

# What Ever Happened To Customer Service?

## *Observations by Alan Sadowsky*

Those of you who visit the TPF Today website certainly noticed when we went off the air for a few weeks at the end of January. Our hosting partner was no longer able to accommodate us, so we arranged with Qwest Communications to have a high speed access line brought into our office, and scheduled to have our server shipped from Atlanta to Scottsdale. What should have been a weekend of downtime, turned into a two and a half week nightmare.

From the time I first placed the equipment order with Qwest, to the time when we finally got back on the air, I personally spoke to 18 different people at Qwest Communications. In most cases, I was given conflicting information. In some cases I was given inaccurate information. In all but 2 cases, I was given the run around. Out of sheer desperation, I fired off one email to the President of Qwest Internet Services, one email to the CEO of Qwest Communications, and one (snail-mail) letter of complaint to Qwest's corporate offices.

The President of Internet Services responded within a week. He agreed that my situation was completely unacceptable, and promised to get back to me once he had done his own investigation on the matter. I can only guess that he was then abducted by aliens and carted off to the outer fringes of the galaxy, because I haven't heard another word from him since. Either the CEO of Qwest Communications didn't make it onto the Clinton pardon list, or couldn't quite master the technical intricacies of email. In either event, I never heard anything back from him either. The folks in the corporate Complaints Department did call me, did listen to my story, and did ease my pain with an "adjustment" to my Qwest account, however in all honesty it was too little, too late.

Companies and businesses need to understand that customer service is not just a catch phrase. In almost all aspects of commerce today, there are three unshakable realities. The first is that any product is available from any number of sources. The second is that when talking about a specific product, quality and price are typically in the same ballpark across competitive companies. The third, and often deciding factor when it comes to making a purchase, is customer service.

Using an example we can all relate to, consider the traveler's choice between 2 airlines. With similar equipment, comparable schedules, and identical fares, it's the "service factor" that decides who gets your business. How helpful is the reservations agent on the phone? How long are the check-in lines at the airport? How good is the in-flight service? The same shopping process can be applied to buying a car, a sofa, or a pizza. Any

company that doesn't provide exceptional customer service is going to suffer, because they're going to lose me as a customer.

Now let's take this whole concept one step further and expand its scope. As technical professionals, we have skills and abilities that are potentially unique (i.e. TPF), and customarily coveted by many different companies. With competitive salaries, and the standard mix of employee benefits, it very quickly comes down to things like corporate culture, workplace environment, and customer service, that dictate whether or not this is the company you would chose to work for. But what do I *now* mean by "customer service"? What I mean is that when any of us join a company as an employee, we immediately become customers. More specifically, we become the customers of our immediate superiors. Whether it's a senior member of the department, a supervisor, a manager, a director, or a vice president, as the subordinate in the equation you are the customer.

It then becomes the responsibility, if not the obligation of the superior - your boss - to provide you with the best customer service possible. This is where we separate the leaders from the managers, because this is where we focus on honesty, and integrity, and accountability, and simple respect for others. In too many cases today, these qualities are nowhere to be found. The excuses have been around forever, and come right out of Management 101:

| What They Say          | What They Mean                |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| "economic conditions"  | We don't have the money.      |
| "explosive growth"     | We don't have the time.       |
| "facilities planning"  | We don't have the room.       |
| "major reorganization" | Things aren't working now.    |
| "requires approval"    | Don't hold your breath.       |
| "corporate policy"     | I'm not sticking my neck out. |

Until companies wake up to the fact that their employees are also their customers, they will continue to lose some of their most valuable people. It's the smart companies who will benefit by holding on to their assets, and will flourish by fostering the right conditions to entice new talent away from the competition. One can't always say that companies are always wrong or that "the customer is always right", but it's a safe bet that the customer will take his or her business somewhere else if they're not getting the service they deserve.