

Bad times, good service? Not necessarily

■ When the going gets tough, customers may or may not get the royal treatment

By ANDY GIEGERICH
The Tribune

Dave Ness, a hard-core Oakland Raiders fan, had nearly finished preparations for his Super Bowl party last January when the phone rang.

Thirty minutes later — and about an hour before the Raiders-Tampa Bay Buccaneers kickoff — the president of the Milwaukee-based voice and data specialist Matrix Networks found himself screwdriver-deep in a phone system at

AFS-USA, which administers foreign exchange student programs.

"We have two boxes that have all the phone cards in them, and one of the boxes looked dead," recalled Michael Weinberg, AFS-USA's office coordinator.

Ness, wearing his trademark Hawaiian shirt, tracked the problem to a faulty wire that had prevented power from reaching the box. He solved the problem and returned to his party just before kickoff.

"I've done things like that 100

times," Ness said.

The Raiders lost the game. Ness won a very loyal customer.

Intuitively, that level of customer service might have been expected to become a paramount survival tool for Oregon businesses fighting to stay afloat during the recession.

Stories abound about acts that were above and beyond the call of duty. These include unusual touches, too, such as the potted cactus that the Hillsdale women's clothing store La Paloma sends its best customers after a purchase.

But customer service experts say the notion of an inverse relationship between the quality of service and economic declines doesn't hold up. An informal poll at Pioneer Courthouse Square downtown on July 11 seemed to support them. Of 20 Northwest residents queried, 16 said customer service has grown worse or stayed the same in the last three years.

"It seems like companies have less staff to deal with problems,

"It's the worst of times for the economy and the worst of times for customer service."

—Gary Goodman, consultant

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When Michael Weinberg (left) called on Super Bowl Sunday, Dave Ness left the pre-game festivities to repair the phone system at Weinberg's office. Some companies are working hard to hang on to customers during the recession; others are downgrading the service component to save money. TRIBUNE PHOTO: KYLE GREEN

Service: Complaints climb in 2002

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and those they do have seen crabbier," said Jim Ewell, 52, of Eugene.

Customer service consultant Gary Goodman agrees. "Right now, it's the worst of times for the economy and the worst of times for customer service," said Goodman, president of the service consultancy the Goodman Organization, based in Glendale, Calif.

The Better Business Bureau of Oregon and Southwest Washington said it registered 28 percent more complaints in 2002 than in 2001.

The Oregon attorney general's office reports that consumer complaints, which entail both customer service gripes and scam reports, jumped 24 percent from 2001 to 2002. Telecommunications service complaints led the list, which included issues involving new and used car dealers and those peddling their wares via the Internet.

Departments first to go

The increase in complaints actually may have come because of, rather than in spite of, the recession. For starters, customer service departments often are among the first areas cut by penny-pinching companies.

"Along with training budgets, service folks and their jobs are being slashed," Goodman said.

Local consumers have their own theories regarding the service decline. Portlander Nick Hall, 28, contends that many U.S. companies don't spend enough to hire top-notch customer service representatives.

"They're even outsourcing it, of

ten to people who don't even speak English," he said.

Jessica, a 20-year-old downtown retail worker who declined to give her last name, said she believes there's little inducement for service representatives to do a good job.

"Companies can't afford to offer anything more to us for doing a good job," she said. "So even if you do well, you don't get anything extra. There's no incentive there."

Jessica thinks that her theory applies particularly to larger companies at which service tends to fall through the cracks.

There are some notable exceptions, though.

Customer service is the hallmark of such Northwest-based companies as Les Schwab Tire Centers and Nordstrom

Inc. Schwab's tire team rushes out to greet customers and often does out free advice; a concerned Nordstrom clerk offered her business card to a customer thinking they might need a smaller size blouse put aside for them.

Yet Steve Dixon, consumer advocate for the Oregon State Public Interest Research Group, argues that larger interests don't emphasize customer service.

"They have a larger pool of people to upset," he explained. "Smaller businesses view customers as more valuable. With larger corporations, it doesn't really matter that

much if they lose a few customers because they're so big."

Web is another avenue

Larger companies also make the Internet one of their principal tools in interfacing with customers.

Bill Rose, executive director of the San Diego-based Service and Support Professionals Association, thinks that the Web, by increasing the number of customer service

routes, has boosted the quality of service. Customers now can e-mail questions to service reps, as opposed to waiting on hold.

"We're also seeing continued investment in support technology, or programs like live chat-room support that makes the service process easier," he explained.

Jason Reynolds, executive director of the Oregon Consumers League, disagrees.

"The Web ultimately puts up more barriers to customer service," Reynolds said. "I've seen surveys reporting that more than half of all e-mails to companies requesting customer service are ignored."

Offline, there are numerous heartening customer service stories. Rasmussen BMW's service department employees drive customers to work when their cars need service. The area's six Backyard Bird Shops carry heavy seed bags to customers' cars.

And Old Town Chevron, 400 W.

Burnside St., sends thank-you notes to customers who purchase parts and service.

Maybe it's the customer

Some stories that seem bad may come with a caveat. A customer at Grand Central Bakery — let's call him Reporter — ordered a chicken and chutney sandwich box lunch, with a cookie and potato chips.

The counterman told Reporter that the bakery was out of chicken but that he could substitute turkey. Reporter said, "Fine."

Reporter then overheard the sandwich maker tell the counterman that the bakery was out of turkey as well. Reporter expected immediate word of the shortage so he could, for the second time, change his order.

After more than 10 minutes, the sandwich maker finally told impatient Reporter his order couldn't be filled. Reporter asked for his money back.

"It was the onus of the person who took the information to come back to you and feed you that information," said Ben Davis, Grand Central's co-owner.

However, there's more. Reporter collected his money and, upon realizing that he still clutched the cookie, tossed the snack on the counter, hoping it would plopp gracefully yet firmly.

Instead, the cookie slid across the counter past the bemused counterman and onto the bakery's flour-dusted floor.

In the end, Reporter came off as a jerk.

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