

MONDAY MANNA

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WHAT IS THE VALUE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE?

By Robert J. Tamasy

Recently I was among nearly 500 people affected when a local medical facility decided to close a specialised care centre that had served our area for 15 years. The patients, many of whom had been going to the centre for years (10, in my case), were understandably disappointed and upset. "Irate" was a better description for some of them.

We all were encouraged to transfer to a new, state-of-the-art, much larger facility operated by the healthcare organisation in another part of the city. For many, however, that meant an additional drive of 20-30 minutes each way, depending on traffic, and having to deal with less than ideal parking accommodations at the site. Considering many of the patients are elderly and not very mobile, or recovering from recent major surgery, moving to the new centre was not an appealing option.

To justify their decision, the healthcare officials used terms such as "full utilisation of a newer facility," "advanced equipment and supportive technology," "continuous improvement model," "resources allocated for optimum service," and "high rankings in key metrics." Terminology like this might warm the hearts of corporate executives, number crunchers and stakeholders, but not the patients living in my area. They could not help but feel forsaken. Nowhere did the officials state the decision had been formulated with the best interests of the patients – the customers – being foremost in their concerns.

So, what is the value of customer service? Can – or should – business economics and efficiencies always justify reducing or making dramatic changes to established services? Throughout my working career, I have experienced decisions of this type on numerous occasions. They are never easy. Sometimes they are justified and unavoidable; cuts may be necessary to ensure survival. At other times, however, decisions justified by dollars and cents might make good sense fiscally, but could be detrimental to long-term relationships with customers.

If profits are paramount, customers and their interests can easily be discounted. But if disgruntled customers vote with their dollars and go elsewhere for services and products, profit-based decisions can lead to calamity. The Bible suggests how to weigh decisions between profits and people:

Customers are the lifeblood of any business. Balance decisions by awareness of the needs and concerns of customers who will be affected. *"Be sure to know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds...the lambs will provide you with clothing and the goats with the price of a field. You will have plenty of goats' milk to feed you and your family..."* (Proverbs 27:23-27).

What would you do if you were them? Substantial cuts or changes in services may be necessary, but if you were the customer affected, how would you feel and react? Might there be any more acceptable alternatives? *"Do to others as you would have them do to you"* (Luke 6:31).

Is greed the primary motive? Profits serve as rewards; they also can be reinvested for a company's growth. However, it's important to remember the value of focusing on others. *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit...look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others"* (Philippians 2:3-4).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

Have you ever been affected by a major change instituted by a business or organisation that caused you inconvenience, or even hardship? If so, what were the circumstances – and how did you respond to the decisions made?

How would you approach reaching a decision – and then implementing it – that you knew would have a negative impact on people within your organisation, or its customers?

What does “knowing the condition of your flocks” have to do with these kinds of decisions, where changes are not eagerly received – even strongly opposed by those involved?

In your experience, how important are profits in the decision-making process? When greed and the desire to make more money are primary motivating factors, what – if anything – can be done to influence decisions that are reached?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about principles it presents, consider the following passages:

Matthew 10:45

Luke 22:27

Romans 12:10

Ephesians 5:21

Philippians 2:7