



Region 7 Review

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Director's Corner

Greetings from Mike Gregg.

Now that the holidays are over, it's time for me to prepare for my installation as Region 7 Director on February 22. First let me introduce myself. My wife Linda and I have been married for 38 years. We have two married daughters and five grandchildren. I have an industrial management degree from San Diego State University and have been in the pool service business since 1978. I originally started my pool business in Orange County, where I joined the IPSSA chapter and served as vice president. I opened a retail pool store, which although successful, demanded too much time, and I settled into primarily one-man operation.

My family and I moved back to San Diego in 1986, and I joined the San Diego IPSSA chapter, where I served as entertainment chairman and vice president. I have enjoyed my association with IPSSA and with your support, expect this new assignment to be equally rewarding.

I look forward to meeting all of you at our next R7 Board meeting on January 22 and wish you a happy and successful New Year.

Romancing the Customer

Show your customers the kind of devotion they deserve, and they will be yours for life.

--excerpted from a March 31, 1999 article by Pamela Mills in **Pool & Spa News**

To create long-lasting relationships with customers, pool and spa service providers may want to consider the words of relationship experts like Dear Abby or Dr. Laura. Think romance, they advise. Never lose your determination to please.

Try to act like a doting lover, they might advise service firms. Listen carefully, rectify complaints, follow through on promises and, whenever possible, do something unexpected – and delightful.

“One of the biggest complaints I hear from people about this industry is that service and repair techs do not pay attention to what customers are saying,” said **A.J. Wilson**, owner and operator of Like New Cleaning & Repair Service Inc. in San Diego. Wilson, who has been in business since 1986, came from the office machines industry, which he said holds customer service as paramount. He brings the same to his own operations.

“What sets me apart from some of the other service companies is that I am very dedicated to finding out what the customer needs from me,” Wilson explained.

This becomes harder the more employees you have, however. Wilson, with one part-time employee, deals with the majority of his customers directly and has greater control as a result. Others rely more on their staff members to interact with customers. In these cases, training employees to ask the right questions becomes essential.

Ways to go out of your way

- Develop a questionnaire, or “primer” for staff members to use when meeting with customers, especially new ones.

Calendar of Events

- **R7 Golf Tournament**, Fri., Jan. 4, 2002, Admiral Baker Golf Course (Friars Rd./Adm. Baker Rd.). Proceeds will be donated to Children's Hospital.
- **12th Annual R7 TableTop**, Sat., Jan. 5, Scottish Rite Center, (619) 464-6400.
- **R7 Board Meeting**, Tues., Jan. 22, 7:00 p.m., Holiday Inn, SD. *Plaques in recognition of participation in the Region meetings will be given out.*
- **Western Pool & Spa Show**, Thur. – Sat., Feb. 7 – 9, Long Beach Convention Center. General Info (800) 787-7727, Exhibitors (800) 746-9772.
- **B.O.R.D.**, Fri., Feb. 22, Long Beach Marriott, (888) 360-9505.
- **Leadership Seminar & Annual Installation Dinner**, Sat., Feb. 23, Long Beach Marriott, (888) 360-9505.

- Have you had service before?
- Was there a problem with your previous service company that wasn't resolved?
- Describe your backyard. Do you have lots of trees and shrubs, grass, concrete or dirt?
- Describe your pool: is it inground or aboveground? How big is it? Does it have an automatic cleaner? Does it have an attached spa? Does it have a cover?

• Follow through. Assume responsibility for fulfilling your customers' needs in a way that proves both that you were listening and that you know how to satisfy. Build a reputation and customer base by starting a job when you say you will, ending it when you say you will, and delivering it at the price you said you would.

- If need be, *add employees* to improve your response time to customers. This not only helps to keep your customers happy, but it also improves your competitiveness against the mass discounters who can't offer your level of service.

- *Educate employees to never commit to repair work without knowing the schedule.* At times a tech will just tell a customer what they wanted to hear in terms of when the problem could be fixed. In those cases, noted Al Inglin of Advanced Training and Compliance in Southampton, Pa., the firm often had to follow up on the commitment, regardless of what it did to the schedule.
- Go that extra mile. Taking the time to deliver more than the other guy creates both a memorable impression and devoted clients. Opportunities to provide this extra service abound:
 - *Offer free on-site repair estimates*, even for non-customers. If you cannot handle the job, offer to refer the customer to another source and explain the customer's problem to that firm. Bob Webb of Aspen Pool & Spa in Brentwood, Calif. notes that he receives no referral fee for this, only the goodwill of all parties.
 - Take the time *to do the little touches*. Add water, vacuum the pool each visit, wipe down chrome. If the customer is planning a party, offer to do a spruce-up visit at no cost. "If they are a good client and pay promptly, I am more than happy to do the extras for them," said Webb.
 - *Connect with customers.* Make sure that customers feel free to ask questions or just come out and talk when you are there.
- Keep customers informed.
 - "Telling customers what you have done, even if this is just a regular weekly servicing, is so important," said A.J. Wilson, who leaves a form at every job checking off work completed and adding a comment or two.
 - *Communicate with customers* about what the job entails and the costs involved. Spell everything out on a contract.
 - *Encourage customers to get a second opinion* on large repairs. Because they don't understand all that is involved, they might think they are being taken advantage of. In these cases, Bob Webb encourages them to get a second opinion. "But before I go, I make them repeat back to me exactly what I have told them (he also leaves a written explanation) so that I know they have heard what I

have said," he explained. "The last thing I want is for them to go to someone else and incorrectly state what I have told them. That does nothing to enhance my reputation."

- Solve problems. When you have gone above and beyond the call of duty and have told your customers as much, and yet they remain unsatisfied, it could be time to shift gears, reassessing both your performance and your relationship with the customer.

- Make the customer feel a part of the problem-solving process. Talk with your techs to get their side of the story, and then get back to the customer directly.

- Make your techs responsible for satisfying their customers. Keith Reuter of Keith Reuter's Pool Service in Napa Valley, Calif. has techs return to the job site and correct situations on their own time whenever a complaint gets logged against them. "Consequently, they have the incentive to do the job right the first time," Reuter said.

- Be accessible to customers. Give them your cell phone number, voice mail, pager, and nighttime number.

- Offer numerous references, and point out other work you have done in the customer's area.

- Teach them what they need to know. Hold customer education classes. This teaches customers how to do the job right and gives you a chance to sell chems to them.

- Be patient. Sometimes going the extra mile requires more than time and an attention to detail – it requires patience as well.

The Payoff

If all this seems like a lot of work and bother, remember to look at the big picture. As your firm's reputation for fairness and reliability grows, so will your profits, say service business owners who take the romance-the-customer approach.

As Reuter will attest, when you provide a higher level of customer service, you earn the right to charge higher prices for your work. In fact, for most customers, pricing ranks toward the bottom of their list of concerns, service providers say.

"If you give customers what they want at a competitive price and in a timely manner, pricing is generally not an issues," said Pat Hancock, owner of

Hancock Pool Services Inc. in Houston. "Reputation is more of one."

"Good customer service is not something you accomplish just once, added Reuter. "You have to diligently work at it every day."

Education Deduction Basics

By Jeanne Mann

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Whether deductions are taken by your company or on your own Schedule C, they are a real, yet often ignored, savings. This author doesn't claim to be a tax advisor, but we can point out some of the basics. Read on.

A deduction is available if the education maintains or improves the skills related to your trade or business. Educational costs are also deductible if the education is required (by law or by your employer) to keep your current position or job.

For example, if you take seminars, courses, learning vacations, or workshops on topics that will help you in your profession or business, they would generally be deductible since they improve your current skills. The payments for courses can be taken in the year they were paid, not necessarily the year the course is taken. Travel expenses would be taken the year the course was taken in.

Each company employee, self-employed person, course, or learning vacation is unique. We encourage you to seek the assistance of a qualified tax pro. Their advice would definitely be in your best interest.

P.S. What if I have already filed my tax return? You may be entitled to a refund by filing an amended return.

As seen in Productive Learning & Leisure 2001 "The Insider" e-newsletter, October 2001. CPA Jeanne Mann, of San Diego-based Withers, Mann & LaManna LLP contributed information for this article. Please feel free to contact her at (858) 566-1065 or call your tax advisor for more details.

Never regard study as a duty but as an enviable opportunity to learn to know the liberating influence of beauty in the realm of the spirit for your own personal joy and to the profit of the community to which your later works belong.

--Albert Einstein