

## MISSION IMPROBABLE

BY RICH GALLAGHER



**A**lmost every management pundit I've heard in recent years has trumpeted the importance of crafting a corporate mission statement. You won't ever hear it from me.

Being an engineer by training, I like to look at the performance data of a thing in order to find out if it actually works as designed. With mission statements, here's my own batting average to date:

- I recently bought a new car from a major automaker that has a very heavily publicized, customer-oriented mission statement. The car happened to be a lemon. When it wasn't in the shop, it was suffering random breakdowns on the highway. How did this customer-driven firm handle my problem? It was rude and indifferent. Where the warranty was concerned, it hid behind every technicality possible. I finally gave up and traded in the car.

- A local hardware store displays a similarly stirring mission statement painted boldly right above its cash registers. The registers themselves are staffed by bored, incompetent people who think nothing of keeping customers waiting 20 minutes for service, or passing problems from one person to another. One cashier rang up a \$6 item of mine as \$60, then stared cluelessly when I asked her to correct it. I finally had to get a manager to straighten it out.

- Last year, after fracturing a tooth, I visited a dentist whose office is adorned with a framed mission statement chock full of words like empowerment and excellence. His only recommendation for my problem involved lots and lots of dentistry along with a large sum of money. His congenial demeanor changed abruptly when I politely mentioned getting a second opinion. A second dentist, who had no visible mission statement, was able to

repair my tooth with a simple filling.

I could go on, but you get the picture. Putting a number to it, I would say the overall score is on the order of Mission Statements 124, Customers 7.

Perhaps the biggest problem with mission statements is that they come from the top of an organization, and thereby can take on the character of parents telling their children how to behave—often, with similar results. Or maybe the top problem is that mission statements are put on a shelf (or on a banner) and left there. Once the statement is written, managers may still talk about customer service twice a year,

*Putting  
a number to it,  
I would say  
the overall  
score is  
on the order of  
Mission Statements 124,  
Customers 7.*

but they'll talk about making quotas several times a day.

The most amusing mission statements are the ones that try to stuff all of a company's varied interests into one big, happy bromide: "Our mission is to strive for excellence and improve our customers' lives through our cheese food, vacuum cleaner and bowling ball products...."

Your company doesn't need a mission statement, it needs a mission. Real missions are best stated not on wall posters but as performance goals that are checked regularly. A goal to keep turnover under 5 percent or to maintain 95 percent good-to-excellent ratings in customer surveys means a lot

more than some empty platitude about being service-driven, employee-focused, or team-empowerment-vision-dribble-drabbled.

A real, benchmarkable mission puts goals in black and white where they belong. As for management by slogan... Well, you can find out how well it's working in your own organization by answering a simple question: Are people able to communicate successfully to management that certain products or employment practices violate the company mission statement?

If you aren't willing to ditch your mission statement, at least don't plaster the thing all over the place before you really have your act together. It makes you look not just incompetent but ridiculous. A few weeks ago my wife and I went to a restaurant. We were discussing a draft of this essay, and so were amused and delighted to find the eatery's mission statement printed right on the menu. Later we were served a couple of gritty, poorly washed salads—and sure enough, neither the waitress nor the manager could remove the charges from the bill. They apologized profusely, but we still had to pay in full. You see, the restaurant's computer wouldn't "empower" them to adjust the bill.

*Rich Gallagher is an independent consultant in Ithaca, NY, specializing in technology. His latest book, Effective Software Customer Support, will be published this spring by The Solomon Press.*

### SEND US YOUR VIEWPOINT

Have a strong opinion on a topic of interest to our readers? Send 750-800 words, a black-and-white photograph (head shot) and brief biography to: Editor, TRAINING, 50 S. Ninth St., Minneapolis, MN 55402. Fax: (612) 333-6526; America Online at [TrainMag@aol.com](mailto:TrainMag@aol.com) or CompuServe at [74143.3000@compuserve.com](mailto:74143.3000@compuserve.com).