

# SERVICE SUPERHEROES 2020



When companies put the right people on the front lines, an exceptional and memorable customer experience can be a reality—even during a pandemic.

By Tina Berres Filipski

**W**hen the pandemic closed most non-essential businesses earlier this year causing massive layoffs and furloughs, customer service was also one of the casualties. In some businesses, as companies cut back, there was no one to answer the phones or monitor online help lines. Customers were on their own.

However, other companies, especially those in the

promotional products industry, quickly sprang into action with transparency, responsiveness and innovation to deliver the level of service their customers had always expected—and at the core of this effort were many dedicated and hard-working employees.

This month, *PPB* recognizes 12 Service Superheroes who were selected from 62 nominations

submitted by co-workers, bosses and clients in an industry-wide search this summer. As these individuals prove, customer service is not a title but an attitude, a calling and a mission to serve others.

Now in its 10th year, *PPB*'s program has recognized more than 100 of the most skilled and admired customer service professionals in the promotional products industry.



## MICHAEL PASTORE

Director of Operations  
Stromberg Brands  
Years at this company: 12

**C**ustomer service is often taken for granted, until it's done wrong. So, when a company president not only recognizes but cheers what's right about someone's customer service performance, it's clear that person is excelling in every aspect of the role. Michael Pastore is that person who, while not specifically holding a customer-service title, redefines what service means for StrombergBrand customers.

"Michael is truly a superhero because he 'gets' this promotional products business," says Helen Stromberg, nominator and president of the Valley Cottage, New York, supplier. "He will bend over backwards to help a customer and does not care about leaving for the day until the job is done. Michael is so customer-friendly and makes concessions everywhere he can. He hates to say 'no' and he hates to disappoint." She explains that during the height of the pandemic shutdown, not only was Pastore the only employee onsite running the office for six weeks, but he made sure that all customers were kept apprised of the situation. "He moved orders around to help us deliver as best we could and keep our customers happy. After 12 years of being with us, Michael knows everything that goes on in our company—he knows how the owners think, and he proactively offers ideas to help the company succeed."

Stromberg recalls a large overseas order. The distributor remembered, at the last minute, that it had multiple drop-shipments in various quantities. The order had just arrived at the supplier's factory and the deadline to accomplish the drop-shipments was unrealistic. "We did not know how this would get done," remembers Stromberg. "But Michael stepped in and said, 'This is such a large and important order, and we must make it happen for them.' He figured out how to do it—12,000 umbrellas and more than 200 different drop-shipments. He got it done in record time and in a seamless manner. This customer has been loyal to us for many years since and given us many repeat orders."

## One-On-One With Michael Pastore

### How the pandemic has affected his

**approach:** Working from home was a challenge (all of our phone calls were coming to my house) because our customers were looking to get orders and samples shipped. For about a month this wasn't possible, and I hated to disappoint anyone who was calling, even though they were very understanding. The main challenge was not having all of our usual supplies available to be able to service the customer. Luckily, with technology today to access systems and our website that has all of our product information, I was able to handle most calls that came in. (After 12 years, I know a lot of the information to be able to help customers with their questions.) Later, we pushed to open production again as soon as we could to get those orders out. The pandemic has made me realize just how important each and every sale (large and small) is not only to our customers, but to us. Business is already difficult to come by on a

regular day, but in today's environment it is even more important, and I stress to all of my team the importance of doing a great job on all orders.

### His inspiration to deliver great service:

Honestly, going above and beyond has been ingrained in me my entire life, set by examples from my parents. My father dedicated his entire life to working extremely hard to not only provide for his family but to also do an outstanding job for his company. I know nothing less than giving 110 percent and this example comes from him. Doing the best job you can is just what you do to show respect for your boss, your client and, most importantly, for yourself. Always.

**No. 1 tip to share with others:** Stay organized and get things done as soon as you can. I find that when I get things done right away for a customer (or even in

general), it not only serves them quicker, which makes them happy, but there is less likely the chance for an error or forgetting about it later. Especially in customer service, when things are happening so quickly, it is important to get things done and move right on to the next thing.

### Best personal customer service experience:

I just bought a new home and received the best service from the real estate agent. He was always available, knowledgeable, pleasant, realistic, honest, helpful—all the things you expect but don't always get from a person when you are dealing with them in the business world. I had many interactions with professionals during the buying process and almost everyone fell short of this agent. I actually liked dealing with the guy and have respect for him in the way he handles himself. I would work with him again and I would feel comfortable recommending him.