

# one customer at a time

## Part one: one customer at a time

Here at Zingerman's we've done a lot of work over the last few years to introduce effective measurements to assess the quality of our service work. In the interest of quantifying the quality of that service, we do mystery shopping, make customer callbacks, and track things like complaints, order accuracy and late deliveries. As a result, we are able to compile data that tracks the effectiveness of the service we give. As we've grown, this data gathering has allowed us to spot trends and better allocate resources. It's given us quantifiable information that has brought good balance to the intuitive feel we've always had for our customers. Although I appreciate the importance of effectively quantifying customer service measurements, I've been very adamant of late to emphasize the other end of the service spectrum: at the end of the day, service success is attained one customer at a time. The simplicity of this statement makes it easy to overlook its importance.

When your business gets bigger than ten or twelve employees, it can be easy to start thinking about customers as statistical segments, or to see them as merely one more contribution to "average sale." I admit that I live in fear of falling into that mindset. I hope I never do. Because I think that businesses that lose sight of the reality that service is still given one customer at a time pretty soon start losing customers. At first they lose them one at a time. But before long the losses start to expand geometrically as word spreads in the community. And pretty soon, they're out of business.

So. Let me again state the obvious. No matter what sort of organization you're in—big or small, shaky or successful, start up or established institution—great service is ultimately given by each of us just one customer at a time. Which means, quite simply, that the seemingly small things like going the extra mile, or remembering customers' names, or noticing a nice order and saying thanks, or taking time to show a new customer around our place of business...those simple, individual acts are exactly what makes great service happen. And those acts of great service happen because staff members make individual decisions to do things for customers that solidify bonds that last a lifetime.

Early one Sunday morning this past winter, I was sitting in the Deli working at one of the tables in the dining room. I got talking to the couple at the next table, who quickly related to me that—although they've lived in the Ann Arbor area for forty years—they'd never been to Zingerman's until that morning. As always, I was in the middle of about fifteen things and I was sort of in a hurry to get "back to work." But having taught this "one customer at a time" approach so often, I couldn't in good conscience just walk away. So I did what we teach everyone to do. I engaged the customer and spent more time talking to them.

Actually I couldn't quite tell if they were joking with me or not about never having been in. I was worried that maybe I was supposed to know them and they were pulling my leg, and I didn't want to embarrass them or myself by saying the wrong thing. So I kept talking to them until it became apparent that they really hadn't ever been before. They'd heard of us but had never driven the twenty minutes to visit in person. As we talked, I noticed that all they had ordered were a couple cups of coffee and a single muffin. While I'm sure the coffee and the muffin were very good, I wasn't convinced that those items alone were going to create the kind of memorable first experience that I know can win over customers for life. So...I offered to get them a packet of Zingerman's literature. They accepted the offer and I brought over a Deli menu, a brochure from ZingTrain, our new Catering Guide, information on our new hand made artisan cream cheese, a newsletter and a mail order catalog.

For the next twenty minutes they sat, drinking coffee and reading through each of the brochures, commenting back and forth to each other about one item or another in the copy. Since they were obviously interested in what we do, I thought that this would be a great time to really solidify our new relationship. So I went and grabbed one of our Sourcream Coffeecakes—it's a product everyone loves, and hence a pretty safe item to send a newcomer home with—and said I wanted to give it to them to help welcome them to Zingerman's. They graciously told me I didn't have to do that. I, of course, graciously insisted. They then proceeded to tell me that they really loved the mail order catalog. The husband, it turns out, was also very interested in ZingTrain; he works for a good-sized computer firm and was intrigued by the service training. Finally, they got up to go, told me they were headed over to the main building of the Deli to buy some bread. Again, I thanked them for coming down. "We'll be back!" they said, smiling, and I'm sure they will.

I tell this story because it illustrates the best way I know to take service and turn it into a tool for making a positive difference. The couple left with a much better introduction to Zingerman's than they probably expected. We generated some immediate sales from the interaction. Two new customers now know about all the aspects of our organization. I'm confident that they had a better experience and a better morning because of the time we spent together. And I can pretty much guarantee that in one form—in fact, more than likely, in many forms—they're going to be back.

An even better story is about Kathi Dvorin, who works at Zingerman's Mail Order. She's been with us for 11 years now and in that time she's become one of the best service providers I've ever had

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the chance to work with. The story is that one of our mail order customers in Texas had placed a particularly nice order to be shipped out. Noting that he was a big Zingerman's fan, Kathi asked me if I would drop him a note to thank him. I did. He was excited to hear from the owner personally, as a result of which the relationship Kathi had already established with him was now a bit stronger. His orders continued to come in and Kathi continued to go the extra mile for him, special ordering products, getting other key folks in our organization to participate in helping him. Then last winter he and his wife wrote Kathi to say that they were coming to Michigan to visit relatives. They drove an hour (in each direction) out of their way to come to see us. Kathi arranged for them to get special tours of all our businesses, a personalized tasting of traditional Balsamic vinegars, and a chance to sit in for an hour to get a taste of a ZingTrain seminar first hand.

Again, I tell you this not to illustrate that Kathi is great (she is, but that's not the point) but to show how much difference she's been able to make by doing small but meaningful things for this one single customer. Dealing with customers on a one to one basis like this isn't the sort of work that creates immediate overnight success that shows up in the statistics. But without question it's what builds the relationships that lead to long term success.

## Part two: breaking the rules and moments of truth

There are two very specific areas where I've found that this one-customer-at-a-time approach can make a particularly significant impact on our organizational success. We focus on both of them because either has the potential to take a customer experience from really poor to really great by simple, though often not very intuitive, effective action by a single individual.

### breaking the rules

Not long ago I attended a presentation by Ann Rhoades, the Executive Vice President of People at the very service-oriented and very successful Jet Blue airlines. Among the many good ideas I took away from her talk was what I thought was an outstanding interview question to use with job candidates:

"Tell me about a time in a past job that you broke the rules for a customer."

If you ask it of an applicant, they're really going to have to work through a bit a paradox to be able to respond effectively. By conservative interviewing standards, they might be tempted to say that they'd "never broken the rules." Certainly many traditional candidates might think, "Who wants to hire someone who's going to tell you up front that they don't follow your company's rules?" They'd be wrong. Ann Rhoades wants to hire those people and so do we. In fact, if an applicant were to tell me that she never broke the rules for a customer I probably wouldn't hire her. Because at Zingerman's we want our staff to break the rules regularly in order to get better service to our customers.

We actually come right out with this rather unorthodox job expectation—I review it in the orientation class I teach for all our new staff members. We also go over it in all of our service training work. We want staff members to know up front that although we definitely expect them to adhere to our systems and policies almost all the time, we know that there are exceptions to every rule.

What does this look like in practice? Well, we have one customer who comes into the Deli every Saturday. He's not the easiest guy in the world to deal with. He has very good taste and very high standards, and he's very particular about what he wants—or doesn't want—on any given day. Often what he's in the mood for isn't on the menu. But instead of reading him the rules, we've adjusted the rules to fit his needs. Only a manager takes his order. A manager or a supervisor always prepares it. And week after week he comes in, spends his money with us and is really happy with his lunch!

Many times new staff members will respond to this by saying something like, "Well, what's the point? He's just going to come back and ask us to break the rules again." I just look at them, smile, and say, "Exactly! You're really starting to get this service stuff down!" I don't think that was the answer they were looking for, but it's the truth. As a result of this blatant rule breaking this customer has been coming in Saturday after Saturday for probably 15 years now. And because he's very vocal about his

feelings, I know that he's out in the community telling people why they too should spend their money with us to get exceptional food and great service.

When we handle this sort of rule breaking well (and we never get it perfect) it allows us to avoid that horrific service scenario that we've all had to suffer through somewhere as customers. The one where you the customer want something that's really fairly simple but which, unfortunately, doesn't fit the "proper procedure." So the employee on the other end of the line or behind the counter starts reciting the rules and telling you that there's nothing he can do. Raises my blood pressure just thinking about it. (If you want a hilarious and food-related cinematic portrayal of this situation at its worst, rent the film "Five Easy Pieces" and watch Jack Nicholson try to order a sandwich.)

It's important to let you know up front that this concept of breaking the rules is not an easy one to get across to new staff members. Well, I take that back. It's easy to get the concept across. What's hard is to get people to really do it. Because no matter how much each of us has that rebellious streak that makes us want to break rules now and again, we also have years of socialization and training in our families, our schools and our previous jobs that have told us that you don't just don't do that sort of thing. And as a result, even here at Zingerman's, it's quite common to hear new, well meaning staff members slip and start reading a customer our policy rather than thinking things through and coming to a creative way to get the customer what he or she really wants.

The bottom line is that telling staff it's ok to break the rules isn't nearly enough. We actually have to train them how to do it by using role playing to practice specific situations in which it might come up. We try to reinforce our message as often as possible—in formal classes and in informal, on-shift conversation. We stress over and over again that no one has ever lost his or her job here for doing too much for a customer. But they could lose it for not doing enough. Over time, new arrivals usually "get it" that we really do mean it; and before long they, too, are creatively breaking the rules when it's appropriate!

### moments of truth

The other place that this one customer at a time approach is so critical is in relation to Moments of Truth.

A "Moment of Truth" is the term that we use here to describe those situations where there's no overt customer complaint to be responded to, but where, for whatever reason, we're in a make-it-or-break-it situation with the customer. It's one of those spots where we're about to lose a customer but—given the right set of perceptive eyes to spot the problem—some effective turnaround work can save the situation. If handled well, that "save" could actually make a customer for life out of

someone who was pretty much half-way—if not all the way—out the door.

Moments of Truth are particularly important for leaders to watch for, because the signals usually run below the surface and are easily ignored by those who aren't trained to look for them. Being as aware of these as I am, I will happily admit to having chased confused first time customers into the street to get them to come back inside so we can serve them, or to emailing potential mail order customers back and forth for weeks in an effort to find a way to get them to buy from us when at first it didn't seem as if we had what they wanted. Others here have done this even better than I have.

Is it worth the effort? Well, our average customer comes to the Deli a couple of times a week. I figure that they spend, conservatively, \$10 a visit. In a college town like Ann Arbor, where almost everyone is seemingly leaving for another city or school at some point, our average customer lives here for about five years. If they spend about \$20 a week during their tenure then each individual will have bought about \$5000 at the Deli (this doesn't count their Mail Order gift purchases, trips to our Bakehouse, the Catering we do for them, etc.) Is that sort of cash worth a couple of emails or a quick walk out the front door to see if we can be of service? I'd certainly say so!

Do a little more math on these Moments of Truth and the numbers are pretty overwhelming. We probably have 50 partners and managers in our organization right now. If each of us saved/made a single customer this year through successfully identifying and acting on a moment of truth, that could mean a quarter of a million dollars in sales between now and 2008. Anyone interested?

### conclusions

This whole concept of remembering that great service is ultimately given one customer at a time—of being willing and able to break the rules when we need to give great service to a guest; of identifying and making moments of truth into positive outcomes—is inspiring, because it demonstrates how each of us as individuals really can make a positive difference every day—for our customers and for the organization. It's also a little intimidating if I really stop to think about it too long. Because opportunities missed are...opportunities missed...and much needed sales and very real customers lost.

Happily, by staying very vigilant about our service and teaching these concepts throughout our organization, we have the chance to really contribute to significant success in the years to come. If this resonates at all with you, then quickly, before you get caught up in the rest of the day's distractions, go find a customer or pick up the phone and do something special for them. In fact that's what I'm going to do right now.

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