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## Eyes on Business

# Recession has taken a toll on service

**Premium content from Sacramento Business Journal - by Larry Mandelberg,  
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The unstable economy has been the source of many understandable problems. Unfortunately, when the major problems dissipate, the impact of side effects continue to grow. One glaring example is the sad state of customer service.

### **A bad taste**

I like tasting wine and frequent a local wine tasting vendor. Before I go, I always check the Internet for the week's selection. Recently, I looked and the page was blank, so I called.

A cheery young lady answered and I asked, "What wines are you tasting today?"

She responded with "I don't know" followed by silence.

Not a sorry, not "hold on and let me check," just "I don't know."

"Is there going to be a wine tasting today?" I asked.

Silence, then "I don't know," then more silence.

So I asked, "Can you please check for me, and while you're checking, could you please find out what is being poured if there is going to be a tasting?"

Several long seconds ticked off the clock until she returned and said "Yes." I ask "Yes what? Is there a tasting today?"

**Again, nothing but "Yes."**

"Do you know what is being poured?"

**The reply was anticipated. "No."**

"OK," said I, "but you're sure there is a wine tasting today at the regular time?"

"Yes."

Needless to say, when I arrived at said tasting site there were no wine bottles on the counter. The sommelier that pours was working, just not behind the tasting counter. I said to him, "What's with the tasting today? The Web site had nothing and when I called, a younger gal told me there was going to be one today."

"Not today," said Larry. "I don't know why, but we were told just this morning, no tasting today. No reason. I didn't know there was something wrong with the Web site."

After explaining the situation and my frustration, and after multiple apologies from the sommelier and the manager, I went home to do a private tasting.

**Out of balance**

I drive a car. That means I buy tires. I have two cars — more tires. I drive a lot of miles — even more tires. I have been quite thrilled with the tire retailers that have cropped up over the last several years. They provide great service and have tended to provide great customer service.

One Saturday a couple of weeks back I went to my usual place to have my tires rotated. They were swamped and the two employees behind the counter were both on the phone.

I stood in line and waited ... for about 10 minutes. The same two people were behind the counter, on the phone, and the same two customers that were at the counter when I arrived were still standing there.

People came and went ... mostly they went. Eventually, I was able to get a mechanic's attention as he ran into the sales area.

"Any idea how long to get my tires rotated?"

"Hour and a half, maybe two."

"Man, I can't wait that long. I'll have to come back."

"Call and make an appointment, you'll get right in."

I said thanks and turned to leave.

When I arrived home, I called and scheduled an appointment for Monday.

When I arrived Monday, I waited in line again, gave the guy my keys, signed the paper, sat down, took out my computer and started working.

I'm not sure how long he was gone, but at some point, fairly quickly, he came in and said, "You're done, car's out front running" as he walked past me and threw my keys on the chair next to where I was sitting.

Again, quite taken aback at the brusqueness of his communication, I sat there for a moment, then methodically shut down my computer, wrapped up the power cord and put it away, then went outside to my car.

The locking lug nut wrench, which I had to prove was where I said it was (in the trunk with the spare) was sitting on my seat, the car was running and the driver's side door was wide open.

One of the many problems with this is that while I want to tell someone their customer service is a problem, I don't have the time. What I do have time for is to tell my friends and never go back. The value of my time and bad treatment far outweighs the savings.

### **Fledgling recovery**

As I stewed over my second bout of bad customer service, I thought about what was going on. Sales go south, money gets tight, lines of credit get cut or called, and staff is laid off. Those with the knowledge and skill to provide customer service are either gone or stretched too thin.

Then the economy starts to percolate a bit. Customers come back, activity increases, particularly shopping, and staff already stretched near the limit is pushed even farther — and nobody's happy.

Unfortunately, the cash necessary to hire staff, and train them, just isn't there yet. Inventories are depleted and product is hard to find because manufacturers have sold down inventories to minimize costs.

Bottom line, the chain of events that led to the recession are still undermining our ability to "recover."

The moral of this story is simple: It's tough to do much of anything without feeling some

discomfort from our economic flu.

As a vendor, take a few minutes in the morning to talk with your staff and help them prepare for the day. Let them know you understand how hard things have been for them and what you're doing to make things as good as possible — for them and the customers they have to deal with.

Be patient with staff, customers and shoppers. Make them feel valued and important. After all, you never know when one of those people who experienced bad customer service will be the difference between bankruptcy and survival.

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