

# When Times Get Tough, Service Makes a Difference

FRAN CARVILLE, CRM  
Carco Awards

The assailant came quietly into the early morning. Much of Gulf Coast was still asleep. But everyone awoke to the monster's howls, as he embarked on a path of mass destruction. He broke into homes and businesses, through windows and through rooftops. The assailant was relentless, attacking every age group, every race, gender and economic class in the area. He showed no mercy as his attacks reeked havoc. And then, he was gone.

Gone, but not forgotten.

The assailant's name was Gustav and he took direct aim on Louisiana. My city has seen many hurricanes come and go, but none took its toll the way Gustav did on Baton Rouge. Trees smashed through homes, 1.2 million people without power, a city in the dark and at a standstill. No electricity means no gasoline, no traffic lights, no food, no telephone service, no air conditioning, no business, no . . . *nothing*.

Alone, on an imaginary island, in 21st Century America.

About a week after the storm, electricity began to return and large companies reopened, thanks to generators. And we learned the new shopping procedures very quickly. They went something like this: 1) Line up outside of the grocery store, the hardware store or the gas station and wait to be admitted into the parking lot or store. 2) Five to ten people at a time were allowed in, due to limited staff and limited lighting. 3) Cash only! Limited selection! No returns! If his intent was to turn lives upside down, the assailant named Gustav had done his job extremely well.

Believe it or not, this is not an article about hurricanes. Most everyone has suffered hardships—the Midwest floods, the wildfires in the West, the blizzards in the North, and of course, hurricanes along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. As we all discover, if we live long enough, life will throw you a



curve ball from time to time. How we react is what makes the difference. Do we step up to the plate in our businesses and give our customers the best we have, no matter what is happening to us? Or do we join with the majority of retailers and duck when a bad pitch comes our way?

It was in the days and weeks after Gustav, that I came to realize our city was being assaulted again, this time by many in the service industry. The roofing companies had but one question, "Have you received your insur-

ance check yet?" The insurance representatives spent most of their time telling customers what was *not* covered. Television service that might be able to fit you in one month from now was not apologetic. Neither was the FEMA help line, where a recording informed you that all agents were busy and disconnected your calls. But these examples all occurred over the telephone. Surely face-to-face service was still alive and well. Right?

## A Contrast of Services

A few days after Gustav hit, we reached the point where we could no longer eat a diet of Vienna sausage and cold beans. We ventured out to the grocery store, dodging fallen trees and power lines. We gladly stood outside of the store in 90-degree heat with other customers, waiting for our turn to enter the store. After waiting for about an hour, our turn came. One employee waved us through, as she continued her conversation on her cell phone. We did our shopping and approached the check out. The gum-chewing cashier rang up our purchases, as she complained to another employee about having to work. No "hello," no "how are you today," no "thank you." Apparently when Gustav blew through, he took all semblance of personal service with him.

Next it was on to Home Depot, to try and replenish our supply of batteries and to purchase an additional blue tarp for our roof. What we found as we approached the store was more of the same. A long line of frustrated consumers, waiting for their turn to get in the store. Same song, different verse.

Or, maybe not!

While the line was just as long and just as hot as at the grocery store, something was *very* different. As we waited, employees walked the line—handing out bottled water and telling everyone what items had come in on

the morning's truck. The employees found chairs for an elderly couple and answered questions about what the store had in stock.

As we approached the front of the line, we saw two employees guarding the doors, ensuring no one broke in line. They asked how we were and as we talked, we learned both were from New York. Once inside the store, an employee from Kansas smiled as she fielded questions and directed customers to the appropriate area. A gracious, attentive cashier from Louisiana asked how we were doing—and really seemed to care. It appears that Home Depot has relief/recovery teams made up of employees from across the country. What an idea!

As we left the store, we thanked the employees for being in our city, and for helping us out. Their response? "We are honored to be able to help others." Honored! Not, "The pay is great," not "Hey, it's a free trip," not "The company *made us*

come here!" Nope, they were honored to be able to service consumers in a time of need. The service was excellent, the helpfulness of everyone was amazing, the experience brought smiles to our faces. For the first time in a long time, that old children's saying had meaning—they turned my frown upside down. Wow . . . now that's service!

Two retailers, facing the same obstacles, with two very different approaches to doing business in difficult times. One: Throw open the doors and take the consumers' money. The other: Give service with care and a smile while providing products to consumers. Hmmmm . . . which of these two do you think converted weary consumers into long-term loyal customers that day?

### **Converting Consumers**

The unidentified grocery store was selling merchandise. The Home Depot was selling service. And so, it got

me to thinking: Are we just selling awards or do we also sell service to every consumer we interact with? Are we just looking for the immediate dollar or working to develop long term relationships that encourage loyalty? Do you want a one time customer who spends \$1,000 with you one time, or do you want that \$1,000 customer for the next 10 years for sales of \$10,000?

Do you want that consumer to make a purchase from you because your store is convenient or do you want that loyal customer to tell others how great your company is to do business with? To build customer loyalty, we have to do more than offer products at reasonable prices. What can we do?

1. **Keep in Touch.** Most retailers do a good job of servicing the customer while he or she is in the store. But after the transaction is completed,

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the customer is out of sight, out of mind. Set yourself apart from your competition by sending a thank-you note or giving the customer a call to see how their event went. A quarterly newsletter or e-letter keeps your company's name in front of your customers year around.

2. **Remember the Lifetime Value.** If you consider the lifetime value of a customer, rather than just looking at the current order a customer has placed with you, it just might change your way of thinking. Do you really want to argue with a customer over a mistake, no matter who's error it was? Is upsetting a customer over a policy really worth losing the customer's business for a lifetime? Always keep the long term relationship with the customer in mind when making such decisions.

3. **Make Loyalty a Priority.**

Customer loyalty should be the responsibility of everyone in your business. Brainstorm ways to treat every customer the way they want to be treated. Each of us is loyal to some business in our community because the business treats us the way we want to be treated. Take your very best customer experiences and determine how you can incorporate these experiences in to your business.

4. **Tell Them.** So often we complete a transaction by simply saying, "Thank you." Keep your customers' loyalty by saying more. Tell them how much you truly appreciate their business. People like to be appreciated, but in today's marketplace a consumer rarely gets more than the automatic "Thank you" that sometimes translates to "Okay, I have your money, now go away." If you take the time to convey true appreciation, the customer will reward you with more orders and referrals.

5. **Listen to Them.** Take the time to hear what your customers are saying. Watch their body language. You can make almost anyone feel important if you give them 100% of your attention. And

everyone likes to do business in a store where they feel important. An added bonus to you is that research shows good listeners make more sales than do good talkers.

6. **Keep Your Promises.** Do what you are supposed to do and when you said you would do it. Do it right the first time. Do it for the dollar amount you quoted the customer. Keeping your promises is the minimum we should do for customers. Exceeding your promises builds loyalty.

7. **Make Them Comfortable.** Give your customers a comfortable, pleasant environment to shop in. A clean, well-ordered showroom. A comfortable temperature. Good signage. Updated displays. A good selection. An easy shopping experience. A place that *you* would like to shop.

*Loyal customers will have more effect on your bottom line than any marketing campaign ever will.*

8. **Take Their Calls.** For most of us, service is number one in the showroom. But that philosophy does not always filter down to the telephone. Give every caller the same time and respect you would give them face-to-face. Be accessible to your customers. According to *Retailers' World*, consumers ranked positive telephone experiences as the number 3 reason for loyalty to a business.

9. **Make it Convenient.** People are busier than ever—so a great way to have loyal customers is to make it easy to do business with you. Remind them about repeat orders. Keep good records so that re-orders are a snap. Be their expert. Offer customers as many shopping options as possible—a good Web site, an 800 number, the ability to

order by e-mail or fax, after hours by appointment. If the order warrants, go to the customer's place of business to take the order. Delivery is an option that many customers are interested in. Our job is to make life easier for our customers.

10. **Whatever It Takes!** Every business should have a plan to keep loyal customers happy in troubled times. After Gustav hit, we had no electricity or telephone service in our business for two weeks—that's 14 long days. And yet, customers needed to be contacted and serviced. We contacted some customers using sporadic cell phone service. For those we could not contact, we made a list of their addresses and drove to their homes or businesses. Most were stunned by the personal contact and very appreciative of our company's concern. Loyalty—whatever it takes.

**The Bottom Line**

Customer loyalty can have a tremendous impact on your company's bottom line. Loyal customers can help to strengthen your position in the marketplace. Loyal customers buy all of their awards from you and tell others positive things about you. Loyal customers aren't as likely to price shop when they need awards because they want to do business with you. Loyal customers will have more effect on your bottom line than any marketing campaign ever will. Loyalty matters!

Customer loyalty should be an ongoing priority in every company. As an unidentified Wal-mart employee was once quoted as saying, "without customers, we ain't got no store." Ain't that the truth! ▲



*Fran Carville, CRM, is an ARA past president, ARA educational speaker, and a member of the ARA Hall of Fame. Fran and her husband, Tom Carville, CRM, own Carco Awards in Baton Rouge, LA.*