

INTER ACT

communicating with people in business

April 2003

Uncomfortable Truisms In The Service Profession



To keep us from viewing the service profession with rose-colored optimism I will identify a few uncomfortable truisms most of us have encountered and suggest ways of coping with them.

◆ *There is no such thing as an "off-the-record" conversation in corporate life or with your customer.*

Recognizing this reality will keep us from feeling betrayed when a casual conversation with a person with whom we are friendly comes back to haunt us. This fact is behind the aphorism, "Loose lips sink big ships". Professional communication includes knowing *what not to say* as well as what and how to say what you mean.

People gossip in business settings as well as in their personal lives. Corporate buzz includes both positive and negative information. Professional Service Reps will listen carefully to what is said in "casual" conversations with the eye on the possi-

bility of it reaching higher levels of management in their own company or the customer's company. Let's make sure positive buzz works its way up the chain of command and not comments that may be easily misunderstood. Negative comments made in an off-hand manner or in an unthinking moment can cause significant damage to your company and to your relationship with your customers.

◆ *People sometimes hear what they most fear.*

We have all been startled by an experience in which the worst possible interpretation was given to our actions and/or our words. We naturally feel offended and hurt when this happens. When asked about the high cost of parts, one Field Service Engineer commented to his customer,

"Do you see that motorcycle? Those parts pay for that motorcycle". Of course the FSE was trying to be funny, but

the customer was genuinely worried about increasing parts costs and didn't hear the humor. The customer heard, "I don't care about your concern" and, of course, that is exactly what the customer feared. The incident was reported to the FSE's management by the customer's top management. The FSE was shocked that a statement made in humor could be so completely twisted in its intent. He didn't understand the *distorting power of fear*.

◆ *Pain has a long life.*

Customers don't forget an insult or a critical mistake that caused headaches, downtime, and profit loss. FSEs may find themselves apologizing for mistakes made

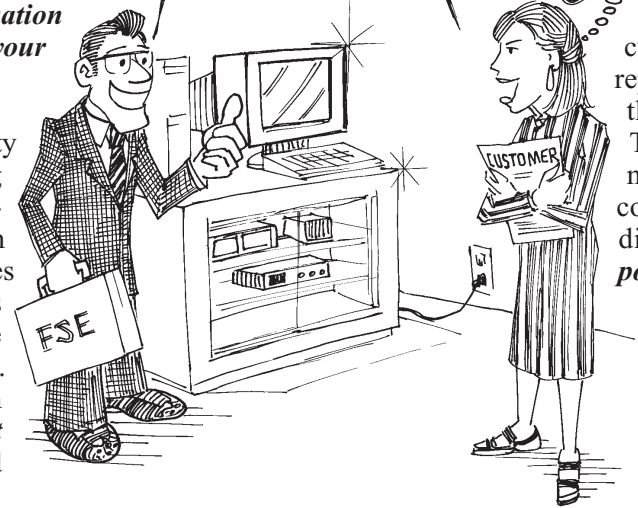
years ago that were not their doing. Yet a customer may easily forget about a major mistake he made that the FSE turned around before it resulted in

see Uncomfortable Truisms continued next page

I CLEANED UP THE INSTRUMENT FOR YOU, AND I ALSO REPLACED THE GIZMO.

I HOPE I WON'T HAVE ANY MORE PROBLEMS!

...I WONDER IF HE MADE THE INSTRUMENT LOOK PRETTY BECAUSE HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S DOING.



PEOPLE HEAR WHAT THEY FEAR!

Uncomfortable Truisms

Editorial continued from front page

a total disaster, saving the customer a lot of money and preventing loss of production.

Psychologists tell us that it takes eleven positive impressions to overcome one negative impression. If that is so, and I believe it is, we should not cry for customer fairness. It's the nature of being human to be more influenced by fear than pleasure.

◆ *Good deeds are often overlooked while a small mistake is made into a mountain.*

We may act with the best of intentions and with professionalism, but some people will still question our motives or object to the results we achieved. We must learn to *distance or detach ourselves from too great a need for praise or to avoid blame* so that we can reduce our own stress levels. We certainly enjoy *praise* but it is *a result of our actions and not the motive for what we do*. As we gain self-knowledge we can separate the "right" action we know we must do from whether we will get credit for it or not.

◆ *Loyalty is most often given when you serve the interests of another person or corporation*, but when you no longer serve those interests it is withdrawn.

InterAct believes that loyalty is an ethical responsibility even when another person no longer serves your or the corporation's immediate interests.

Employees who have served their companies well for twenty years or more are sometimes treated as strangers or with disrespect when they are let go. Some managers are escorted to their desks and closely watched while they pack only their personal items. They are prevented from taking any corporate computer information to lessen any risk to the company. They are then escorted out of the building as an enemy, not the long-time member of the corporate family they have been. As I

write this article I am reminded of two long-term service professionals who were let go in exactly this manner.

All the accolades this FSE or manager received during employment are hollow when the final act of separation is done with implicit distrust and lack of dignity.



These actions are demoralizing and damaging to corporate stability. Remaining employees who witness this ultimate act of disloyalty become aware that accolades and expressions of gratitude are simply positive stroking to influence behavior, not sincere expressions of affection or friendship.

Being able to tell the difference is important for our corporate survival and growth. It protects us from disappointment when attitudes change because we are no longer needed. The old adage, "Know who your friends are" is certainly applicable here.

The presence of a positive truth is implicit in these negative realities:

◆ When someone (friend or foe) shares a confidence, protect that *confidence as a sacred trust*. If you hear something that could damage someone's reputation it is wise not to respond and immediately get in touch with the person to discuss what you heard.

◆ People who are capable of great trust and true caring for others are not easily frightened and therefore do not have fear that causes a distortion of what they hear.

◆ While pain has a long memory, sincere caring acts toward the customer who has a negative recall, can erode away the mountain of resentment. *Faith that sincere concern is stronger than resentment is basic to our personal and corporate growth.*

◆ Loyalty is an authentic connection that is a two-way flow between people. It is based on mutual trust. To cease being loyal is to betray that trust.

With careful reflection and trust, we can turn these uncomfortable truths into values we can live by. ❖

- ◆ Share an off-handed comment you made that resulted in major repercussions from your customer. How would you handle the same situation today?
- ◆ How can you detach yourself from the inevitable criticisms of your actions?
- ◆ What actions would you take to correct a long-standing negative customer attitude?

INTERACT INTERVIEW

by Sandy Campbell

Cary Chapman, National Customer Operations Manager AIXTRON INC.

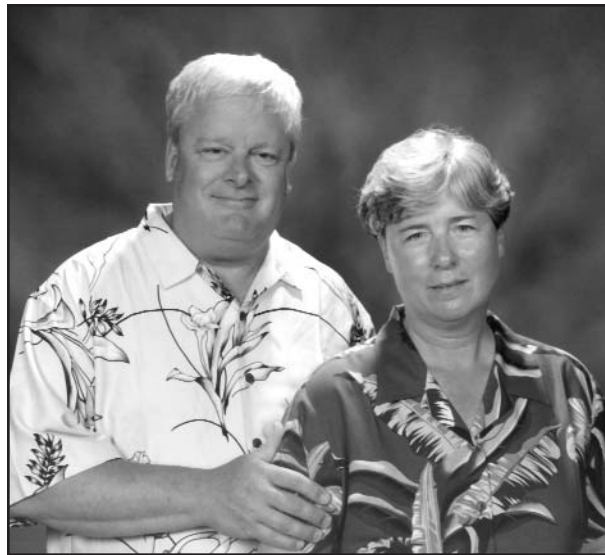
Cary has ten years experience in sales and with twenty-five years in service he is a true service veteran. Even though his choice of service as a career was strongly influenced by a very positive experience he had as a young boy, it is obvious from the story he shares with us that service was already in his heart. "I chose service as a career because of my experience as a paper-delivery boy when I was eleven years old. Prior to becoming a paperboy I had talked to my neighbors to find out what they liked and didn't like about their service. All my neighbors said they were dissatisfied with their service because the paper was always delivered in the middle of a snow drift, in the middle of the driveway, etc. I took the paper route and I had about one-hundred thirty-five customers that I delivered newspapers to each day. I decided I would always put the paper either in the mailbox (in those days it was attached to the house) or between the storm door and the door. I earned \$650 in tips the first year, a huge sum of money in those days. It dawned on me at that early age that customer service done correctly makes people very happy and is also financially rewarding. During the many years of my career in service, I have found that continues to prove true in many different companies and in many different circumstances."

Commitment is a key word for Cary. Cary believes companies must be "focused on meeting the challenges of delivering commitments made to customers". Cary is aware of the discrepancies between the customer service companies promise and the reality of what they deliver. "In reality, many companies rarely ever truly deliver great customer service. Many companies are driven by the bottom line and service is often difficult to equate to financial results. There is often a lack of understanding of the impact on customer retention that results from FSEs pleasing customers every day. Companies have to be

committed to the importance of service. The 'warm and fuzzy' feeling the customer has when the FSE walks through the door may be difficult to equate to dollars but the economics of service is a reality."

Cary discusses some of the commitments we make to customers and the reality of what we actually deliver, why we fail to deliver on our promises, and solutions to turn this around.

Q *What are the typical commitments we make to our customers and what do we deliver in reality?*



**Cary and Cheryl Chapman
in Hawaii on a recent vacation**

A ♦ "World-class service. We are overusing and abusing this statement. If you analyze what it means to one hundred customers you may receive fifty different responses. Companies must take the time to understand what their customers believe world-class service to be.

"I rarely experience what I consider to be world-class service and when I do it is usually in places I never expect to find it. I found world-class service in a shop that sold pens and it was very clear to me they had taken the time to understand their customers' perceptions of world-class service. The experience was rewarding. I was going to buy a pen of fairly good quality and I walked out with a very expensive fountain pen. I felt wonderful about spending the money and the service I received. As I started to leave the salesperson said, 'We've found that a lot of our customers want to know how to maintain the pen so we have prepared a set of instructions for you'. I was blown away. I realized they had both eliminated phone calls about service and had provided a true service to me. They put a lot of attention into understanding their customers' needs.

"If we are truly committed to delivering service excellence, we will work proactively to figure out a way to do it. One of our key assets is our people and we often don't take full advantage of this asset. We have a wonderful group of people who, no matter what, satisfy or more than satisfy the customer day in and day out. We tend not

InterAct Interview continued next page

Inter Act

communicating with people in business

to recognize that as the true asset that it is. Our FSEs become the true consultants to the customer to validate what is being said by different departments and levels within our company. We don't springboard off that asset and capability as well as we could.

"Face-to-face interaction with customers and giving them a value-add through the discussions we have with them creates long-lasting customer relationships. It is very difficult to create a relationship with a customer without face-to-face contact, but we can maintain a relationship through e-mails and telephone calls. These are wonderful tools but nothing replaces face-to-face contact, having a great conversation, really understanding what the issues are, and being able to read the body language of the customer as you discuss certain topics.

"One story illustrates this point. We were doing surveys and I felt I wasn't getting the information I was looking for. I called twelve prospective, existing, and past customers and set up a customer meeting so that I could obtain the feedback I needed. We sent formal invitations and set an agenda. I felt a high degree of risk because I had existing, prospective, and past customers in the same room. But I felt so strongly about the need to understand what was important to our customers that I was willing to take the risk. We had a hands-on working session and it was a fabulous meeting. We asked how we could improve. I expected hundreds of items but we had a list of twelve items. We were able to deliver six items on the list within thirty days because we had total control over the solution. We delivered another three in six months and two more in a year. We solved eleven out of twelve in a year. We communicated back to all twelve people quarterly. We gained a huge insight into what our customers expected, we didn't jeopardize any of our existing customers, and we signed up a potential customer.

◆ "Many companies advertise *factory trained FSEs* but in reality it is often the case that very few actually have factory training. I've worked in companies with wonderful training departments, but when there were numerous service installations, the FSEs were kept working in the field and not sent to training classes. When

business is slow and people are available for training, travel and training budgets are often cut.

"I have no training budget this year because of the downturn in the economy but I knew there had to be a way to accomplish some training. I asked the training department in Germany if they would build a training module for the safety system for our tool (which is very complicated to learn) and schedule a training class here with my team. I expected objections and I was amazed when they said, 'Yes'. If we want to solve a problem we

"We have to develop internal relationships that will generate a management commitment to our service team. If our internal team isn't committed we must accept the responsibility as ours to achieve. We are truly selling to the toughest customer when we are selling internally."

have to be creative and look at it from a different angle that allows us to achieve our goal.

"In our society we tend to ignore relationship training. Stan's training is incredibly valuable because there is a true

need to have face-to-face contact with customers and he prepares the front line for this work. Over and over again I've seen the light come on with FSEs who didn't think they needed this training. Stan helps FSEs understand the value, why they need it, and his training is very believable.

◆ "*Quick response time* is promised to customers but fluctuations in the service business can impact response time. We have to know what our customers quantify as quick response and strive to achieve their expectations.

"The business climate in the high tech industry is a roller coaster so we experience many highs and lows. During the low periods we have to pay attention to cost control in order to be profitable as a business and sustain ourselves. But if we are truly committed to the thought that our service organization is value-add then we will work harder to find creative ways to continue to make it happen. We can often find money if we are truly committed to doing something.

"We need to invest in communicating with customers. We need to drive proactive up-front communication. If we are pushing the specs of our tools in delivering a product to the customer, we need to discuss this with the customer early on rather than having problems surface as a surprise to the customer during the final acceptance.

InterAct Interview continued next page

“If we are unable to continue delivering a promised response time we need to sit down with the customer, communicate what we can deliver, find a way to meet the customer’s needs, and be willing to go the extra mile in critical situations. It is important to talk about a potential problem before it happens. The customer knows we care when we fly to their site to work together to discover mutually satisfying solutions.

◆ “In our industry there are an amazing number of **parts** and a lot of different models. This means millions of dollars in inventory. When the economy is good you can’t obtain parts because they are being used to manufacture tools. When the economy is slow budgets can’t support huge inventory. Some companies are standardizing tool sets to minimize the number of parts so they can maximize what they have on hand to take care of the customer.

“There are ways to optimize parts inventory so that it becomes a revenue source. Companies often maintain inventory in different locations and it is very expensive. One customer asked for dedicated inventory. I proposed putting the inventory in a third-party source near their location where it would be readily available to them 24 x 7. I asked the customer to pay a price per month for us to maintain the inventory that was less than he would spend if he owned the inventory. If it is significant inventory, in many cases you can share it with other customers. I developed a revenue source and the customer was happier because the parts were there for him when he needed them. We met the customer’s need and the customer met our need.

◆ “As the equipment in any business becomes more sophisticated, there is a need for expensive and intricate **diagnostic test equipment**. We have toxic sensors because we work around dangerous gases and the sensors protect the lives of our people. The sensors are very expensive to maintain, they have to be calibrated twice a year, and the sensor must be changed once a year. This is just one of many pieces the FSEs need to do their jobs.

“If companies are committed to customer delight they build tools that are increasingly more capable of diagnos-

tics and allow FSEs to quickly diagnose problems before arriving on site. Many businesses are developing self-diagnostics. The greater commitment you make to building this technology into your product, the greater your return in terms of time on site, mean-time-to-repair, etc.

◆ “At the time of the sale the customer may be told the **product requires very little service**. This is not a realistic statement. Anything mechanical breaks, wears out, needs to be calibrated, etc. My industry measures on a cost-per-device basis of the final product produced by our tool. Presenting the customer with this perspective and showing that we are committed to service and support establishes a realistic expectation.

“The upper management team must be committed to providing the resources to accomplish what you have promised to your customer base. One company I once interviewed with told me they were nine months and 7,000 PMs behind. They wanted to hire a service manager to focus on and fix the problem. The prob-

lem was deeper than hiring a manager to pay attention to the problem. The company had numerous lay offs and had laid off their base of expertise in PMs. The issue was whether or not they were committed to service excellence.

“There is a value-add to the customer and your company by including service in sales presentations to customers. It is important for service to hear the discussions and commitments that are about to be made. Service will be able to influence those commitments in a way that will allow service to be successful in delivering them. The training that InterAct provides is invaluable in making us successful in how we conduct ourselves in these meetings and as customer support organizations we have to get behind training.”

Q *What can we do to ensure we deliver on the promises we make to our customers?*

A “I learned a very important lesson from a customer in my first year as a Service Sales Rep.
InterAct Interview continued next page

“Service organizations have a responsibility to step up to marketing what they do within their own companies because our work is extremely valuable.”

“If you experience true customer delight, you will never forget it and you realize the true value of receiving it.”

After I had developed a relationship with the key customer contact he said, ‘The biggest mistake your team makes is that you do a fabulous job, we couldn’t survive without you, but I’m the only one who knows it.’ Service organizations often make the same mistake within their companies. Front-line service teams provide incredible service for customers every day. How often do service departments schedule time with upper management to talk about the successes of the service organization? I think rarely. We assume everyone knows the great job we do but the service organization has a responsibility to step up to marketing what they do within their own organization. We also tend to downplay what we do. When I think of the situations FSEs all over the country step into every day, it is amazing. We do it so often in this industry that we don’t realize the negative impact if we didn’t. There is a true need for us to market ourselves because our work is extremely valuable to the company’s bottom line.

“In the short time we have for presentations to our upper management it is important to be able to talk with them in their own language - ROI, shareholder value, etc. and we have to capture their attention in the first couple of minutes of our presentation. Presenting real customer situations achieves very powerful results. If we don’t do these things, we will waste our time and theirs.

“We have to develop internal relationships that will generate a management commitment to our service team. If our internal team isn’t committed we must accept the responsibility as ours to achieve. We are truly selling to the toughest customer when we are selling internally.

“One of the advantages of belonging to the Association for Field Services Management International, working and spending time with Stan, Jerry Bruder, etc. is the gold nuggets I have gained that enable me to do a more effective job. AFSMI has provided hard data that I have used for internal justifications. I would have had a very difficult time ferreting out the information myself. Every time I hear Stan speak and read the InterAct newsletter there is always something new I can use.

“Customer support and sales are the mouthpieces back to the company. We need to develop better methods of using the wealth of information they have about customer

concerns and perspectives. I have involved our Vice President, who heads global services and also sits on our board, in coast-to-coast customer visits. When I give him feedback about a customer it takes on a whole different perspective because he can put a face to the customer. It has proved to be very effective.”


We began the interview with a wonderful story and Cary wraps up his thoughts with a great anecdote about customer delight. “I was attending a meeting and I had to eat a quick lunch and return to the meeting. I went to a fast-food restaurant and ordered three tacos and a glass of water. I received two tacos and I asked the cashier if the check was for two tacos or three. The cashier had limited

English language skills and didn’t understand my question. I was frustrated trying to get an answer and decided to sit down and eat because I had to get back to the office. The assistant manager came to my table and said, ‘I couldn’t help but overhear the conversation. I would like to offer my sincere apologies. I’m sure we didn’t meet your needs

today and I would like to offer you this third taco. I hope in the future we can do a better job of meeting your needs.’ I was blown away by that experience. I don’t like fast food but I continue to eat at the restaurant because of my experience with that manager.

“If we achieve that same warm glow with a customer who bought a \$2 million tool we can create a phenomenal experience. If you experience true customer delight, you will never forget it and you will realize the true value of receiving it. That experience paves the way to creating a commitment within your company to deliver customer delight to your customers.” ❖

Spring Planting
Plant the seeds of customer retention
at our May 19-21 InterAct Open Workshop
at the Holiday Inn O’Hare in Chicago:
◆ *The Economics of Customer Retention*
◆ *Business Consulting Skills*
◆ *Business Negotiating*

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