

between phone calls.”

Taking time to unplug offers a lot of benefits. “Over the course of the day for most reps, the stress level just ratchets up and pretty soon you are not very skillful in how you deal with customers because you don’t have that reservoir of emotional control that you need to be able to handle difficult customers — or just the everyday challenges of the job,” Burke says. “We find that if you can get away from the chaos in the call center to go somewhere to just clear your mind, you are much more productive when you get back.”

Be open to “Aha” moments

Unplugging — and the self observation and mindfulness that it encourages — will also help reps to be more open to those moments of understanding and discovery that Burke calls “Aha” moments — little pieces of wisdom that we pick up that make dealing with customers just a little bit easier.

For example, one of the “ahas” that Burke’s fictional customer service rep experiences is: *There’s no such thing as a difficult situation.* “And by this we mean that we have very little control over what happens to us — from service disasters to difficult customers. But we do have the power to control one thing — which is our reaction to those events and people. A difficult situation is just that — a situation — and it’s up to the rep to decide if it is going to be ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘difficult,’ or ‘easy.’”

Another related “aha” that Burke describes is one that most reps learn at one point or another, and that is: *It’s not about me.* “When customers are angry, they are frustrated with the situation, and not with the rep,” she says. “And when the rep puts his or her energy into solving the customer’s problem instead of getting angry back, everyone is happier.”

Five more service “Ahas”

The main character in Barbara Burke’s book, *The Napkin, the Melon & the Monkey*, is a customer service rep who has a number of “Aha” moments that make her life as a service rep easier. Following are her character’s observations on their meaning:

Problems can be gifts in disguise. “At first I thought the notion that problems could be gifts in disguise was nuts. But once I started getting a better handle on problem situations by practicing SODA, I could see that every call from a customer was an opportunity to practice understanding and compassion.”

The nicer I am to myself, the nicer I am to others. “Once I let go of the notion that I needed to be perfect, and so did everyone else, I became much more patient with myself and others.”

A simple apology works wonders. “I never considered it my responsibility to apologize to a customer for the inconvenience a problem had caused. But when I tried it, I was amazed at how those two words — ‘I apologize’ — immediately diffused customers’ anger.”

Give a little, get a lot. “Once I made a conscious effort to be more generous and understanding of others, good things happened. It was as if I was being rewarded for doing the right thing.”

United we stand. Divided we fall. “Once team members realize that the only way they are going to achieve their goals is if they put their differences aside, everything changes.”

When all else fails, have a SODA

One of the most challenging and stressful situations that reps encounter on a regular basis is dealing with a difficult or irate customer — and Burke offers an “Aha” for that, as well. It’s a four step process for handling emotionally charged situations that she calls SODA:

Stop what you are doing.

Observe what is going on.

Decide on a solution.

Act with confidence.

“When we are forced to deal with a difficult, irate person at work our natural response is to become defensive. But that reaction isn’t appropriate in most business situations,” she says.

“When I work with reps I ask them to just stop for a nanosecond before reacting automatically. It’s that automatic reaction that often gets us into trouble, and by prac-

ting unplugging, we discipline our minds to react less automatically,” Burke says. “If you can stop for a second to observe the situation for what it really is — maybe a shipment was incomplete or went astray — and begin to understand that, ‘OK, the facts of the situation are that maybe we screwed up, and if I were this customer, I would probably be mad too.’”

The other self-talk that should go on during that short stop-and-observe moment is to realize that it is not about you — the rep — the customer is angry about the situation. “And once you take yourself out of the equation, you can focus on coming up with a solution to the customer’s problem,” says Burke. “And I always counsel reps to try to come up with at least two options for the customer so they have some say in the decision — and then you can act with confidence once you have formulated what your solution will be.” **TCC**