

'Whether serving customers or tennis aces, keep your eye on the ball'

by Catherine DeVrye

I've watched and played countless hours of tennis and whether it is Wimbledon or the Australian Open or the local court, I've never once seen a player win a match by looking at the scoreboard. Champions keep their eye firmly focused on the ball and let the scoreboard take care of itself. Yet, how often are we so busy measuring customer satisfaction results and looking at the scoreboard of tangible indicators that we take our eye off the actual customer situation? A classic example was an attempt to improve train service. Although there were indeed improvements in terms of trains running on time, it was also revealed that they weren't stopping at all stations to pick up the passengers, as the drivers were only focused on the measurement of timeliness! So much for keeping your eye on the ball!

Let's look at the acronym of the word, 'service' and other such analogies between service in tennis and service to customers.

Self-esteem

Too often, we confuse service with subservience and people in service jobs don't have the high self-esteem that their roles deserve. How often have you played doubles with someone who ducks and calls out 'Yours'? How often do you work with individuals who do an equivalent 'duck' and call 'yours' when there's a tricky customer situation? We need to feel useful and be able to step up to every customer situation, difficult or otherwise, take ownership of that moment, and call out 'Mine'.

Exceed expectations

As customer demands increase, we need to constantly meet and exceed their expectations. We can never take customers for granted. It's not always the number one seed who wins Wimbledon but often the up and coming players who are willing to go that little extra distance to gain a slight competitive advantage. The same applies in business-and no matter how great a champion you or your organization may be, success in the past is no guarantee of success in the future.

Recover

We all know that things go wrong from time to time, and even customers appreciate this fact. Encouragingly, the research shows that if you satisfy a customer complaint, and do so quickly, the majority of those customers will become more brand loyal to your organization if they feel you've adequately recovered from an initially unsatisfactory situation. Just like missing a first tennis serve, most customers let you have a second chance. It's equally important to remember that 96.7% of unhappy customers never take time to complain so you better not double fault on those who do.

Vision

It's not only essential to keep your eye on the ball, but to keep in mind a long-term vision in order to successfully win tennis games or customer loyalty. Neither happens overnight, so and in order to maintain a key competitive advantage, keep in mind a long-term vision. Tennis games aren't won or lost on centre court. They're won or lost on the back courts-hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year of practice.

Improve

Even if we never reach centre court, our tennis game can improve through practice. The difference between an amateur and professional tennis player is that an amateur will practice until they can get something right. A professional will practice until they never get it wrong. We need to be professional in our approach to servicing customers, as consistency is a key retention factor.

Care

If you're a tennis coach, you care about your players, just as a service provider must care about the needs and wants of their customers. Customer care should never be some phony platitude, but a genuine, heartfelt desire to help the customer by placing yourself in their shoes, whether they are sneakers or high heels! If you like your job and look for daily opportunities to do this, you'll find it easier to succeed. It's better still if you love your job and love helping people. In tennis, love is nothing. In life, it's everything! And it's important that we genuinely care about serving our customers, our organizations, families, communities, planet and ourselves-not necessarily in that order.

Empower

We all like to feel that we can make a difference to the final score; that we're a valued team player; that we can be empowered to stretch ourselves beyond previous personal bests. John Akers, former CEO of IBM, once said:

'If you always get your first serve in, you're not trying hard enough.'

Certainly, it's not all strawberries and cream in the world of customer service, but it will be game, set and match to those individuals and organizations who recognize that looking after customers will result in increased net profits, without you even having to jump the net in victory.

Love all. Love all customers. The ball is truly in your court so remember that:

'Whether serving customers or tennis aces, keep your eye on the ball'.

Catherine DeVrye, Australian Executive Woman of the Year, is a #1 best selling author of *Good Service is Good Business* and global speaker on service quality and change. This is an extract from her book *'Hot Lemon & Honey-Reflections for Success in Times of Change*.