

Value Needed



By Michael Konrad, Aqueous Technologies



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The leading manufacturer of cleaning and cleanliness testing products.

We've all seen it: that ad on TV depicting a warm, English-speaking smiling face standing behind a stainless steel counter clean enough to be in an operating room. "Welcome to our restaurant," she says, "May I take your order?" And, we've all experienced the reality version of that scenario. An employee stands behind a messy countertop, with the personality of a cardboard sign-yielding "will work for food" beggar.

News reports indicate leading fast food companies are currently looking into reasons why their revenues are declining. They'll probably spend millions with research analysts and focus groups, while the average consumer already knows the answer.

I was in a major office supply store the other day. The cashier asked me, "Did you find everything okay?" I replied no. She hesitated, handed me my change and wished me a "nice day."

I recently had trouble with my mobile telephone. When I called the service provider's customer service department, all I could do was "speak" with a computer rendition of a human voice named "Claire." Claire's job was to listen to my concerns and repeat a prerecorded narration on how to solve my trouble. Trouble is, Claire is not real. For a company that specializes in person-to-person communications, at least one person was missing from the equation.

Financial analysts claim the U.S. consumer is supporting the U.S. economy. If this is true, why is the consumer being treated so badly? If my fellow shoppers and I are single-handedly propping up our nation's economy, where's the red carpet?

During the Super Bowl, corporations spent millions of dollars for a 30-second spot in an effort to influence a potential buyer to enter their store. Madison Avenue advertising agencies engaged in ultrascientific psychological examinations of human response triggers within various demographics to produce the most effective ad. Scripts were written, producers and directors were hired, and actors were told how to look, stand, dress and speak. The ad aired, connected with a potential customer who drove to the store and was greeted by an uninformed, underpaid, undertrained teenager who could not formulate a sentence correctly.

There is a growing disparity between what companies say and do. With a struggling economy, many manufacturers are quick to promise and slow to deliver. When I founded this company, my father gave me some advice. He said, "Promise little and deliver much." In other words, exceed a customer's expectations.

The electronics equipment manufacturing industry has been especially hurt by a lingering economy. Many industries report sales declines upward of 50 to 60 percent. There is no dispute; these are challenging times. But challenging times bring forth new

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opportunities to those companies willing to seek them.

The fact is that companies are purchasing equipment. Businesses are growing. Budgets are being spent. Is it the boom days of three or four years ago? No, but there remains plenty of opportunity.

I was exhibiting at a trade show last year and was across the aisle from a competitor. They brought one machine to the show. It was one of their biggest, most expensive six-figure machines. After three days, they received about five leads. "No one is buying," they proclaimed. "The market is dead." We quietly left with our 60 leads and two purchase orders.

American manufacturers need to pay close attention to the consumer. History has demonstrated that consumers are a finicky bunch. Consumers are loyal until they feel betrayed. If American manufacturers do not cater to American consumers, someone else will.

A friend of mine recently purchased a German luxury car. All service is covered for three years. If, during a service, he needs a ride from the dealer, one will be provided. If he chooses to stay and wait, he can receive a free massage, putt around on the putting green or be dropped off at a local cinema to catch a movie, all compliments of the dealer. Although my friend spent more for his car than he should have, he maintains that he received a better value and his expectations were exceeded.

What consumers want most is value. Value is what drives our economy. An exchange of cash for the prospect of a greater return is value. Value does not have to include "frills." Just look at the consistent profits of certain low-loss, no-frills airlines. They exceed expectations (sometimes because expectations are low). They provide value.

Americans want value. Value is:

- Selling us what we want.
- Treating us with respect.
- Exceeding our expectations.

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