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CFI Group CEO: Better customer service can boost profits

May 4, 2014

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As the CEO of CFI Group, Sheri manages offices across four continents from their world headquarters in Ann Arbor. / CFI Group

Sheri Petras didn't start off her career aspiring to be CEO — it just sort of worked out that way.

Petras, 50, is CEO of CFI Group, a customer service consulting company in Ann Arbor. Petras grew up in Flint, went to the University of Michigan, earned a graduate degree in marketing research there, and, then, got an MBA from the University of Chicago.

But in 2000 after stints at Quaker Oats and Kraft, she wound up back in Ann Arbor working for CFI Group — a company founded by one of her college professors.

Now, she is CEO of a company with about 120 employees in five global offices and about \$25 million in annual sales. But, Petras said she never really aspired to become CEO.

“There are some people who want to be CEOs from the time they are 5. They go to business school because that is what they want to do,” Petras said. “I went to business school because I went to college in the early '80s when nobody had jobs and the business schools had the highest placement rates.”

CFI Group is a marketing research company founded in 1988 by Claes Fornell, a professor Petras knew from her studies at U-M.



By **Brent Snavelly**

Detroit Free Press
Business Writer

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CFI Group helps companies improve customer service through a customer survey and feedback system based on a formula Fornell developed.

Fornell launched the American Customer Satisfaction Index in 1994 as a national economic indicator of the quality of goods and services in the U.S. The survey uses modeling technology to relate customer satisfaction to expectations, evaluations of quality and value.

For corporate clients, CFI takes its survey research farther and then helps companies pinpoint ways to improve customer service.

Sheri Petras

Title: CEO

Age: 50

Education: University of Michigan for marketing research, University of Chicago, MBA.

Experience: Worked for Kolcraft Enterprises, Kraft Foods and Pepsico/Quaker Oats in the 1990s before joining CFI Group in 2000.

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Petras said bad customer service can hurt a company's sales and profit margin.

"I would argue," she said, "that the companies with terrible customer service that do very well are either in a monopolistic, or quasi-monopolistic situation."

Petras joined CFI Group in 2000 as a market analyst in charge of a large account. Later, she volunteered to manage a division that wasn't doing well, and that, she said, turned out to be her best career move.

"That was the division that nobody wanted. It was low margin. It was not sexy. ... But I managed to turn it around, get the costs in line and provide more value to the customers," she said. "I was in the dog division, but I embraced it. I am a firm believer that you have to play the cards you are dealt — not the cards you wish you were dealt."

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