



BY PAUL RAKO, TECHNICAL EDITOR

In a downturn, treat your customers right

When things are bad, as they are now, smart companies know enough to treat their customers right, even if the customer is wrong. As an example, 15 years ago, I started having trouble with an 8-foot fluorescent fixture in my shop. I went to my nearby hardware store, Orchard Supply Hardware, and bought a new ballast. After I used it to replace the ballast in my fixture, I turned on the circuit breaker and flipped the light switch. The

lamp still didn't work. It turns out that the switch was bad. Like all other engineers, I was curious, so I put the old ballast back in. The light worked perfectly. Now, this story should tell all you troubleshooters to not make assumptions without testing them. A minute with a voltmeter would have shown that the switch was defective.

I will forever cherish this memory because, when the next day I took the new fluorescent ballast back to Orchard Supply Hardware, I was honest with the store manager who was manning the returns counter. I explained that I thought I had a bad ballast but that the problem had turned out to be the switch. I then showed him where the wire nuts had grooved the wires on the ballast and told him I would understand if they wouldn't let me return it. "Of course we'll take it back," he responded. "The important thing is that you got your light fixed." I have been a loyal customer at Orchard Supply ever since. I don't care if I can get something cheaper at a big-box store. Orchard Supply gets my business.

More recently, I saw both sides of the customer-service coin. A friend had a heart attack and needed a char-



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ger for his cell phone in the hospital room. I guess he was too embarrassed to let me see his apartment. I went to a local Verizon store with the model number. To my amazement, the store had no charger for his two-year-old phone, and the employees had no recommendations about where I could find one. They just didn't care. I might as well have been in a Denny's.

So I went to Micro Center across the mall. After hearing about my friend in the hospital, a store employee browsed through the shelves with me, show-

ing me everything that might work. We agreed I should buy a \$50 universal charger and hope for the best. Unfortunately, the charger didn't fit, but, when I took it back to Micro Center, I found out that it was over the 30-day limit for returns. I started to inundate the return clerk with an avalanche of excuses, adding how carefully I had repacked the box. She stopped me after I showed her the receipt and said, "Oh, this isn't too far out." She scanned the bar code and told me that I would receive the full credit on my credit card—no hassle, no argument, no restocking fee—nothing but a smile and a thank you. I immediately bought some blank-DVD media and cable-routing hardware that cost more than the \$50 credit I had just received.

Just two weeks ago, I was in Portland, OR, visiting an old college buddy. We went to a trendy local supermarket that he said had restaurant-quality steaks. We bought three at \$15 a pound. As we waited to check out, we got a call from his brother-in-law who was having car troubles on the way to visit us and needed our help. We went back to the meat counter and explained the situation, and they cheerfully took the steaks back. When the car problem turned out to be a false alarm, we returned 20 minutes later and bought four steaks.

When times are good, we take our customers for granted. Hunt down *The Suicidal Corporation* to read how corporate narcissism made Ford Motors think it was the customer's *duty* in the 1980s to buy a car every two years (**Reference 1**). There is no need to worry about the downturn if you realize businesses are here for the customers, not the other way around. **EDN**

REFERENCE

1 Weaver, Paul H, *The Suicidal Corporation: How Big Business Fails America*, Touchstone Books, 1989, ISBN: 0-671-67559-1.

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