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# The Mathis Group's Messenger

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## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Customer Service

Customer service is vital to the survival of your company. If your customers aren't happy, it will just be a matter of time before your business fails. We define customer service as giving customers what they need, in the manner they need it, while treating them with dignity and delivering the highest service possible every time. This month we will show you how the customer relationship process develops. Understanding this process will ensure that your customer service outshines everyone else's.

In order to improve your customer service, you have to realize why it is so important. First, customers talk to each other and will tell about bad treatment or service they have received. As negative words move along the "grapevine," business will decline. Second, standards are moving higher and higher. Customers expect more out of you than they did in years past. If you are not constantly improving and raising your standards, your customers are going to be disappointed and will look for someone else who will meet their expectations. Third, poor customer service affects revenue. Poor customer service leads to unhappy customers who will turn somewhere else to get what they want. You should also note that most customers will not complain to you--they will just leave without notice. This gives you no chance to make amends and try to win back their loyalty.

There are five main stages for customer bonding. During each stage the relationship between you and your

customer grows. Being conscious of the development process will help you to be a more attentive vendor.

### *Friendship*

In this stage you begin to build the relationship. One side, usually yours, might be giving more than others, but this helps to lay the foundation of trust. The relationship is based upon your strength, but be careful. A little mess up early on can derail the relationship. It is also hard to always know where you stand at this point. Persistence and following through with what you say is the best prescription for success.

### *Dating*

Once you've built the initial relationship with a customer, he/she starts to be open to limited products or services. By this time you will also start to have knowledge of the customer's mission, values, and strategic goals, although it is limited. As you start to do business together, good performance will open up the relationship to deeper bonding. You know that the customer has a desire and a need for your products or services. The relationship is still fragile. Doing a bad job will cause the customer to stop the relationship cold. Spending time getting to know your contact person and going the extra mile to communicate is the best prescription for success during this phase.



*Go the extra yard--it  
makes a mile of difference.  
Paul M. Melia  
Engineer*

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## *Going Steady*

At this point, the relationship is stable and each party is involved. Information is being shared on a need-to-know basis. The customer now likes and trusts you and is investing time in bringing you up to speed. However, there are still issues that must be dealt with so you won't lose this customer. Competition is making attempts to interfere and the cost factor may still be an issue. It is imperative that you examine everything as a long term focus. Get in touch with your contact person as often as possible. It also helps to create reasons for your customers to need to call you for advice.

## *Engagement*

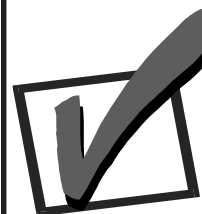
By this point, people are committed to the direction of the relationship. Communication is exchanged between customer and vendor frequently. You have now built a deep rapport that is close. Competition has trouble breaking in due to the depth of that relationship. Price is also becoming secondary. Even though the relationship is strong, it is hard to keep it developing in this direction. The association is with a limited amount of people--normally only one or two. To continue the success of this relationship, make contact with others throughout the organization. Furthermore, make sure that customers have numerous reasons to come to you for added value.

## *Marriage*

Finally, the relationship is so strong the customer becomes a mouthpiece for advertising your products and services. They give others numerous benefits of using your products or services. Currently loyalty is shown in both directions and you have an in-depth knowledge of the entire organization of your customer. Since the customer is spreading the word about your company, you must be sure that the quality of your work is excellent. The customer's credibility is on the line when they recommend you. Conversely, if someone does not like

your customer, they might view your organization in a negative light. You should praise customers when they recommend you to someone else. Write thank-you letters and cards to demonstrate your gratitude. Don't be stingy. Give rewards, lunches, or tickets to events. Help them sell you. Give them information about all new services and products you offer. The customer might have a limited view of all your services and products so make sure they have all the information necessary to give to others.

Once you have gotten to the marriage stage, you still must be careful that you do not slack off with your customer. Do not take for granted that they will always be there. Customers want to feel appreciated and taken care of. If you keep your customer happy, everyone will be happy.



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- Retaining Customers For Life*

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The Mathis Group, Inc.  
Dr. Keith Mathis  
106 Lakeview Woods  
Eureka, MO 63025  
1-800-224-3731  
636/938-5292 voice/fax  
kmathis@ix.netcom.com  
www.keithmathis.com  
GSA Contractor- GS10F0383M  
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