . *and know when great service is being provided.* SLMs are a critical success factor that can quickly become a matter of pride, providing a sense of accomplishment for staff who don't frequently garner the accolades and recognition of other positions on the front lines, such as doctors and nurses.

To pick your SLMs, I suggest you ask your customers what measurements they use to evaluate a specific component of their IT services. For example, measurements for the help desk may include questions such as:

- How many rings before the phone was answered?
- How many problems could be solved without referring to someone else?
- How long did it take to fix a reported problem?

Once you've agreed on what metrics to use, it's important to post the results and refer to them frequently in management and staff meetings. *SLMs won't be taken seriously until you take them seriously.* It's also important to set realistic targets that can be achieved and, in fact, exceeded. Unrealistic goals can be worse than not having any goals at all.



Once your team has embraced the right attitude and earned a reputation for good service, you're in a better position to address budget reductions if they come your way.

Publishing SLMs to demonstrate value

In addition to publishing your scores internally, it's equally important to publish them externally (i.e., to your customers and senior management team). This shows your team is trying to improve its service levels and that you take them seriously. Great customer service is defined as much by a great attitude as by the actual service rendered—as demonstrated by Dan's electronic signs. The beautiful part is that a great attitude is free!

Having documented and published SLMs is the first step to establishing a reputation for good customer service. SLMs provide great value in that they:

- Allow you to clearly demonstrate value
- Create a historical track record for conscientious service
- Enable you to equate the value to a cost
- Put you in a position to define the effects of enhanced/reduced staffing and/or other budget adjustments on your service levels, customer satisfaction, and bottom line

Once you start to document your service levels, analysis can be performed to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Adjustments can be made to improve service and tracked to ensure successful outcomes. If additional funding to resolve service issues is needed, your documentation will help justify appropriate funding increases.

Leveraging a good service track record when times are tough

Once your team has embraced the right attitude and earned a reputation for good service, you're in a better position to address budget reductions if they come your way. If you can equate a given staff level to a specific SLM, you have the option of negotiating new SLMs should you be asked to reduce staff in a specific function. For example:

- If you have an SLM to answer the help desk phone within four rings and you're asked to reduce the help desk team, you have the right to renegotiate the response time.
- Reductions in your network support team will affect the speed with which you can respond to network and/or workstation outages.
- If you have an SLM for adding new employees to various application registries and granting access to specific applications, a reduction in support staff could justify a reduced response time.
- As the number of applications and online customers grow, computer response time can be affected. A freeze in capital necessary for adding computing capacity could justify slower response times.

You no longer have to appear to be resisting cuts without any good explanation. Now you can easily demonstrate the result of any cost-cutting decision you are asked to accept. These are causes and effects that the entire senior management team should own and understand.

In tough times that have included expense and staff reductions, you, your staff, and your customers know when the level of service drops in spite of best efforts and a good service



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attitude. Morale and service levels can drop even further. Without SLMs, however, you have no basis for any type of discussion except "I'm sorry" or "Let's try harder." But that's not always good enough when senior management is looking for an explanation of unacceptable performance and your customers are complaining about your unresponsiveness.

Without a well-established and readily available set of SLMs, you might wind up the scapegoat for an arbitrary decision to cut expenses without understanding the consequences. And, to the extent that IT is considered strategic to the organization, the ensuing damage can be significant.

The trick is to establish a reputation for good service with a tangible track record so that if budget cuts do force a reduction in service, everyone is on the same page and share your pain, not doubt your performance. Your customers know what great service looks like. And you and your team have a responsibility to measure and deliver it. When times are tough, it's what will set you apart . . . *and then some.*

Tally Ho!

Ward