

BETTERING THE BEST

Georgia-Pacific uses Wilson Learning's Signature Service to give its people a common language and approach for interacting with customers – and each other.

A leading manufacturer of tissue, pulp, paper, packaging, building products, and related chemicals, Georgia-Pacific Corporation (GP) employs more than 60,000 people in over 400 locations worldwide. But even such an impressive industry presence does little to capture market share in today's highly competitive business environment.

GP needed a surefire way to differentiate itself — today, tomorrow, and beyond. And like many companies searching for a competitive advantage in today's environment, GP decided to focus on enhancing the customer experience. "Customers can get essentially the same products from our competitors, so the buying decision is often driven by the relationships our reps have with their customers," explains Ron Remillard, director of the Sales Training and Development Institute at GP.



Ron Remillard
Director, Sales Training and Development Institute
Georgia-Pacific Corporation

When compared with the competition on customer surveys, GP's sales and service reps consistently rank higher. "We see that as a competitive advantage which can be leveraged," says Remillard. "Through the Sales Training and Development Institute, we want to ensure that our sales and service professionals are trained in the skills they need to sustain and enhance that advantage."

GP is a very diverse organization with numerous divisions. Most divisions have several business units that sell through different distribution channels and to different end users. "Consequently, the culture can be very different from division to division," explains Remillard. "We believe that a standard curriculum can foster a common culture within GP, and a more consistent approach in skills and language in interacting with our customers.

"Historically, we have always focused on teaching people what we want them to do — the technical skills. These are people with good social skills, but we weren't training them on how we wanted them to interact with customers. Wilson Learning's Signature Service program was a way for us to accomplish that."

Coming to Terms

It was the fall of 2001 when Remillard got in touch with Maxene Raices, GP's Wilson Learning account executive. Remillard, along with Lori Hudson, assistant manager of marketing, researched service training alternatives and ultimately assembled an internal task force of service professionals from all divisions to make the final decision as to what program would become the company standard.

"We went through a rigorous process with a task force of representatives from across GP, consisting of sales and service professionals as well as division trainers," says Raices. "As part of the process, I asked and was given the opportunity to talk and listen to some of the people on the phones. This firsthand insight helped us show GP how the concepts and skills in Signature Service would apply in their world."

Hudson, who actually trains many of the customer service reps, says, "Service roles can be very



Lori Hudson
Assistant Manager of Marketing
Georgia-Pacific Corporation



Maxene Raices
Account Executive, Wilson Learning

demanding, and it can be stressful. Our reps face multiple priorities, competing demands, problems, and complaints. To effectively perform in such an environment, frontline reps needed the support of training to help them quickly diagnose the customer's personal needs and respond professionally, creating a positive experience for the individual, even when we can't satisfy their immediate need."

Wilson Learning's *Signature Service: The Key to Customer Satisfaction™* (SCS) fit the bill. "There was unanimity in the group about Signature Service being the program of choice," says Remillard.

Spreading the Wealth

The first step toward putting SCS to work at GP involved extensive leader training. Remillard and Hudson, along with several other task-force members, were trained to deliver the program. "We got a tremendous positive reaction," says Raices, referring to the leader training sessions. "Once that core group of leaders was trained, it was like they had seen the light — that they really came to realize the impact Signature Service could have at GP."

One of the managers trained to deliver the program was Dee Taylor. "Dee has a great deal of credibility among the customer service professionals at GP," says Remillard. "She has made a significant contribution, not only in teaching the program, but in designing follow-up reinforcements and managing the transition of classroom skills to on-the-job application."

SCS quickly proved its effectiveness. "Initial reactions to the class were very positive," says Remillard, "both in terms of trainees seeing the relevance of the skills and their motivation to apply the skills on the job." Adds Hudson: "We also began

to have requests from trainees to offer the program to other departments within the organization with whom our inside sales and service people interact. It became apparent that our trainees realized that their ability to apply the same skills with internal partners was critical to their ability to serve their customers."

The Difference

Many of GP's customer service reps feel that their customers simply present themselves as either happy or mad. SCS teaches reps to recognize four distinct customer conditions — comfortable, irate, insistent, or indecisive — and provides specific approaches for responding to each. Remillard describes irate and insistent customers as having psychological sunburn. "You have to be a little careful just how you touch them," he says. As a result, GP's people can now respond in ways that better satisfy the customer's psychological needs.

The program also teaches participants to ask for a statement of satisfaction — something GP's people say makes all the difference. "Asking for satisfaction can be so powerful," says Remillard. "I think it makes a huge difference just because we ask. But if there is a problem, we get a chance to address it.



From left to right: Dee Taylor, Lori Hudson, and Ron Remillard

And when the customer is satisfied, it is important that they acknowledge that satisfaction at a conscious level."

Remillard and Hudson encourage the people in the divisions with which they work to look at training as a learning intervention, not just a stand-alone event. "We try to work with the managers to plan, schedule, and communicate in ways that cause trainees to show up to class with a predisposition to learn and an understanding of what's going to be expected of them, both during and after class," explains Remillard.

Reinforcement activities take many forms, depending on how the various business units apply SCS. For example, "A Day in the Life," an activity that Raices helped develop, requires learners to pick a day — any day — and record each customer's condition on a checklist provided by management. The activity encourages them to think about the condition of everybody they talk to, plus how each interaction fits into the big picture. "Dee implemented the Skill of the Month campaign, working with team members to design follow-up activities for each of the skills taught in Signature Service, along with posters, job aids, and other tools to enhance the awareness of the skills," says Hudson.

Coaching classes for managers and refresher training sessions are highly recommended as well. The coaching programs are designed to help managers identify opportunities to help their people implement newly acquired skills. For example, Remillard suggests that when a customer service rep approaches his or her manager about a difficult customer interaction, the manager should begin by asking, "What was the customer's condition?" and "How did you respond?" That way, managers prompt reps to think of the appropriate response for that condition on their own. Refresher sessions include a knowledge test and coached skill practices for situations that reps encounter regularly.

On the Way

Remillard and Hudson are measuring the impact of this human performance improvement initiative in a number of ways. "Mainly, what I'm interested in is, 'Did you understand what we taught you? Do you see its application to your job? And do you intend to do something differently on the job as a result of your training?'" says Remillard. "To me, that says to management that there's an intention to change behavior, and that it was made on the part of an individual as a result of attending this program."

In addition to conducting end-of-course surveys, Remillard and Hudson conduct knowledge-based tests. "We try to make it easy," explains Remillard. Each learner receives a copy of the test, including the answers, following class. Then, after being given ample time to review the material, they take the test on their own without the answers. "If they know it, they'll use it," says Remillard.

A skill application survey asking learners how often they use their new skills — and how effectively they think they're doing so — is distributed 10 weeks later, once participants have had a chance to apply what they've learned on the job. "We ask how many of the follow-up activities have been completed, as well as how frequently their manager reminds them or suggests to them or coaches them to use skills from the class," says Remillard.

"The combination of post-class feedback, the knowledge test, and follow-up surveys gives management confidence that the skills were relevant and are being used on the job — that they got what they paid for," says Remillard. "It really makes a difference when managers see those three components of measurement put together." Adds Hudson: "We also try to use internal newsletters and other communication vehicles to give recognition to the divisions that are doing something right."

A Win-Win Relationship

When asked to reflect on GP's decision to collaborate with Wilson Learning, Remillard describes the experience as not only positive but insightful. "You guys do very innovative things with content and learning design, always looking a little bit deeper, teaching people to respond to the psychological dimension as well."

Remillard and Hudson continue to work diligently to extend the reach of SCS with GP. And now they have added to the curriculum Wilson Learning's *The Versatile Salesperson* sales effectiveness program, which provides salespeople with the interpersonal versatility skills needed to sell the way customers want to buy. With their help, GP is no doubt well on its way to providing an unparalleled customer experience.

