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**Veteran Customer Service Manager Shares Secrets
to Successful Customer Relations**

By Paul Scelsi

Cover Photo: *Shelly Doubet, former customer service manager at Air Vent.
Photo courtesy of Paul Scelsi*

Possibly the most critical – and as often underappreciated – part of business, I believe, is the role customer service plays before, during, and long after the transaction concludes with your customers.

Our podcast interview on customer relations features Air Vent Customer Service Manager Shelly Doubet, a 43-year veteran in the art of making clients happy, who retired in February 2023. Doubet shared some of the lessons learned for successful customer service interactions based on her long career at Air Vent, which she joined three years after the company's founding in 1976.

“Today we call it ‘customer experience’ not ‘customer service,’ so the description has changed [slightly] but not the goal,” says Doubet. “To me, customer service means from the minute you pick up the package, click on a link, or see a picture of something you like; it’s that whole interaction with that product or service start to finish.

“Forty years ago, customer service was calling a phone number and who you were talking to at that point in time. It’s so much more now. Customer service also applies internally – how we interact with each other within the company. There’s external customer service and internal customer service.”

Doubet’s observation about how customer service interactions involve anyone and everyone within the company highlights the importance of being customer-focused no matter a person’s role or title. It’s also important, Doubet explained, that businesses have systems in place that keep the customer in mind through all phases of the interaction. Bottom line: How the customer service experience plays out reflects on a company’s brand.

Representing the Company

“While the customer service department is very much the face and voice of a company to the customer, it truly has expanded beyond the customer service department in today’s digital world. So, if a business doesn’t have a website that’s current or interactive or doesn’t have the most up-to-date knowledge, that’ll be noticed by the customer,” Doubet says.

For example, she said when customers and potential customers engage with a business on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media platforms, that's an extension of customer service.

"When the industry uses the resources provided by a business — for example, the Air Vent app or the educational seminars — that entire engagement is part of the customer service experience," Doubet says.

It's also potential customers, people considering doing business with a company or conducting research for a future project, like a future roof replacement.

There's also a wide range of experience and expectations on the other end of the telephone when someone calls customer service (or emails or posts on social media). What a homeowner asks for regarding customer service differs markedly from what a roofing contractor, architect, home inspector, or vendor requests. These differences can pose challenges for businesses and their customer service operations. They have to be well-versed in the subject matter and be ready to adjust the depth of the information they provide to customers.

"There's a piece to all of these interactions that is intuitive, but you really do have to know who you are talking to," says Doubet. "A consumer, for example, is not generally as interested in the science and research behind an attic vent. But you can pair down the explanation to the essence of the message in those cases. Having user-friendly content in a variety of platforms also helps."

Doubet said the very first thing a customer service representative should do is identify who they are talking to and adjust their message accordingly.

"We wear many hats here in customer service," Doubet says. "A call to place an order is different than a warranty call, which is very different than a 'help me vent my attic call.' Identify who you are talking to, identify their needs, and then use the available resources to help answer the incoming question."

Interestingly, Doubet has noticed a change in how customers think from 1979 through today.

"It used to be the consumer didn't really care that much about the science of attic ventilation and how to keep their attic cool," she says. "That concern was generally on the mind of the roofing professionals who contacted us. That's no longer the case. Now,

homeowners want to know more about it because they've researched how it impacts everything about their home and their energy usage. They want to protect their investment."

"Forty years ago, customer service was calling a phone number and who you were talking to at that point in time. It's so much more now."



Handling Unhappy Customers

Sometimes the role of customer service involves talking to unhappy people. They may be disappointed with the product or service, justified or not. The extent of their unhappiness can vary greatly too. Keeping things in check as the customer service representative goes a long way toward a positive outcome.

"You have to understand how to defuse the situation," Doubet says. "I have found that they really wouldn't be upset for no reason. There's a reason. You can empathize with them. You can sympathize with them. You can find out the root cause of the whole problem. Be patient. And I have found that talking in a calm tone the entire time, it helps rather than raising my voice as high as their voice."

Doubet said the key is to speak calmly, be transparent, and try building a rapport and trust.

"Even if you can't tell them exactly what they want to hear, you can tell them the absolute best information you have," she says. "I just think patience and honesty is the best

thing to do along will full transparency.”

To avoid allowing a challenging customer service interaction to spoil the day for her and her team, Doubet says each of them supports the other.

“We hold each other up all the time. We have a great sense of humor. And sometimes we just talk through those tough phone calls aloud after the fact and encourage each other that the next call will be better,” she adds.

Doubet says she would recharge her battery for the next day’s customer service duties by listening to podcasts on her commute to and from work, and encourages others to decompress and recharge.

“I like crime podcasts, and I know that may sound pretty weird, but it’s what I enjoy. That’s how I relax,” she says.

Keys to Long-Term Service Success

With more than four decades of servicing customers and managing customer service teams, Doubet boils down the keys to success as follows:

“I think you should have a complete understanding of your business, understanding how all aspects of your product or service work,” she says. “From beginning to end. How it’s made, how it’s packaged and shipped, how marketing gets the message out, and how it hits the market with sales. Even understanding your competition is important.”

To that end, Doubet has encouraged training for her team to include not just interpersonal skills but also learning the business A to Z.

“Maybe customer service representatives take turns working a day with marketing, with sales, with engineering, with shipping or whatever service you’re selling with a goal of fully understanding the business,” Doubet says.

Empowering customer service employees to make on-the-spot decisions is essential for managers. It also builds a strong culture on the team.

“Empowering them to make decisions on their own and supporting them when they did not make the 100% best possible decision goes a long way,” she says. “And understand that every employee is unique and build to that uniqueness and be patient. And allow them to make independent decisions. In the end, this benefits the customer because customer service representatives will increasingly be able to handle incoming customer requests solo.”

She added this also impresses customers, who will appreciate not having to be transferred to multiple other employees or wait for someone to call them back.

In 43 years, the forms of communication to Air Vent and other businesses have expanded from phone calls to faxes, emails, websites, social media platforms, apps, and more. Doubet says in some ways, today’s technology makes it more difficult to talk to a human being. She urges businesses to stay accessible.

“Make sure whatever phone system you have, whatever platform you’re using to interact with your customers, make sure you’re still accessible because sometimes people want to talk to people. Stay accessible even as technology advances. I’m a firm believer in that,” Doubet says.

About the author: Paul Scelsi is marketing communications manager at Air Vent Inc. and leader of its Attic Ventilation: Ask the Expert™ seminars (airvent.com). He hosts the podcast, “Airing it out with Air Vent,” and he’s the chairman of the Asphalt Roofing Manufacturers Association Ventilation Task Force. He is the author of the book, Grab and Hold Their Attention: Creating and Delivering Presentations that Move Your Audience to Action.