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Delivering On A Guarantee: Perfect Service, No Exceptions

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By Daniel V. Byrne

In 1984, when my gas-distribution company was small enough to be run from my basement and I still had some free time, I wrote down three operational keys to success.

They were basic principles involving safety, quality, and service for employees and customers alike.

Safety, of course, is paramount to every business, but particularly so in my industry, where hazardous chemicals are part of everyday life.

Likewise, virtually every company considers quality and customer service cornerstones to success.

But as a start-up entrepreneur, I had decided to "put the customer ahead of everything else," and that promise was not easy to get across to potential clients. Although most industrial gas distributors sell a lot of gas and welding supplies to the construction industry, Byrne Specialty Gases was designed to serve a unique niche—laboratories and other operations that need high-purity bottled gases to keep vital work going. Since gas plays so integral a part in these operations, companies are reticent about giving their business to newcomers.

I knew that to succeed, I had to do something tangible to show employees and clients I was serious about my customer-service goals.

Then, in 1989, I read about a New Jersey gas distributor that offered customers a 100 percent service guarantee.

The concept was simple—and worth copying; here was an idea that would differentiate my company from the other guys, appealing to the specialty market that needed a higher level of service than I believed the competition was providing.

Within days, I wrote my own guarantee: The order would be right—done to the customer's satisfaction—or it would be free. There would be no excuses, no exceptions for bad weather, nothing to hide behind if problems arose.

My company, which then had six employees, was plunged into a promise of service perfection. Having spent my first five years in business living up to my operational goal of putting the customer first, I was confident we could do whatever was necessary to make the guarantee work.

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PHOTO: © PAUL PECK

Daniel V. Byrne: "The guarantee is the way I want to do business."

Obviously, offering—and providing—perfect service has tremendous marketing advantages. Customers are impressed by our ability to promise and deliver their orders on time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

But making the guarantee work operationally involves more than just telling employees to work hard and deliver on time. Although I can control certain types of deliveries—notably for cylinders we fill or gases we keep in stock—it's much harder to ensure that special blends, the high-priced end of our business, will be made in time for us to satisfy customers.

To do this and keep to our guarantee, we must communicate clearly with our suppliers, spelling out our needs to ensure an accurate commitment date.

Some suppliers overestimate their ability to deliver. Yet because of our guarantee, we simply cannot promise to deliver a gas in four weeks, for example, and have it show up two weeks late; we would have to give the product away.

Similarly, if we understate our ability to get the job done—promising delivery in eight weeks for a job that should take only a month—we risk losing the customer to the competition.

To walk this tightrope, we work with customers as well as suppliers to determine a commitment date. We frequently start with a range for delivery and, in the middle of the process, determine when the product will be ready. At that point, we make our commitment; the customer knows when to expect the goods, and we know what must be done to maintain our standards.

Not too long ago, a supplier called to say he was about to miss a delivery date.

It was a big order, and it was going to be late, giving the customer an obvious claim on our guarantee.

To avoid the problem, I asked the supplier to run his crew overtime if necessary to make our gas, and I offered to pay the overtime costs to get the job done. When the supplier realized that our on-time delivery commitment was that important to us and our customer, he finished the work at no extra cost, and the customer got the product on time.

Although we didn't incur the overtime, paying it would have been in line with our customer-service philosophy.

Simply put, the guarantee is the way I want to do business; it's how I believe companies should treat one another.

The guarantee certainly seems to have helped the company's growth; since its adoption, our staff and revenues have increased by about 50 percent. But it's the way we serve the customer that has been paramount to our success; the guarantee is a public declaration of the principles I jotted down back in 1984.

Don't talk customer service; live perfect service. **NB**



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