

editor's note



RECENTLY MY DAUGHTER'S CLARINET BROKE. Our rental agreement with Evanston Band & Orchestra said they would repair any problems so we dutifully drove over to the store. The company's response? They immediately took the damaged clarinet and handed us a nearly identical loaner. But they also went one step further: They said it would be a couple of weeks to repair the clarinet and at that time, we could either come back and exchange the clarinet, or we could just keep using the loaner and avoid having to make another trip to the store (we made the trip; my daughter wanted "her clarinet" back).

With today's poor economy, the natural inclination of many companies is to pull back on such niceties as customer service. But your current customers are also your best prospects and retaining them may be one of the most critical factors in your company's success.

Consider three other customer service experiences I've had recently.

My wife's Blackberry has been a lemon since we got it (in contrast I love my Blackberry and it was on my recommendation that she got hers). T-Mobile had previously replaced the SIM card and upgraded the software but the problems with the phone have only gotten worse. My wife was finally fed up so I called T-Mobile and recommended they replace the phone. They were very pleasant and responsive and told me they would ship another phone out and I'd only have to pay the shipping cost. I asked if I could simply go to one of the seemingly hundreds of T-Mobile stores located within walking distance of my house to exchange it (maybe even the one where it was originally purchased) but they said that wasn't allowed.

Last year I bought a computer from HP for home and for the most part I've been pretty satisfied: it's fast, has plenty of capacity for my family's needs, and it was relatively inexpensive. But over time it developed an extremely noisy fan. I opened the case but couldn't determine which of the fans was the troublemaker. After some online research I discovered reports of noisy fans in the video card that came with this particular

model—and a link to MSI which was offering a replacement at no charge (not even the shipping cost). Sure enough, the replacement card came last week and now my computer hums along quietly. I only wish HP had thought to notify me; I wonder how many people had the same problem and didn't find the information online?

I store a lot of photos and music on an external hard drive. The other night, the plug connector broke off inside the Maxtor One Touch 4 unit. At a loss as to what to do, I turned to Seagate's (the parent company for Maxtor) website. I couldn't find any helpful information so I emailed customer service, who advised me to "get in touch with local technicians or someone to check if they can help you fix since only the connection is broken." A suggestion on who to contact would have been a lot more useful, however.

If you were the customer, which of these companies would you be most likely to use again? (My middle child just started oboe lessons. Guess where we rented his oboe!) Now is a good time to look at your own company's customer service and the impact it has on your business. Are your clients likely to be one-time customers or repeat business?

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