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Superior service will bring customers back

On Jan. 20, President Barack Obama eloquently described the economic crisis we face. Then he issued a stirring call “to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.” For businesses that means resuming the practices that made our economy flourish—innovation, efficient execution and, perhaps most important, customer service.

A few months back, a former waitress described how she prospered in the brutally competitive restaurant environment. She went the extra mile, greeting customers warmly, making sure they were served efficiently and responding to any issues they might have. Initially, this meant they left her larger tips. Since they had a good experience, they would return to the restaurant. And when they realized that the service she provided was better, they asked to be seated at her tables. Over time she developed a loyal following. There were times when other servers had no customers, but she was busy.

Today she is an entrepreneur. Using the same responsive approach to customer service, Suzanne Clarridge has grown My Brands Inc. of Henrietta into a success.

Kitty Van Bortel, president of two car dealerships, says that what keeps her awake at night is the fear that one of her employees has treated a customer rudely. She describes her own role as that of customer advocate. For example, once a customer brought in a new car for its first service. The mechanic



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changed the oil but did not tighten the plug adequately. The oil drained out, the engine seized and the car broke down on the Thruway, then was towed back to the dealership. Her mechanics realized it was their fault and quickly started to work on the car.

But Van Bortel knew the customer was thinking, “Whatever the mechanics do, this refurbished car will never be as good as new.” So she told him she was going to give him a new car with the exact same specifications. The look of relief on his face told her she had earned his trust.

Little wonder, then, that Americans are known for excellent customer service. Visit service establishments around the globe and you come to appreciate the service you receive here.

A customer in Switzerland may want a detailed breakdown of his telephone bill to check whether he was accurately charged. The Swiss phone company’s cold response is “We don’t make mistakes.” Go to a fancy restaurant in India and you will be sur-

rounded by waiters. But ask for a cold drink and it can take several minutes to arrive. Or travel by train in Spain—but make sure you arrive early, or the train might have left.

Peter Parts Electronics Inc. of Ontario buys products in Asia and distributes them to customers across the United States, helping companies build a global supply chain for sourcing components. When founder Peter Parts meets potential customers, he promises Japanese quality, Chinese prices and American customer service. Why? Because excellent customer service will bring back customers, and that will help to grow the economy.

The task for businesses is to show that they can meet customer expectations consistently and will respond quickly and with empathy when those needs are not met.

It can be argued that educational institutions are among the major drivers of the Rochester economy today. Education’s customers are the community. People ranging from high school graduates to practicing professionals to seasoned businesspeople come to college to deepen their knowledge or embark on new careers. The task for education is to provide the service that will enable them to pick themselves up and dust themselves off.

The way forward is to provide American customer service.

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