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How Stew Leonard's Customer Service Rock of Commitment Came to Be

Two weeks after Stew Leonard's grand opening in 1969, Stew Leonard, Sr. was standing at the front door of the store greeting customers.

Suddenly a customer came up to Stew and said, "YOUR EGGNOG IS SOUR!" and thrust into his hands a half-gallon carton.

"My eggnog is sour, from my brand new dairy plant? Impossible!" exclaimed Stew, "You're wrong! It can't be sour. We've sold over 200 half-gallons of eggnog from this batch and you're the only one who's complained!"

The customer was so mad, veins were popping out in her neck. She said, "I don't care how many cartons you sold, it's sour and I want my money back!"

Eggnog was 95 cents per half-gallon so Stew reached into his pocket and gave the customer a dollar bill. She snatched it out of his hand and started out the store. The last words he heard her say were, "I'm never coming back to this store again!"

That night, Stew relayed the story to his wife, Marianne, and she, too became upset with him.

"I don't blame her at all," said Marianne. "You didn't listen to her. You contradicted her and practically called her a liar. I hope you are not going to run your store like other store managers, who think all customers are trying to put something over on them. They don't trust us -- but we fix them -- **WE JUST NEVER GO BACK!**"

After thinking about it for a while, Stew realized that he had everything in the world tied up into his dairy store. He could not afford to lose a single customer by telling them they were wrong.

He realized that most customers were honest and wouldn't try to take advantage of him. However, if he tried to protect himself from the one percent who were dishonest, he'd end up penalizing the other 99 percent who were really good and honest!

Stew decided Marianne was right and that no customer was ever going to be wrong in my store again.

On his way to work one morning, Stew drove by a monument yard, where they were unloading granite. Suddenly, Stew got an idea. He stopped and bought a huge slab of granite from Mr. Bates. It weighed 6,000 pounds. Then Stew had him deliver the rock to the front door of his store, and had their stonemason chisel the store's new policy into its face:

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| Rule 1 | The Customer Is Always Right! |
| Rule 2 | If The Customer Is Ever Wrong, Reread Rule 1. |

To this day, 35 years later, the rock still stands firm at each of Stew Leonard's store entrances. Every single team member knows of the egg nog story, and how the rock came to be. They know that they can do anything in their power to make the customer happy. Happy customers not only come back, they bring their friends!

How Stew Leonard's Keeps Customers Happy

"We strive every day to create happy customers, to make them feel welcome in our stores and do everything in our power to exceed their expectations," said Stew Leonard, Jr., President and CEO of Stew Leonard's. "To do this, we really listen to and love our customers."

Customer service at Stew Leonard's really is not tied-up into one or two neat, easily defined bundles of rules. Here are some of the company's key customer service programs:

- **Monthly focus groups.** "We offer shoppers an opportunity to come in and tell us what we are doing well and what we can improve on. Each department manager is responsible for identifying a good customer and asking them to attend.
- **Daily suggestion box.** Suggestions are typed up by 10:00 a.m. the next day, and store managers either act on or call the customers about the complaint or suggestions. "We average approximately 100 per day – this is the pulse of the store, it's important to know what everyone is thinking," Tavello explains.
- **No waiting in line at checkouts.** "Stew Leonard's strives for this – we want our customers to leave the store thinking they have had a pleasurable experience. Instead of having 15 cash registers with 5 open, we keep all 30 of our registers going so that the customers don't wait in long lines and become frustrated," Jill Tavello says. "As my brother, Stew Jr. says, 'He never met a customer who liked to wait in line'."

The bottom line, says Stew, is that: "Customer service cannot be a sometimes thing. It must be earned and re-earned every day."