

Fixing the Bugs In His Pest Control Business

By CARA S. TRAGER Special to Newsday Updated February 27, 2012 9:37 AM



Whenever Arthur Katz's exterminators showed up a few minutes late for an appointment, they not only risked irritating customers but made his pest-control firm look unprofessional. The company's credibility also took a licking when customers asked how much time they should give a treatment to work before making another appointment. The answers they received ranged from seven to 14 days, depending on which employee responded to the question.

Customers wondered "who's lying and who's telling the truth," said Katz, 60, president of the [Uniondale](#)-headquartered Knockout Pest Control Inc.

For Katz, the faltering economy made his company's uneven customer service especially worrisome. The market for pest-control services had grown increasingly tight, since the decline in home sales meant fewer termite inspections. Katz feared, too, that the economy would drive some property owners to cut back on the frequency of treatments. Or, worse yet, customers would opt to handle problems themselves.

Manual for success

A nonprofit executive turned entrepreneur, Katz jumped into the business in 1975 by purchasing a small pest control service. He gave the company its current name and then, through the years, gobbled up 40 pest control firms, rolling their customer lists into Knockout. With a database encompassing some 75,000 accounts, including homeowners, medical facilities, office buildings and warehouses, the firm dispatches its 30 technicians to nine counties.

About two years ago, to head off a reversal of fortune, Knockout formalized its customer-service policies and procedures, spelling everything out in a manual for customer service representatives and technicians.

Leaving nothing to guesswork, the handbook directs employees, for example, to tell customers to expect technicians within a two-hour window, such as between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., instead of at 1 p.m. on the dot, to allow for traffic and other delays. And when customers ask how long they should wait to call for another appointment if a treatment doesn't appear to work, employees' answers are based on the specific infestation -- as in 14 days for roaches.

"We had to distinguish ourselves and make our customer service as efficient as we thought it needed to be," Katz said.

Focus on customer service

But the value of putting policies in writing goes beyond improving customer relations, according to Gail L. Trugman-Nikol, president of [Hicksville](#)-based Unique Business Solutions Inc., which worked with Knockout in creating the manual.

Business owners "understand that boomers are retiring and when they hire new people the learning curve can be huge," she said. "Manuals get them up and running."

As an added bonus, Katz said, the manual reduced new employee training by as much as 25 percent -- to six weeks from two months. According to Tom Mirabella, president of Wingman Planning, a consulting firm in [Wantagh](#), the fragile economy is driving many businesses to take a hard look at their customer service and clean it up.

"With people getting bids for everything, you have to set yourself apart," he said. "Customer service can make or break a firm." With the help of another consultant, [Amityville](#)-based Workforce Development Group, Knockout also improved the way employees handled phone calls. Their training covered everything from asking callers' permission before placing them on hold to learning to listen and respond to customers' needs, rather than just selling them a product.

Knockout invested about \$50,000 in its customer service overhaul, including the manual and phone training, and according to Katz it has already benefited from that investment. Last year the business generated more than \$5 million in revenue, a double-digit jump over 2010's results. In the past the company's annual revenue increases amounted to single digits, he said. "Our growth has accelerated."

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