**Customer Service in Service and Parts**

***By Valerie Ziebron***

Consider how much time and interaction a boat owner has with your dealership's service and parts department. No other part of the dealership interacts with your customers more, and their experience in the shop usually has a strong influence on their overall opinion of the dealership. It has been proven time and again that if the customer likes and trusts the service department he or she is more likely to purchase another boat from that dealership.

   Stores that use great customer service in the service and parts department as a competitive advantage enjoy great word of mouth advertising and generally happier, more understanding customers as well. So what can a front line service or parts worker do to get their customers to know them better, like them and ultimately trust them?

   Communicate, communicate, communicate. Lack of good communication is often the number one complaint from unhappy customers. On the flip side, happy customers usually rave about great communication. Smart service managers employ technology and trick available to them as a means of proactive communication. One of the best practices is to set a call-back time. This means with every customer interaction, you let that customer know when he or she can expect to hear from you next. This keeps the phones from ringing off the hook, and allows you to have the information you need in front of you when you speak with the customer.

   In order to be successful with this, you must call the customer back at the time you promised. Using a route sheet or putting reminders in your day timer or computer can help you stay on task. Speaking of the computer, some customers may prefer to be contacted by e-mail or even text message. Be sure to ask your customers how they would like to be contacted, and let them know that a speedy reply helps to get their boat back on the water as quickly as possible.

   It can be frustrating when you are in the middle of something else and the phone is ringing. Remember that the customer on the other end of the phone has no idea how busy you are, so be sure to answer with a professional greeting and a smile on your face. Every time that phone ringing, imagine the sound of a cash register- ka-ching! Almost every call that comes in is someone who wants to spend money with your service and parts department, and for some, it may be the first impression that they have of your dealership. Make sure to make a good first impression with every call.

   When you think about delivering good service, you tend to think about 'customer service', but it is so important to have relations with your co-workers as well. Long-term, your co-workers can make or break your customer service and profitability goals. The best policy is to treat everyone well, but let's face it, it's easier to get along with some people. One of my favorite sayings is, " You may not always like your customers and co-workers, but to be successful in service and parts you must always L.U.V. them." L.U.V. is an acronym for Listen, Understand, and Verify. These three tools are key for delivering quality service. They can help you to fix the boat right the first time or order the right part the first time, and they help in building stronger, more trusting relationships. Let's take a quick look at each step.

**Listen**

   Listening is one of those things many try to do well but it becomes challenging when there is shop noise, people competing for your attention, or a customer having a hard time explaining what they want. Recognize that listening is a skill, and try to be aware of when you are doing a good or not so good job of it. The best types of listening skills are active and reflective. Truly focus on what the other person is saying and repeat back the key points. A great time to do this is during the write-up, when you show the customer the completed work order and review with them everything the technician is going to do. It is amazing how many times something is lost in translation, and doing this gives the customer the opportunity to ask questions and clarify things for you.

**Understand**

   The understanding piece of the equation is really about empathy. Good customer service is about connection, and that can't happen unless you let the customer know that you understand what it feels like to walk in his or her shoes. Empathy tends to require practice. When you are listening to the customer, ask yourself "what is he or she most upset or frustrated about?" and put that into words. Even if it is as simple as, " Well, I know you'd rather have your boat on the water than in the shop today so we'll do our best to get it back to you as soon as possible." This is one of the most important things you can do to help your customers get to know you, like and trust you. But remember, it won't be worth anything if you don't take care of their boats or get their parts ordered correctly. That is why the last step in L.U.V. is so important.

**Verify**

   Verify that you heard everything correctly. Verifying all of the facts helps to build a successful action plan. Lastly, verify that your customers are happy with the final outcome. If not, find out how things could have gone better and make note of changes for next time.

   Getting good at the habits of L.U.V. can help with all of your interactions with customers and co-workers alike. Take a fresh look at each of your communications this week. Where do you excel and where could you use some work? Each customer interaction can be training for the next one. Make the commitment to learn from each one, and you will enjoy the benefits of customers who know you, like you and trust you.