

Circular Messages Keep Everyone in the Loop:

The Link Between Communication and Customer Satisfaction

By Dianna Booher

Consider the irony of these corporate communication clichés delivered to customers every day:

- “Please sign in, update your insurance information, and be seated. Your name will be called when the doctor is ready to see you.”
- “Your call is important to us. Please hold for the next available representative. The estimated wait is approximately 30 minutes. Do not hang up and redial. This will only delay your call.”

Although some customers have grown accustomed to these comments, even more are tiring of the runaround and taking their business to providers with a reputation for good customer service. And these sample messages are the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The real chaos ensues when companies don’t communicate in a circular fashion behind the scenes, behind the cubicle walls. Circular communication involves sharing information across departmental lines. Up the chain. Down the chain. From day shift to night shift. From boss to staff and vice versa. Dialogs with customers.

Companies with good circular communication—without a “silo” mentality—soon find themselves branded as the good guys, and expand their customer base.

Why Circular Communication?

Lack of circular, cross-functional communication within organizations inevitably shows up to the outside world: to customers, to suppliers, and to strategic partners. And it drives them nuts.

I still remember this communication nightmare from twenty years ago:

... We buy the house of our dreams and pull out the home-furnishings catalogs. Custom window coverings arrive from Department Store X. The master bedroom woven-wood is two inches too short and two inches too narrow. Someone didn’t measure or record the dimensions correctly. Excuse offered: “I guess they didn’t communicate the fact that they should come to the bottom of the windowsill.” We send them back to the factory and reorder.

After the second set arrives, the installer comes down the hall shaking his head. “You wanted a double-pull wood, Ma’am? I’m afraid the factory made another mistake. Or someone copied down your order wrong again. I’m going to have to send this back, too.”

On the third delivery, I am afraid to look. “Ma’am,” the installer said, “you’re not going to believe this, but they made the same mistake. It’s the same one we sent back to the factory.”

Anticipating “disruptions of service,” we had planned early phone installation: one month before the move, we had called to have telephone service transferred.

Four weeks later and before we have actually moved into the new house, the installer phones. He wants to know where I am. He is at the new residence to hook up the phone and the house is empty. I tell him we were rescheduled, giving him name, date and hour of rescheduling. He’d never gotten the word, he insists. “Somebody” had fouled up and not sent him the “reschedule” notice. We reschedule phone installation for a week later.

I wait in the new, cold, empty house for the installer to arrive between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. At 4:55, he shows up to install the phone line—the metro service I’d ordered, but a limited suburban line. “Sorry, someone must have made a mistake in taking down the order.”

Two days later, the phone bill arrives for one month’s service. Since the phone has been working for only 46 hours, I call to complain. “Not to worry,” the assistant tells me. She will adjust the bill and send a corrected copy.

A disruption-of-service notice arrives. I phone to say that I have never received a corrected bill. “We’ll make a note not to disconnect then,” the representative promises, “so don’t worry.”
I do.

Two days later, the phone isn’t working again. Our line is crossed with another. After 77 days we have a working phone. A week later Customer Relations calls to ask about “the manner in which my recent order had been handled.” I tell her, giving the names and dates of each conversation, miscommunication, and resulting foul-up. “This is my job,” she gushes, “to catch problems like this. I’m going to give this to my supervisor for his personal attention and he’ll get back to you immediately.”

And ... no one ever called back from Customer Relations.

How many other customers have to go through similarly painful scenarios before companies get the point? In the moving fiasco, consider these specific, individual

communication mishaps: The window-covering people who didn't communicate the correct item numbers and specs to the factory. The telephone people who didn't communicate and coordinate service installation and correct orders between departments.

Lack of internal communication—all of it.

Tips to Improve Circular Communication with Internal and External Clients

1. If you say you will return calls and emails with 24 hours, then return calls and emails within 24 hours using clear, concise language.
2. If you say you'll handle the paperwork, then handle the paperwork timely and accurately.
3. If you say you will manage an inquiry to its completion, then follow through until you reach a resolution.
4. If you witness a coworker or manager communicating in a way that leaves the company open to customer service issues, slip a copy of this article into their "In" tray and spread the good word.

Circular communication requires a plan, patience, and persistence. And when those are lacking, your customers and profits suffer.

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For more on effective sales communication, see From Contact to Contract: 496 Proven Sales Tips to Generate More Leads, Close More Deals, Exceed Your Goals, and Make More Money (Kaplan) by Dianna Booher.

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