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## **WALK IN YOUR CUSTOMERS' SHOES Doing So Will Give You the Information You Need to Grow Your Business**

By John Tschohl

How easy is it for people to do business with your organization? If you don't know, you'd better find out—and fast.

It is the customer experience that determines whether or not you will attract and retain customers. It is the customer experience that determines your sales, your profits—and your success. If you don't provide your customers with the best possible experience every time they do business with you, they won't stay with you for long.

I suggest that you walk in your customers' shoes, so you can see first-hand how they are treated by your employees and what obstacles they must overcome in order to give you their business. What you learn will help you to identify where your organization must improve in order to provide customers with service that is so superior they wouldn't dream of doing business with anyone else.

You can learn something by watching "Undercover Boss," a popular TV program in the United States that tracks CEOs as they go undercover and spend time in the field, working in various positions with their employees. It's a real eye-opener for those CEOs, who see what their people encounter on the job and how they respond to the challenges of serving their customers.

While I was in Russia recently, I went into one of my client's retail stores. His employees ignored me. They offered no greeting, no assistance, as I perused various cell phones and computers. Using my cell phone, I took a picture of them. They immediately became very attentive, but not in a nice way. They wanted me to delete the pictures, and they threatened to have me arrested. What did I do? I sent the pictures to the owner, who apologized at great length.

How do your employees treat your customers? More importantly, how does your organization, as a whole, treat your customers? Do you handcuff your employees with policies and procedures that prevent them from providing customers with the best service possible? Do you train and nurture your employees? Do you provide them the skills that will aid them

in serving your customers? Do you treat your employees the way you want those employees to treat your customers?

I recommend that you walk in your customers' shoes. Using a phone other than your cell, or that at your home or office, call your company. How long does it take for your call to be answered? Is it answered by a live person, or are you faced with an endless stream of options—push 1 for company hours, push 2 for company locations, and on and on and on?

Pretend to be a customer or potential customer. Ask about a particular product. Ask about a service. Say that you are having a problem with a product you purchased. Then sit back and see how employees respond. Are they helpful? Do they respond to your questions in a knowledgeable manner? Do they empathize with you? Do they have the authority to solve your problem, quickly and to your satisfaction?

Call at various times of the day and days of the week. Recently, while attempting to wire money from my daughter in China to Metro Bank in the United Kingdom, I had a problem. I called Metro Bank at 4 a.m. on a Sunday. A real person answered the phone and gave me the information I needed to complete the transaction. Now that's service.

I also recommend that you log on to your organization's web site. Is it easy to navigate? Ask for a response to a question. How long does it take for an employee to respond? This is important, because many potential customers contact several organizations via the Internet before making their purchasing decisions.

If you walk in your customers' shoes, you will get the information you need to ensure they have a comfortable walk through your doors, either physical or virtual. When you do so, you will increase customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth advertising, which in turn will increase market share—and profits.

John Tschohl, the internationally recognized service strategist, is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Described by USA Today, Time, and Entrepreneur as a “customer service guru,” he has written several books on customer service and has developed more than 26 customer-service training programs that have been distributed throughout the world. John's monthly strategic newsletter is available online.