



## Customer service crucial during rough economic times

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Customer service seems to have fallen by the wayside recently, but businesses need to make this a priority now more than ever.

Personal finances are shaky these days, especially as the recession continues and unemployment remains stagnant. When patrons are willing to shell out cash for discretionary purchases during hard times, swift action to correct a shortcoming or unpleasant experience is vital to keep customers spending their money.

Each year, business consultants with Convergys Corp. conduct a survey to evaluate customer satisfaction. In January, they polled 2,500 customers, 1,500 employees and 120 executives of large companies in the United States and the United Kingdom. Of the respondents, 57 percent said they have had a bad experience with a company, up slightly from 2008. Of those, 44 percent said they stopped doing business with that company, up from 38 percent in 2008.

If these statistics carry weight, two businesses in New Orleans have cause to be concerned.

One is the New Orleans Saints organization, which has taken season tickets from about 1,200 fans to make room for a new press box in the Superdome. While the Saints have said they are "confident" all affected ticket holders will be accounted for during the upcoming season, there has been no real commitment from the head office.

An e-mail exchange between Greg Bensel, vice president of communications for the Saints, and WWL-TV reporter Bigad Shaban only proves the blasé approach to the situation.

Following numerous phone calls from fans to his station, Shaban asked for specifics on the affected rows and seat numbers. Bensel's response was that the subject had been covered enough and "if Saints ticket holders have any questions about this very public story, about their accounts, they normally will call us and get the information," according to the exchange posted on WWL's Web site.

In an April 3 incident, a power failure caused by a fire in Mid-City forced the cancellation of the musical "Wicked" at the Mahalia Jackson Theater shortly after the second half began.

Patrons complained on their way out that there was no indication they would be compensated or given an opportunity to see the conclusion of the show. Three days later, officials with the Mahalia Jackson Theater and Broadway Across America were still consulting with the show's producers. According to a release, patrons with questions were urged to contact the theater's administrative office.

Working with customers on a one-on-one basis is great, assuming there's a resolution. But businesses must own their mistakes.

Mistakes happen. It's human nature. But waiting for your customers to come to you, while not having a plan in place to accommodate them at the scene of the error, is not the way to retain business.

The Convergys survey found that 80 percent of respondents who had a bad customer experience told their friends and colleagues about it through face-to-face chats, e-mails, text messages and social media.

In both incidents, message boards and social media Web sites have buzzed with discussions about how things are being handled. Those affected are trying to get as much information from each other as possible.

The risk that unresponsive management runs by not publicly acknowledging their mistakes is shunning not only those who were affected but potentially others who hear or read the flow of unchecked information, which can be misinformation.

Beyond customer service, this is just bad business during a time when companies should spare no efforts to keep their customers happy.

News Editor Christian Moises can be reached at 293-9249 or by e-mail at christian.moises@nogg.com.

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