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## Taking action

How to use customer feedback to perpetuate strong service

By Brooke Bates

When it comes to customer service, Anthony J. Filippis takes his father's advice.

"He always said treat that customer like your mother," says the president and CEO of Wright & Filippis Inc. "If you do that, you won't have any problems."

His father, Tony Filippis, who founded the company in 1944, passed away in January 2007. But his legacy for customer care lives on in the company's 931 employees.

First, response cards go out to everyone who uses the company's prosthetics, orthotics and home medical equipment. Filippis uses negative feedback to patch gaps in the company's procedures and positive feedback to reward employees for stellar service.

But whatever action is spurred by the feedback, Filippis communicates the next move to everyone — customers and employees alike.

"It's a matter of listening to your customers and your employees and letting them know what's going on," says Filippis, who guided the company to 2007 revenue of \$136 million.

*Smart Business* spoke with Filippis about how to gather and use feedback to build strong customer service.

**Gauge customer responses.** We've tried to take that patient care philosophy throughout all the products and services we provide. So every one of our patients gets a survey card, no matter what they're buying or what service they're receiving.

First of all, things need to be easy to understand and easy to respond to. You want it to be quick and easy. You don't want a 20-question survey. We keep ours to five or six questions, focusing on were they attended to properly, was the speed of their service good.

Whatever line of business you're in, focus on what your key elements are and then get questions that can help to make sure that whoever you're servicing gets those services in the most economical and efficient way.

**Reply to feedback.** Listen to what they're saying and make sure that you're dealing with those concerns. Make sure that when you have a problem that you solve it, and you solve it quickly.

There's a group within our organization called Organizational Improvement. When a phone call comes [or] someone has a problem, they're the first line. They're the ones that field the calls and then research. They do analysis, finding out, 'Is this a one-time problem, or have we had ongoing problems?' If we find an issue that's consistent ... we'll do training.

If it's a specific problem, it's addressed and obviously moved on. If it's a general concern, even if it's not something that affects them necessarily, we always get back to them and let them know what we are doing.

**Cover your bases.** Any time you have a problem, it's first of all [locating] the breakdown: Is it a procedural breakdown, is it a staff breakdown, is it something that's within our control or outside of our control?

If it was an issue [out of our control], did we communicate that to the patient to begin with? It's that upfront communication with the patient so they know what the rules are — not necessarily your rules but the rules that govern you.

In any business, you have certain guidelines that you have to follow. Making sure that the customer knows what those guidelines are will prevent problems down the road. I would encourage most of that to be in writing. When we service patients, they sign documents that show what I said I gave them, I gave them.

It's making sure that if you do something, you have a way to go back to it. Not to say to the patient, 'Ah-ha, I proved you're wrong.' You say, 'If you didn't read this, I apologize. Next time maybe I need to walk you through it.'

**Reward employees for service.** We also recognize our employees for their interaction with customers. We formed a Big Tony Award, which recognizes one of our employees every year. And some of those [awards], patients can actually go on our Web site and nominate somebody.

We also encourage our employees to recognize other employees.

Feedback can come in a number of different ways. You just need to make sure that when it does come, that it's recognized and that you also let the employee know. That's the biggest key, because if you let them know, it's more likely to happen again.

**Communicate action steps to everyone.** Communicating that to the employee is key, too. You want them to hear it from the people making decisions. And then you want feedback from them. We have open communication to deal with what concerns that they're seeing.

It's one thing to listen, and it's another to then respond and make sure that they know you heard the issues and that you've done something to make changes so that those same issues don't continue to be problems.

Do what you say, and say what you do. So you say what you're going to do, and then you make sure you do it and that you communicate that you did it. If all these suggestions are out there and nothing gets implemented, then next time around they're not going to respond. It's key that you get back to people and let them know what you did [and] how you did it.

That can be done in a number of ways. We communicate a lot through our payroll stuffers. In each of our departments or facilities, every other Friday, there's a packet of information that goes out, and that's how our employees get a lot of their information.

If it's critical information, they have to sign off that they read it. Make sure that there's verification that they know.

**HOW TO REACH:** Wright & Filippis Inc., (248) 829-8200 or [www.firsttoserve.com](http://www.firsttoserve.com)