



# The Leadership Letter

## Customer Service & Non-profits? YES

Customer service only applies to businesses and for-profit organizations, right? As a non-profit, we're not trying to sell a product or maintain a customer base, or are we?

If you take a good hard look at your association, you'll find that you are essentially "selling" a product (membership) and trying to maintain a "customer base" (membership retention.) So how do the business concepts developed for excellent customer service apply to us?

Businesses maintain their customers based on the following:

- ◆ The product they provide is quality and of value to the customer.
- ◆ The personnel who interact with customers are responsive and courteous, assisting customers as needed.
- ◆ Customers feel respected and valued in their interactions with the business.

A non-profit is no different. Those persons who wish to join a professional association (our customers) expect value in their membership and courtesy and respect in their interactions with staff or volunteers.

In this issue of *The Leadership Letter*, we'll explore the topic of customer service as it relates to a membership organization. The values that members place on their membership with the association is

directly influenced by the level of customer service they perceive.

In a brief article, [3 Tips on Nonprofit Customer Service](#), Elaine Fogel outlines concepts that help define what customer service means for us.

- 1) **"Your organization's level of customer service ties into its brand".** Everyone who works or volunteers for the organization should promote that brand. Negative word of mouth can defeat any branding programs and bad customer service can be responsible.
- 2) **"In order to provide exceptional customer service to your nonprofit's customers, you first need to identify who they are."** Who are your members? Do your customer service protocols need to differ based upon the member?
- 3) **"Just like the for-profit sector, there are three kinds of customer service: lousy, satisfactory and exceptional."** Ask your self what type of customer service your association is currently providing? *Source: <http://elainefogel.net/2013/09/18/3-tips-on-nonprofit-customer-service/>*

Don't forget, customer service isn't confined to just office staff. It's also the responsibility of leadership and volunteers to make the professional connection a valued one.

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# Customer Service and the Office

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For many of our associations, a physical office is simply not in the cards and paid staff consist of one part-time person who manages the business side of the association. With this in mind, how do we provide customer service that meets the needs of our members?

What do our members want? We'll share our experience from the SECA office and perhaps it will provide a springboard for you to begin looking at options within your state or local.

- ◆ Members want that "personal touch" when they contact the SECA office. They want to talk with someone, not just a recorded message.
- ◆ Members want you to help them problem solve. How can they join? How can they receive proof of membership that they need for either their CDA renewal or their state professional development system?

- ◆ Members want to know what they receive for their membership dues. What resources and benefits are there?
- ◆ Members want you to explain the membership structure. Am I in a dual state, a non-dual state? What does that mean? It's a complicated structure that's hard for people to understand.

Obviously, SECA has an office with full-time personnel who can respond daily to requests for information or membership. We understand that's not always the case with our affiliates and here are some questions to ask about how your association functions in regard to customer service.

## Some Ideas to Consider

- **Is there a person or entity that can serve as your "office"?** This may mean joining/contracting with a person or another non-profit to provide

options for members to contact your association.

- **Do you have the option of having a 1-800 phone number that members can call to get information or business completed?** (If you go this route, make sure you have someone who will answer the phone or pick up messages on a frequent schedule. We hear lots of complaints about not being able to reach anyone in the state office by phone.)
- **If you have a post office box, is someone regularly picking up your mail and processing any membership applications?** Nothing is more frustrating to new members than not receiving a timely response.
- **Make sure the SECA office has updated membership and affiliate information so that we can respond on your behalf. We'll be happy to be your advocate!**

# Customer Service and Volunteers

Our associations are primarily volunteer driven and we rely on them to implement programs and provide services to members. Volunteers are often overlooked by organizations but they can be one of the most effective "customer service" tools available.

Volunteers can spread the word, respond to members and put a personal and professional face on

the association. But volunteers need the tools to ensure that they represent the association and its "brand" well.

## Do you provide any type of orientation for your volunteers?

Do they understand the mission of the association and the current list of priorities that have been developed by the leadership?

## Is there a system for ensuring that volunteers are doing

**something worthwhile for the organization?** Are you ensuring that they are productive and contributing, not just marking time?

## Are you recognizing those volunteer efforts in a way that highlights their contributions to the association?

Utilize your volunteers well and recognize their efforts. Excellent customer service will be a natural.

# How to Provide Great Customer Service

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**Customer service...**What does it really mean? As defined in the marketplace, "*Customer service is the service or care that a consumer receives before, during and after a purchase. It's one of the factors that come in to play when a consumer is determining buying value, the other is the quality of the product or service that is being offered.*"

In the [Ten Commandments of Great Customer Service](#), Susan A. Friedmann focuses on ten strategies to ensure that excellent customer service is an integral part of the customer process.

- 1) **Know who's the boss.**  
Without members, our associations would cease to exist. The actions taken by our leadership and staff should reflect the knowledge that members are the backbone of the organization and critical to its vitality and strength.
- 2) **Be a good listener.**  
Don't assume that you know or can predict what a member is thinking or what his/her concerns are. Take time to listen carefully and respond appropriately.
- 3) **Identify and anticipate needs.** If you're listening, you may be able to identify what the member needs and help them reach a satisfactory conclusion. For example, the SECA office often gets a caller that wants to "join our club." With just a little bit of questioning and some prior experience on our part, it's simple to

figure out they need a membership to renew their CDA.

- 4) **Make customers/members feel appreciated.**  
After all, we wouldn't be here without them. Thank them for their membership and focus on the fact that they are professionals. They don't always get that feedback.
- 5) **Help customers understand your systems.**  
Let them know how their membership works, when they will receive their membership card, how they will receive member benefits.
- 6) **Appreciate the power of "yes."** Do your best to answer yes when asked a question. It may not always be possible but the majority of the time you'll be able to respond in the affirmative.
- 7) **Know how to apologize.**  
When something has fallen through the cracks or has broken down on your end, know when to say you're "sorry." Most people will respond very positively if you just admit your mistake and agree to resolve the problem.
- 8) **Give more than expected.**  
It doesn't have to be anything significant, just "have a good day" will be enough. Recognize that our members work in tiring and often stressful situations with very young children who require time and attention. Recognizing them as individuals and connecting with them on a personal level

makes all the difference in how they perceive the organization.

- 9) **Get regular feedback.**  
Don't be afraid to ask your members what they like and don't like. You'd be surprised at the excellent suggestions you can receive through surveys or just asking questions. Particularly if you're asking those questions about your meetings or annual conference, just don't worry about the comments about "too hot, too cold, too expensive, not enough free things, etc." You'll always have a few of those but you'll also find many sensible and helpful suggestions along the way.
- 10) **Treat your leaders, staff and volunteers well.**  
If those who are responsible for providing customer service in our organizations don't feel valued and nurtured, it's highly unlikely that they will represent the organization in a way that promotes customer service.

One thing we Southerners are known for is hospitality and friendliness. It's natural for us to ask questions, get to know strangers, and respond in ways that are open and engaging. Use those natural inclinations to translate into great customer service and you'll gain a loyal and committed member and volunteer.

## Have a great day!

*Source: The Ten Commandments of Great Customer Service, <http://marketing.about.com/>*

## Other Resources



### SOUTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION

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1-800-305-SECA (7322)  
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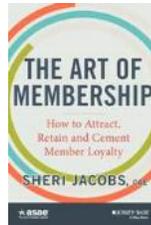
*Promoting Quality Care and Education for  
Young Children and Their Families*

*SECA is a "Voice for Southern Children"*

*This newsletter is written and produced  
by Glenda Bean, Executive Director.*

[www.southernearlychildhood.org](http://www.southernearlychildhood.org)

[About Money](#) This website offers a variety of articles about customer service. Just enter customer service into the search engine.



[The Art of Membership](#) (2014) by Sheri Jacobs  
Publisher: ASAE ■ ISBN-13: 978-1118633106

*The Art of Membership* will give you the framework and knowledge to create and customize a solid membership strategy no matter what size your organization is or which industry or sector it serves. Just a few of the topics covered include:

- Finding Your Value (including a chapter on pricing strategies)
- Defining Your Members (Are they members or customers?)
- Selling Your Organization
- Personalizing the Process

[Click here](#) to sign up for notices when a new *Leadership Letter* is available.

## Customer Service and the Board

As a leader in your organization, how do your members perceive you? Do they think you are:

- ⇒ Too important to spend time with them?
- ⇒ Unapproachable because of your position?
- ⇒ Unaware of their concerns or unwilling to listen?

**If that's the case, you have some work to do!**

*Accepting a position of leadership in your organization means that you have assumed the ultimate position in customer service.* As that leader, your responsibility is to:

- Identify the concerns and issues that are paramount to your members.

- Guide your organization to reflect the will of the membership.
- Create an environment that values and nourishes each member.
- Support staff and volunteers and create an operational environment that reflects the priorities of the organization.

There are many things you can do to ensure that your board is viewed as approachable and an integral part of the customer service system.

### VISIBILITY

Do your members have regular opportunities to interact with the board at major association events and meetings?

Are board members expected to interact with members?

Do board members recognize and welcome new members?

Do you have a system for utilizing technology to let people know who you are?

### COMMUNICATION

Do your board members communicate regularly with their locals/chapters?

Is there a system for providing members with regular information about what the association is doing?

Do you invite member input and constructive criticism?

Try a little of that Southern hospitality! It will go a long way.