Over the Top Member/Supporter Service
by Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

Since the retention of members and supporters is one of the most important and ongoing challenges for any nonprofit, there should be no limit on the effort these organizations make to keep their member/supporter base satisfied. Too often, however, organizations seem to think that because of their nonprofit status they can't "compete" for these supporters the same way that a private, for-profit company can. Not so. The only limits on what nonprofits can do to keep their members/supporters satisfied are the limits of their budget - and their imagination!

Maybe what membership organizations need to do is spend less time complaining about the advantages of these for-profit competitors and more time learning from them. If these companies are so good at customer service and keeping customers, maybe membership organizations should learn from their success. Instead of fighting the competition, maybe membership organizations should be emulating the competition. Not-for-profit is a designation given to membership organizations by some government agency, it doesn't have to be a business philosophy. Remember - even nonprofits can - and should - be run in a businesslike manner. They are just different kinds of businesses. The need to give top-quality member/customer/supporter service is the same for all organizations.

Step # 1 – Create a Positive Member Service Environment

Successful companies and organizations of all types believe that good customer service has to be part of a culture, not just a slogan. These organizations understand that every employee plays a part in good customer service, regardless of his or her position in the company.

Nonprofits also need to institutionalize a customer/member service culture. The first step is to develop some member service policies and standards. This can't be just a reminder to the staff to answer the phone quickly and be polite. Real commitment means identifying as many ways as possible to actually measure good customer service, and then setting standards of good performance. Try to identify what top-level performance means in areas like turnaround time on orders; how many times a phone rings before it's answered; how many times a caller gets transferred before

speaking to the right person; how accurate the member listings are in the organization's database and directory; etc.

Step # 2 – Develop Top-down Involvement

If the top leaders in the organization (Board members, officers, top-level staff) aren't committed to better member service through a systematic approach, then the other staff and members are unlikely to be as concerned about it as they should be. The organization's Board of Directors and top staff need to adopt a formal, specific, written set of customer service policies and guidelines. These need to be developed with input from various sources, and then communicated to everyone in the organization's staff and volunteer leadership. These policies should be reviewed frequently and used as part of the evaluation of the organization's retention efforts.

Step #3- Empower Member/Customer Service Personnel

One of America's major U.S. telecommunications giants has a very interesting philosophy regarding who is responsible for solving their customers' problems. According to their Chairman, "No matter who you are, when you come in contact with a customer who has a problem, you *own* that problem until you help the customer get it solved."

Nonprofits need to take note of this concept. If there was ever a great slogan for member service and member retention, it is "You own the problem until it is solved." That doesn't mean that the leader or staffer who is the first contact with the member and his/her problem has to be the person with the answer to the problem. It's very possible that the member's problem is better handled by another staff person or volunteer leader. It DOES mean that the person who first interacted with the member is responsible not just for transferring the problem to someone else, but also for making sure that the problem is solved.

It also means that everyone on the membership organization's staff needs to buy into the concept of top-level member service. It means that the days of "It's not my job" are over. It means that staffers can no longer consider themselves or their departments separate entities, dedicated to only one area such as legislation or education. It means that all leaders, volunteer and staff, have to be willing to accept "reminders" and inquiries from others who have asked them to help solve a member problem. It means that the organization's leadership needs to establish a teambuilding system that

will create a culture that focuses not on the organization, but on the members.

Step 4 – REALLY Understand Your Member/Customer Needs and Wants

The Marriott Corporation, the worldwide hotel chain, works hard to instill the notion of top quality customer service in all of its employees (not just the service people). One of the techniques they employ is something that, for lack of a better term, is known as "empathy training." Every management-level employee is asked to go out into Marriott's various business enterprises (hotels, food service, etc.) and perform the work required of the people who are employed in the areas for which the manager is responsible. This means that every manager is going to experience (at least for a short while) the challenges, frustrations, and rewards of working for Marriott in these various jobs.

Nonprofit membership organizations can use the same technique to give staffers at least a small idea of what members face every day in their jobs and in their professions. One association asked its staffers to spend a day with one of the organization's members. Association staff members actually went out and spent an entire day with a member, from the opening of the business in the morning to the last after-hours meeting in the evening. The idea was to let the staffers really get some insight into the problems members faced. The goal was simple - when the staffer picked up the phone and listened to the requests of members calling their Headquarters office, the staff could actually "picture" the situation the member was describing.

Step # 5 – Determine the Elements of Your Organization's Member Service Program

By looking at these successful companies, membership organizations can pick up many ideas for enhanced member/customer service, and retention. Here are some additional tips on giving the best member service.

1. *Ask the right questions.*
Sometimes members aren't really sure what they want from an organization. Even when asked something as simple as "How may we help you?" there can be a miscommunication. Members actually don't know how the organization can help them unless they know everything that the organization does. What they *do* know, in all cases, is what problem they

need solved. Try to guide them into explaining what their problem is, and get them in touch with the correct person or department.

2. *Learn to be a little bilingual*
Sometimes people who work for membership organizations forget that the members and customers contacting the organization aren't familiar with everything the organization does. Staffers can fall into the trap of using names and initials and references that are well-known to staff and organizational leaders but not necessarily to members at large. Be careful to speak the "language" of members/customers.

3. *Repeat important information.*
When a member request requires some sort of follow- up action by a staff person, be sure to repeat important information before breaking off the contact with the member. Reconfirm what is to be done, in what time frame, etc. so there are no misconceptions about what is going to be done. If staffers make sure they are clear on what members' expectations are, they have a good chance of meeting or exceeding them.

4. *Set quality control standards on everything the organization does.*
Membership organizations need to emulate the "big boys" by establishing standards of performance on all aspects of customer service. Tracking the organization's performance in such things as turn around time on orders, meeting deadlines on publications, returning phone calls in a specified time frame, etc., isn't supposed to put undo pressure on overworked staff members. It is supposed to remind everyone of the organization's commitment to meeting member/customer needs.

5. *When in doubt about whether or not the organization can "do it" for a member, DO IT! Handle the internal battles later.*
Membership organizations must empower their staffers to make good, common sense judgments when handling member requests. Within reason (i.e. within the legal and financial guidelines of your organization), staffers should be encouraged to give members what they want as often as possible. Staffers should handle the "internal" battles after the member's problem has been solved.

6. *Handle problems as they arise.*
If a problem looks as though it might grow into something worse, don't take the attitude of "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Stop and find ways to correct the problem immediately. This philosophy of finding solutions to problems as they arise has saved private companies millions

of dollars over the years. They found that to delay dealing with current problems only creates more expensive problems later on.

7. *Don't panic if something goes wrong.*
Improving an organization's member/customer service is an important goal, but the effort must focus on continuous improvement, not on perfection. No organization is ever going to be perfect in member/customer service. If something goes wrong (and it will), the ability to retain that member or customer is dependent upon how your organization handles the situation. Customer service surveys over the years indicate that a vast majority of members/customers who have a problem with an organization's products or services *will* do business with that organization again, as long as the problem is solved to the member/customer's satisfaction. Apologize for mistakes, ask the member/customer what it will take to make the situation right, and then (within reason) do what they ask.

Nonprofits face competition from many sources for their members' time and support. Providing over-the-top member/supporter service may be the nonprofit's biggest competitive advantage.

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