



Hiding from customer complaints?

By John A. Gentle, DLP

CONTRARY TO POPULAR OPINION, customer service is not about order processing. It's actually about maintaining your company's best interest, and it demands a rigorous commitment and a specific level of skill in the effective resolution of problems after the sale is made.

You can test the strength of your company's customer service process through your company's words, actions, and deeds.

Unfortunately, many companies have associated customer service only with order processing and payment and not with Effective Problem Resolution (EPR)—and many have attempted to hide from this responsibility as well.

When a customer needs assistance your company should make itself available at no charge and the EPR process should work in a positive manner on the customer's behalf. Generally, retail stores have an area set aside for "problem resolution." When, however, products are sold via the internet, or when the retail store can't or isn't willing to provide assistance, the only alternative left is to contact the manufacturer or distributor.

Regrettably, many companies have chosen not to provide contact information on their packaging in an effort to skillfully shuffle the blame to others. In this case it would be easy for a big-box electronics store just to say, "We just sell it. You really need to talk to the manufacture."

Americans are more likely to complain to their friends and family rather than to the offending company; and as a result, they either don't go back to the store or they just stop purchasing a particular brand. All the offending companies know is that sales are down, but they don't have a clue as to why.

If companies fail to create an active EPR program and actively seek feedback on their products or services, they will be creating programs to generate increased sales that are misdirected and will not yield the desired results.

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We will know what kind of company you really are by the words, actions, and deeds of your problem resolution team.

So, what is the mark of a company that has a strong EPR? Here's an example: Last year I replaced my weather-faded American flag. Over the first several months the new pole rusted and I contacted the company, Heath Outdoor Products, for help. Their customer service group helped me identify the correct flag pole and days later a new pole and flag arrived at my door. Two months later, when the same problem re-surfaced, I contacted Nanci Beck, customer relations manager for Heath, and related my problem to her again.

Two days later another American flag kit was on my door step. What was unique about this replacement was that the company not only replaced the pole but they replaced the flag as

well—and this time they sent a premium flag and pole, a kit that cost much more than the one I purchased originally.

For Nanci and Heath Outdoor Products, EPR is something they have embraced. They have not hidden from customer or supplier complaints. They honor the promise of their brand.

An active EPR process provides companies with insight that they can't get anywhere else. It's a barometer of their manufacturing and logistics processes. Not establishing an effective process is actually counter-productive to future sales, operating efficiency, and your bottom line. It's all about keeping your eye on the customer—no matter who that customer may be—and keeping them coming back.

For sure, I have told all my friends and colleagues contrasting EPR stories and I will be looking for the Heath brand every time I shop; and, for sure, I'll never shop at that offending big-box electronics store again.

One final note: Having a strong feedback process for your suppliers is also extremely important. If companies don't make it easy and safe for suppliers to constructively provide feedback on issues that affect productivity and safety, how will we ever improve our processes?

Creating an Ombudsman and repeatedly communicating the need for constructive feedback from your suppliers is the best way to surface and correct problems and have your suppliers coming back to you as a Shipper of Preference.