



■ by Barry Furey

## Sometimes it's More Than a Milkshake

**A**s a loyal reader, you may have noticed by now that most of the columns in *9-1-1 Magazine* typically have some relationship to the topics covered elsewhere inside the issues. I assure you that this is no accident. Occasionally, as is the case this month, I take liberty and stray from the theme. However, since my chosen focus is customer service and staffing, I think that it is fair to say that this topic pretty much touches everything we do.

I often try to relate experiences in life to the services we provide, and to try to learn from these experiences. Here's one of them. Recently, I pulled into the drive-in lane of a fast food restaurant that I occasionally frequent and ordered a medium chocolate shake. From past experience, I knew this was a chancy move. If this franchise didn't make money from burgers, they'd never stay in business, because there's always some sort of problem with the ice cream machines. These machines, as I was once helpfully informed by an employee, are critical to the production of any chilled dairy product. Generally, however, they seem to be in a state a perpetual repair, and customers must learn to be content with a Coke and an apple pie instead of their first choice.

Surprisingly, this must have been my lucky day because my reasonably simple order was quickly taken and I was directed around to window number two where I waited for my milkshake. And I waited. And waited some more, until I was finally directed to find a parking place because I was beginning to cause a traffic jam. Prior to moving, I voiced my opinion, that "I should have known better than to expect a pleasant experience." This might have been McDonalds, but I certainly wasn't loving it.

A few moments later a very polite young man delivered both my order and an explanation. It seems he was the "senior" person on the crew that day with less than six months of experience, and that four other employees there had all been hired within the past week. He went on to tell me that I didn't realize how hard it was to work shorthanded and with so many new people, but wanted me to know that they were trying hard, and he was sorry that I had to wait.

I thanked him for his genuine concern for customer service, and drove off without giving him an explanation of what things he didn't know. Like what it's like to have most of your off duty supervisors working consoles because staffing is so tight. Or how to adequately deal with community growth that adds an average of a street a day to the CAD database. Maybe someday he may even look to find that the next training academy for new hires accounts for more than 20% of his total authorized staffing. And, perhaps he can try to figure out how to best cope

with the reality of delivering a consistently excellent product when a majority of his crew has two years experience, or less, and not just delivering this product on a short-term basis.

There was little point in educating him about facilities that provide a somewhat more important service while facing similar challenges; but there were still lessons to be learned. I was a customer who did not receive the treatment I perceived that I was due, and I was angry. I wondered how many times we short-serve our customers because we, too, are short staffed or poorly trained or both? And I wondered how often we even take the time to offer our customers an explanation of why we fell short of fulfilling their needs.

Now don't get me wrong. Some people's needs are never going to be met by calling 9-1-1, and they shouldn't be. The whole issue of improper requests for assistance could fill, well, another issue of this magazine. There may actually be occasions when there really isn't time for an explanation, although a simple but sincere "we're sorry" still probably isn't said enough. And there may be times when receiving poor service is just the tip of the iceberg and not the real concern.

I have often said that when people call 9-1-1 they are not having a nice day. They are already angry and upset by something that has happened. Most of the time, they are looking for someone else to fix things. More than anything, they don't want someone to make things worse by injecting yet another set of problems into their currently overcomplicated world. Take me for example.

For a time before she died, my mother, like many older people, developed a penchant for sweets. In fact, although she had pretty much given up on eating and on life altogether, a chocolate milkshake was one of her few remaining pleasures. That day, when I left the nursing home in search of one, I fulfilled what was to be my final promise to her, and saw her smile for the last time. As you can imagine, I wasn't in a mood to be mistreated. And neither are the customers at our drive-through.

Sometimes it's not that we took a dozen rings to answer, it's that those dozen rings got added to the second time this year that somebody blew up their mailbox. Sometimes it's not that we acted like we weren't listening, it's that their neighbors never listen when they ask them not to block their parking space. Sometimes it's not what they are asking for. Sometimes it is why they are asking for it. Sometimes it's more than a milkshake. **9-1-1**

*Barry Furey has been involved in public safety for more than 35 years, having managed 9-1-1 centers in four states. A life member of APCO International, he is the current Director of the Raleigh-Wake County, NC Emergency Communications Center.*