

# Do You Deliver What You Promise?

By G. Charles Dart, Jr.

**A**s you begin reading this article, think of your favorite merchants. Why do you like them? Would you recommend them to someone else? Do you find yourself talking about these companies even if you have not patronized them for awhile?

Now think about the businesses that are your least favorites. Why don't you like them? Do you ever patronize them? What turned you against them? Could they do anything to make you consider doing business with them again?

Are Nordstrom, Ikea, Disneyland, Amazon.com, British Airways, Mercedes, Toyota, Microsoft, Nintendo, Sony, McDonalds, and your school among your favorite businesses and/or your least favorite? Should we even compare any of these businesses to our schools? After all, we are in the education business, not "for profit" businesses. But business is business, no matter what we sell, manufacture, or service. So, who would you consider to be your competition?

## The Competition

Do you consider non-education institutions as your competitors? What about McDonalds, Toyota, or even Disneyland? Of course, some of us complain that we are already trying to compete with radio, TV, and computer games! But really, who is your competition? The answer might surprise you.

According to the book *Inside the Magic Kingdom, Seven Keys to*

## Who would you consider to be your competition?

*Disney's Success* by Tom Connellan, "the competition is anyone the customer compares you with. "If someone else satisfies customers better than you, no matter what type of business, you suffer by comparison." This means we are in competition with other schools—public and private—and all businesses. But it can also be said that we are competition for Mercedes and McDonalds.

## Customer Service

At the Enrollment Services Department of Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, we used Connellan's book to identify our competition and to find ways to improve customer service. This has helped us identify areas where we are weak and ways we can improve.

When looking at the customer service we give at our schools, we need to ask if we deliver what we promise, and whether we are good at what we do. If our customers compare us to their favorite merchants, do we come out close to the top of their lists?

If putting the customer first is a good philosophy in a for-profit business, is it a good maxim for us in the education business as well? After all, education is mandatory (at least up to a certain age), and research shows that students with college degrees get better jobs. Doesn't that mean that the students will just show up? Of course, a private/Christian school costs money, so it requires some effort on our part to lure students away from "free" schools. But since we are operating church-sponsored schools, shouldn't Adventist parents and students be expected to support them just because they are Adventist? Herein lies a misconception. The truth is,

Adventist schools should take the lead when it comes to customer service, ethical advertising, and delivering a superior product.

If we believed that the customer is always right, at least most of the time, how would that affect the way we conduct our schools? Do we really consider students, parents, and vendors our customers? Do we treat them the way we would want to be treated?

Is this even a viable idea in an education setting? Is it crazy to think that the students, as customers, are always right? Having been a high school teacher, a vice-principal, and a principal, I know that sometimes students conduct themselves in ways that are not acceptable. Just as a business may need to deal with shoplifters, schools may need to take appropriate disciplinary action with some of their students. Both schools and businesses must guard their integrity and viability. But the students are our customers and should be treated as such.

You may have heard the story, true or not, about the elderly lady who, after buying a set of tires, decided that she didn't like<sup>o</sup> them. So she went back to where she "thought" she bought them and asked for her money back. She returned them to Nordstrom, a Seattle, Washington-based clothing/department store. The sales

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clerk refunded her money, and the lady went home satisfied. There is one catch to this story—Nordstrom does not sell tires. But Nordstrom *does* empower its employees to use their good judgment to provide exceptional customer service. Nordstrom is famous for doing whatever is necessary to keep its customers happy.

Customer service does not mean letting the customer tell you how to run your business, but rather, adopting a caring, compassionate attitude toward your patrons. In edu-

cation, that means every employee at your school—teachers, administrators, and staff—should be trained and empowered to give exceptional customer service. Ask yourself, "How would Christ handle customer service at my school?" Or how about a twist on that question: "What would Jesus think of our school's customer service if He were one of our students?"

### **The Product**

In addition to customer service, you offer a *product*. What kind of product do you deliver? For the past 41 years, I have had the privilege of attending, visiting, or being employed by many Adventist schools. I have observed small schools, medium-size schools,

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and large schools. Each had its own personality. But not all of them offered the same product. I have seen schools with excellent academics, schools where the spiritual atmosphere permeated the program, and schools where a hands-on learning philosophy was the norm. Some of the larger schools offered extracurricular events, while the smaller ones provided a warm family environment. All of these areas are positive attributes, but they result in different products. Because our schools have varying budgets and staff, they cannot all offer the same product. However, every Adventist school can embrace the same philosophy and offer a high-quality, Christ-centered curriculum.

An analogy to the product your school offers would be an automobile such as a Toyota. Toyota's parent company, Toyota Motor Corporation, manufactures a variety of vehicles to meet the needs of people with different-sized families, budgets, and driving styles, ranging from the fairly inexpensive to the very high priced. So if you want a small, fairly inexpensive compact car, you would choose a Corolla. However, if you want a larger automobile with some extra gadgets, you might want to consider a Camry. It costs more than the Corolla, but offers more room and greater luxury. But if you want a vehicle that allows you to drive off the main roads and holds more passengers or cargo, the Land Cruiser may be the vehicle for you. It costs quite a bit more than the Camry, but has four-wheel drive and gives you the added space you need.

Whichever vehicle you choose, you can rely upon Toyota's corporate commitment to build high-quality, reliable products at a competitive price, and to back them up with excellent service. Regardless of the model, all of the vehicles listed above are made by Toyota and should reflect the company's philosophy of quality, service, and cost.

Like differing automobiles, our product does vary from school to school, but if every Adventist school delivered a great product for a reasonable price, with great customer service, our customers would be excited.

### Advertising

Having discussed our product and service, let's look at how we market Adventist education. Have you identified your mar-

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ket? Are you offering the product and services they want? Does your school have a marketing and advertising plan based on this information? Is it up to date?

What are we selling, anyway? Is it just education? Or is it more than that? Do you offer your students a preparation for life and for eternity? How do you sell that? How well do you deliver it?

Combining customer service with advertising and promotion can be a balancing act. You want to say flattering things about your school to entice students, but you have to be honest. As a teacher, principal, and a recruiter for several schools, I know it is hard to deal with some of the questions posed by potential students and parents. You want to answer honestly, but you also want to attract students. Does what you tell them depend on how badly you need to boost the enrollment? Do you try to get students at all costs? Because of that, are you sometimes tempted to stretch the truth?

**D**o you advertise a Toyota Land Cruiser but deliver a Camry or Corolla? Or worse yet, an obsolete, unsafe "clunker"? How does what prospective students see in the advertising or hear from the recruiter compare to what they see on campus? Do you deliver what you advertise? You may think you don't have a problem in this area, but conduct a survey, and see how students really feel.

Just recently, I was flying on Frontier

Airlines. The plane was taking off late in the morning and landing in early afternoon. Since I had not eaten, I asked if food was provided on the flight. The counter worker said, "You should get a bagel or something like that, but it won't be a full meal."

She gave me the information I needed to make a decision, and I appreciated her honesty. She could have just said "Yes," knowing there would be something more than peanuts—and she would have been technically correct, but she would have given me the wrong impression. She understood what I was asking. She did not put down her company or make disparaging remarks. She was honest, yet tactful.

Are we honest like that? When the questions come, do we tell the truth? One of my main concerns in recruiting students to Adventist schools in general, and the one I represent in particular, is "Is this a good fit?" Will the student get what he or she needs and wants at my school? Is this student the type who will be successful at my school? Is this student's success more important than simply enrolling another pupil in our school? On occasion, when talking to potential students, I concluded they would probably not be successful or happy at the school I represent, so I encouraged them to consider one of our sister schools. To me, this is true customer service. Knowing our product and what it can do for students is very important when we are advertising and recruiting.

Someone said that customers will talk about a bad business three to five times more than a good business. It is in our best interest to enroll students who want to be in our schools and who enjoy their experience there. This is our best advertisement—happy, successful, "right fit" students. So selling at all costs may not be, in the long run, the best method of recruiting students. Remember, students have a good memory, and they are critical customers. They know what we promise and of course, what we deliver. They will—and should—hold us accountable.

### Conclusion

Disneyland and Mercedes don't always have satisfied customers, but they do try to apply the slogan, "The customer is always right." What makes the difference in a suc-

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Conduct a survey of your customers—students, parents, and vendors—to see how they rate your product and your service. Create or restructure an up-to-date marketing plan. Keep abreast of changing markets. Remember that a good attitude is the key to superior customer service. Advertise intelligently and truthfully. Be sure you can deliver what you advertise. And then, share your accomplishments with your sister schools. It would be wonderful for your school alone to improve, but it would be much better for our entire school system to develop into an organization that delivers on its promises. We are in this together. Let's cooperate for success! ✍

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Successful business is how well it advertises and delivers—and how well it handles problems. Disneyland advertises and tries to provide the experience of a lifetime. Nordstrom advertises and sells quality products, but has as its main goal to put the customer ahead of making a profit.

How does this all relate to your school? There are several things to keep in mind:

1. Know your competitors. Remember, your customers compare you to everyone with whom they do business.

2. Assess your product honestly. Do you deliver a Land Cruiser, a Camry, or a Corolla?

3. Good customer service is essential with any product. What kind of service do you deliver with your product? Are your employees trained and empowered to make customer-related decisions?

4. Advertise truthfully. Don't advertise

one thing and deliver another.

5. Create a positive, nurturing atmosphere at your school. Remember, students are the most important asset on your campus. Make sure the experience they have at your school is the best it can be. Remember, your students can be your best advertisement and recruiters.

Consider some of the keys to Disney's success. The company pays fantastic attention to detail. It wants every guest to have an incredible experience every time he or she visits a Disney theme park. Do we pay attention to details? In some of the schools I have visited, it is obvious that dealing efficiently with details was not a priority. If I can see that, the students can, too. As Connellan states, "If you knew that increased attention to some detail would improve customer loyalty, how much more attention would you be willing to give it?"<sup>2</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. Tom Connellan, *Inside the Magic Kingdom: Seven Keys to Disney's Success* (Austin, Tex.: Bard Press, 1996).
2. Ibid.