

Complain, Complain

by JoAnna Brandi

Human nature is funny. Put a person in a room with a "specialist" and they tend to want a little bit of free advice. My friend Robin, a lawyer, says whenever she goes to a party someone usually asks for a little legal advice. My friend Steven, a doctor, says it's always "By the way Doc, I've got this pain..." And me, the Customer Care Coach, I get the customer abuse stories. It's hard for people to resist telling me the last time they got left by the airline, or the last time a bank teller ignored them...

Although we are constantly being reminded in the business press and by our consultants about the importance of treating our customers well and adding value to their experience - use your own experience as a guide - what's the state of service today? Judging by my informal polls, not so good. The American Customer Satisfaction Index hovers around the 74 percentage point (give or take a point or two) and hasn't shown real gains in years.

In general, most people I talk to think there is plenty of room for improvement. While customers believe that in many cases they pay enough to get the highest level of service, the majority believes that the service reps they deal with don't care about their needs. Some - especially the tech savvy - have abandoned traditional channels and embraced self-service wholeheartedly. Why? "So I don't have to take the chance of getting some sassy know-nothing person on the phone after listening to the recorded we-value-your-business-crap for 15 minutes." That's what a business consultant friend of mine told me last week, as she went on to tell me that she avoids customer service departments "at all costs."

That made me rather sad, since I see the customer service (and as we call it customer care) function as an important enhancer to every other part of the company. If service is good, sales are easier. If service is good marketing is easier, building on a strong reputation and the experiences of happy customers. But it seems we are lacking the consciousness, and the skills, which help create a positive experience for the customer - every time.

As a customer, I long for more positive experiences, and occasionally do complain when I am not satisfied. And I'm usually bewildered by the less than appreciative stance companies take when I go out of my way to comment on their service. Shouldn't we be grateful for complaints? A complaining customer is doing what many companies hire consultants and mystery shoppers to do - critique the service.

Just recently, after I took my time to compose a letter of complaint to the president of a large office supply dealer, I received a response - initially apologetic - that took a turn for the worse when he chose to get defensive and used my own words out of context against me. He turned an angry customer into an enraged customer. Uh, not a smart strategy. Perhaps he went home that night with his ego intact, thinking he had "won" the argument. What he did do was cause me to lose the respect I had for him as a leader, and broke any bond of loyalty I may have had with his company.

Does your company embrace and encourage your customers to complain? Do you know how to handle feedback in a non-defensive fashion? Have you made the process of getting feedback from the customer easy (and maybe even delightful?) Do you listen intently to what they have to say, correct the problem and then follow up with your appreciation?

Actually, it's the customers who don't complain that you really have to worry about. Customers who don't feel like expending the energy to confront you, or write a letter, or be bold enough to say to a sassy clerk "There's no reason for you to treat me so rudely," just slip quietly away - and with them they take their future business.

Customers too weary to put in yet another complaint that doesn't get addressed are the ones that might just be bad-mouthing you to their business buddies at the next networking luncheon. In fact studies show that for every customer that complains 26 more have the same complaint and are not voicing it, and of course, we all know that an unhappy customer tells more (many more) than twice as many people about the experience than he would if he were happy about it. So much for all the good will you were trying to build with that last advertising campaign. The power of the internet makes it possible to tell 6,000 of your best buddies about the lousy service you got yesterday. While not many people do that, the "viral" quality of the internet makes it possible even when it's not intended.

One of the reasons customers don't complain is because they have tried in the past and haven't gotten much satisfaction from the experience. What is your expectation when you complain? That someone will listen patiently, not be defensive, apologize, solve your problem and take the time to say thank you. That's what mine is. Was that your experience that last time you complained to one of your vendors? Even more importantly was that your customer's experience the last time they complained to you?

I urge you to take this opportunity to look at the process you have designed to deal with your customer's complaints (and feedback) and see if it reflects the level of customer caring and appreciation you would most like to portray. From my experience as a consultant, researcher, and writer on the subject of Customer Care - my guess is your process might benefit from a little improvement. Remember to "Dare to Caresm" about those customers!!

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