I needed to have the chimney flu checked on my fireplace because it was letting smoke into the living room. I went to the man who installed it to make an appointment for him to come out and see what needed to be done. The secretary took all the information and scheduled the visit for the next week. The week passed and I called, thinking that maybe I was confused on the date. We rescheduled, and again he did not show. I went to the office to see about the situation. Hanging on the wall was a huge sign that said, “If we don’t take care of our customers, someone else will.” Sound familiar?

Obviously the policy and the strategy for customer care were at odds with each other. The most successful organizations are characterized by their ability to hold customers over the long term. Conflict between marketing activities, which are played out day to day, and company policy, the guidelines formed for smooth operation, ignores the potential impact of dissatisfied customers. If a customer purchases regularly, (the average is $40 per stop at garden centers) over the year this could easily run into hundreds of dollars per year loss if that one customer is dissatisfied.

Poor customer relations may very well have effects on other people also. The result is a downward multiplying effect. The point of this discussion is that it is worth spending a substantial amount of time and money understanding customers and keeping existing ones happy. Be sure that your claim to be customer oriented is reflected in the way the customer is serviced. A good marketing plan requires commitment to performance and completion dates.

It is noted that poor performance is usually due to the company trying to service too large an audience. Focus on segments, the target markets. Growth is necessary but not at the expense of losing loyal customers by over extending the company’s capacity.

Another customer loss due to poor strategy activities comes about when there is lack of empowerment. An employee cannot be bound to policy and be inhibited from using good judgement. This situation is not fair to either the employee or the customer. An example of this frustration is one that most of us have encountered in return policies. A customer may try to return merchandise, maybe only worth a few dollars but cannot prove purchase date or loses the receipt. If the employee is not empowered to make a judgement call without management approval, which many times is not available, often the outcome will be another case of dissatisfaction and loss of potential business. When you treat customers like they are out to steal from you, then you deserve to lose them. And you will. The lack of empowerment turns interactive employees into machinery. They become no more than equipment that is used and replaced. A sense of autonomy will give the employee ownership in the company goals. There is no reason that a customer should ever leave unhappy. Is there any situation that exist that is so bad that it can’t be repaired? Don’t let company policy become a stumbling block instead of a guideline.

*Emily Nolting, Ph.D., Commercial Horticulture Specialist, K-State Research and Extension*