

RARE CARE

Experts say it's easy to improve service

By Cathleen Ferraro
Bee Staff Writer

It's that time of year. You know, the time when parking lots are jammed, gotta-have toys are gone and frazzled store clerks are despairing of giving shoppers any personal attention.

Not the best of times for a company to pull off superior customer service? Well, maybe it is, says Doug Lipp, a Sacramento author who specializes in customer service strategies for big corporations as well as mom and pop shops.

In the early and mid-1980s, Lipp cut his professional teeth at the Walt Disney Co., where he was on the start-up team for Tokyo Disneyland. Later he was named head of training at Disney University in Burbank.

From his Disney days and subsequent work at NEC Electronics in Roseville, Lipp has just two bits of advice for companies striving to improve their customer service, especially during the holidays:

* Know very well the business of your business.

* Deliver what you know as nicely as possible.

The advice isn't particularly profound, and Lipp admits as much.

"It absolutely blows my mind that customer service is so simple and so cheap," he said. "You don't have to do all these customer service reports. It boils down to common sense and

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Doug Lipp - Sacramento author who specializes in customer service strategies



Lipp, above, works with Jerry Johnston of Alphagraphics in Sacramento during a recent training session.

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Lipp's latest book, self-published earlier this year, is "Even Monkeys Fall From Trees: the Balance of Art and Science For Outstanding Customer Service."

The title is taken from a Japanese proverb that means even capable, talented folks at some point lose their footing and blunder.

So what are retailers and their employees supposed to draw from that? They should work at keeping their balance, according to Lipp, by blending just the right amount of technical knowledge with interpersonal abilities to make customers happy and loyal. Lipp said examples of such balance are rare these days — even at Disney.

Employees at the company's original Disneyland park used poor judgment, Lipp said, when they recently recommended that his family not stay at the theme park for dinner because prices there are too high.

"They didn't ask what my budget was ... or what kind of meal we were looking for," Lipp said. "Basically, they were flippant and went back to serving popcorn to other customers in line."

Gap For Kids, however, gets high marks from Lipp, who especially likes the electronic buttons installed in dressing rooms. When pushed, the button beckons a sales clerk who can retrieve another size so that a parent doesn't have to leave a child alone in a dressing room.

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Locally, a few small companies are trying to stand out with an unusual touch here and there.

For example, Davis & Co., an antique and gift shop in downtown Sacramento, offers gift wrap and delivery at no charge all year long. Free gift wrapping is definitely a practice of the past. Most stores don't do it at all any more, and those that do charge for the perk. Some retailers even charge for plain boxes and tissue paper.

As for free deliveries, Davis & Co. will cart a piece of furniture too big for customers' vehicles directly to their home if they live within 15 miles of the store. Holiday time and special sales at Davis & Co. also mean bringing out the cheese, crackers, wine and flavored coffees at the downtown shop.

"We feel if we can't give primo customer service, it's too easy for customers to do no-brainer shopping somewhere else," said Davis & Co. manager Stefan Key. "We try to chat with people about whether they're buying a gift for a friend or for themselves. We ask about their friend, what colors are in their home, whether they're traditional."

Lipp's reaction?

"Those (amenities) are all right on target," he said. "I'd expect nice background music and nibbly things at a boutique, but free delivery is above and beyond the call."

Brown House, a women's dress shop in Loehmann's Plaza, is known for arranging special orders on the spot for customers by calling apparel manufacturers directly anywhere in the country. That perk is nonexistent at traditional department stores, in part because sales clerks don't have the authority to make such calls.

So Brown House owner Doris Pittell knows putting out that extra effort — a long-distance phone call here, an extra alteration there — is what will distinguish her shop, now in business 25 years.

"We don't have anything special. A dress is a dress," she admitted. "The key is showing (customers) how to



Lipp, a business author and consultant, says most customer service boils down to balancing technical know-how and interpersonal skills.

wear it ... (or) asking where they plan to wear a top or dress they're interested in so that I don't sell the same thing to another woman going to the same event."

Lipp said such attention can be typical of high-end shops such as Brown House, and it has long-lasting positive effects.

"Even if you don't sell a dress, you create great good will and marketing that's better than traditional advertising," he said. "That customer will talk to her friends, and people believe their friends more than advertising (pitches)." Staffers at Viking Hobby, a games and miniature models store in Carmichael, make a point of knowing the first names of the store's 75 most

loyal customers and greet them when they visit. Employees also know which obscure industry magazines certain patrons like and set aside issues of *War Games Illustrated*, *Fine Scale Modeler* and others for those folks.

In the first few weeks after Sept. 11, retailers were more expressive and appreciative of people's business,

Lipp said, even if they were uncomfortable with promoting consumerism at the time. But that softer behavior already is fading, the customer service guru noted, at a time when holiday shoppers — often harried, cranky and tired — need even more attention.

Keeping a customer-friendly attitude, according to Lipp, is up to store managers.

"If I'm surrounded by bosses who exude a Let's-take-care-of-each-other-and-the-customers attitude," he explained, "then the dynamic becomes infectious."