

May I Help You?



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Last week I was among the weary passengers on board a flight stranded at Chicago O'Hare Airport. After our delayed flight from sunny California landed around 8:30 pm, the pilot brought our plane to a 'complete stop' about 200 feet from the terminal. We remained parked there for 90 minutes due to the lack of an open gate. One by one, we watched helplessly as connecting flights completed boarding and taxied to the snowy runway. The experience was frustrating but also a bit surprising. The surprising part was the reaction of my fellow passengers. Instead of becoming visibly angry, impatient and emotional, everyone around me remained calm and dare I say, jovial. Not what I was expecting at the late hour and under the circumstances! I attribute the mood on board to one thing: excellent customer service. The flight attendants were thoughtful, professional and clearly concerned. Instead of hiding in the galley to avoid the brunt of unhappy passengers, they walked up and down the aisle to engage in conversation with customers, even offering post-landing beverages to anyone who was thirsty. The pilot provided frequent updates and apologized.

If you think about the fundamental purpose of risk management—to inspire confidence on the part of an organization's stakeholders—risk management and great customer service go hand in hand. Remember that the customer service professionals of any organization, including a nonprofit, play offense and defense. They offer support to back up the promises associated with the nonprofit's products and services, and they serve as the first point of contact with happy as well as disgruntled clients.

Yet too often there is a distance between the risk management function and the customer service team in an organization. There shouldn't be.

Reposition Risk

Perhaps it's time to rethink the risk function in our organization to ensure that is grounded in the principles of excellent customer service, such as:

- **Your staff members are the organization:** Your employees' actions and reputations are directly linked to that of your nonprofit. If your employees provide great customer service, that is what your nonprofit will be remembered for (and vice versa). Think about a time you had a positive or negative customer service experience—maybe while shopping, trying to get a broken machine fixed or replaced, or while on board a delayed flight. Your interaction with a single customer service associate can lead you to harbor strong feelings about an organization or brand, like "I'll never go back to that store again!"
- **Employee satisfaction matters:** Research shows that employee satisfaction leads to high performance, including customer service. Don't assume you know what's best for your staff or what they want or need. Ask them what they value and find ways to deliver the kind of workplace and workplace

culture your staff will boast about.

- **Your nonprofit has both internal and external customers:** We focus heavily on pleasing our external stakeholders, which means that important internal stakeholders get pushed aside. Since employee and customer satisfaction are linked, it's essential that you provide the same level of care to your employees that you ask them to provide to your clients, consumers, service recipients, members and donors.
- **Customer service comes first:** At the Center, our motto is that anyone can be trained to be an effective risk champion as long as they have the fundamental skills necessary to support the job. The same approach is embraced by Apple's retail stores. While 'auditioning' for the position of sales associate, candidates are rarely asked about their technical skills or their knowledge of Apple products. Instead, they are asked behavioral questions, like how they would respond to challenging customer service scenarios. Apple, a hugely successful company, insists that customer service is key—and that value has made a huge impact on the company's culture, customer loyalty and bottom-line.

At the Center, we rarely identify customer service as a critical element of risk management. But now we recognize that this oft forgotten component can influence the effectiveness of the risk management function as much as—or more than—headline issues like catastrophic losses, loss ratios and the like. As we move forward into the New Year, remind employees with risk responsibility that great customer service is job #1 in their area as well. Likewise, remind yourself to ask your direct reports, superiors, and the colleagues you interact with every day, "May I help you?"

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