



## Customer Service as a Milestone Deliverable

Game development is a very intense process and it is natural for the tactical focus on project execution to pull resources and mindshare away from strategic planning and marketing for the studio as a whole.

Developers who believe it is enough to let the merits of their titles speak for themselves are not practicing good partner relationship management, and they frequently lose repeat business relationships because of it. Others who believe price alone determines their competitive advantage set themselves up for failure by under-resourcing and under-delivering.

At FOG, we look for clients who understand that their ultimate potential is fully realized only by taking a holistic approach to not only great game development, but also great customer service, marketing, and relationship management.

**Let's do a little exercise.** Take the total number of development contracts you have done, then subtract one for each publisher relationship you did not repeat because *you* would not ever work with them again (assuming the difficulty in working with them was far and above their fault, and not prompted by your own actions or inactions). Group the ones that remain by publisher. If 50% or more of the total are repeat relationships, you are doing a good job of retaining your customers. If your percentage is less than that, it is time to figure out why. As a manager or director of the company, you may not have had ongoing insight into the day-to-day operations and communications between your producer and their counterpart at the publisher customer. That should be the nexus of your investigation.

Project management systems and formal post-mortems are valuable tools, but being able to track how many features and assets were implemented -- or how many bugs were corrected in a certain block of time -- are metrics that can address and improve problems in your process, but not in the people within that process necessarily. Certainly, it is easy to identify if a particular person is the source of late deliverables, but what are the deliverables of the producers and project managers themselves? I would argue that it is more than the sum of the parts, more than keeping the project on time and on budget. Indeed, I would argue that the main deliverable of a producer is to bring the customer back for another project -- not specifically by asking for more work, but by providing world-class customer care and responsiveness on the current project, so the customer is actively seeking more opportunities to work together. Good producers can make the jobs of business development professionals far easier. It becomes not a question of whether you will work together again, but when and on what project.

View the producer conversations as training opportunities, so don't get thrown by the use of the word "investigation" previously. Go through the formal communications to analyze things like "response time" and what obstacles or problems occurred and how they were resolved, but discuss the intangibles as well. Did your person like working their counterpart? How do they feel about the relationship and what do they think could have been better? Did they discuss improvements and lessons learned with their counterpart? Was consensus reached? Some of you are most likely way outside your comfort zone at this

point because the conversation has gotten all touchy-feely, right? “Why can’t we just make good games?” you’re asking. You can, as long as someone is willing to pay you to do so and that all begins with customer retention. You know the saying: “It’s cheaper to keep a customer than to find a new one.”

We all know that most producers began their careers doing other things and, being good at them, we employed the Peter Principal and promoted them to something they had participated in, but never managed. Some grow into the role, some don’t. It’s bad enough that we do that to them without formal project management training in many instances, but it is much worse to do so without also beefing up their people skills.

If you invest in some communications, customer service, and relationship management training for these folks, it will not only make them more effective project leaders, it will also make them more effective ambassadors building repeat business relationships for you. It’s about the people, people!

Good Hunting!