

Customer service - it really *is* your problem

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Too many businesses are getting customer service wrong. Bureaucratic business processes are making it incredibly difficult for employees to be flexible and accommodate unique customer needs.

"The customer is king" has become merely an empty saying printed on a poster and very little (if any) evidence of it can be found in business operations. In today's economic circumstances it is probably more important than ever to refocus and start getting it right again. After all, the customer is the one paying your salary.



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1. You are guilty by association

Even when it is not your fault, the customer will associate you with the problem they are experiencing - so figure out a way to fix it. Unfair? Maybe... Reality? Definitely! Fixing a customer's problem, even when you are not responsible for the cause, is going the extra mile - the foundation of excellent customer service. Just doing what everyone else does, will make you ordinary - you need to clearly distinguish yourself from the rest.

Let us share some examples:

- Julia is experiencing an issue with a component that she is buying from supplier X. Despite numerous complaints, supplier X has been unable to resolve the issue. You jump in and save the day. Although you were not the cause of the problem, you are now suddenly associated with solutions and not problems and very likely in Julia's mind she will prefer to deal with you in future, rather than supplier X. Even though this may have taken up some of your quality department's time, consider it an investment in the future of your business.
- Peter is unhappy with the component you supply. The cause of the issue is in fact due to an inherent design issue and since Peter's company supplied the design to you, you may argue that you are not at fault. You may know this and Peter may even know this, but every person working with that component is unpacking it from a box with your name on it - the component itself may have your name on it and they may be completely unaware of the root cause.

Even if Peter knows, he may still feel that your company should have picked it up and highlighted it or corrected it when the design was submitted to you. Peter's design engineers may require some training (maybe you could do a workshop event that will also have marketing value for you) or you may need to implement a check point at the design submission stage in future.

- Sarah continuously receives complaints from the company next door that their rubbish is blown by the wind into the adjacent premises. Sarah contacts the rubbish bin supplier (because she considers them to be the rubbish bin experts) for a solution. Yes, the rubbish bin supplier cannot control the wind, but if they do not address the issue (although they are not the root cause) Sarah will associate this recurring rubbish issue and repeating complaints from the neighbour, with the rubbish bin supplier's inability or incompetency or lack of interest to solve this issue.

2. Don't defend, attend

Do not argue with a customer. Do not start passing the blame. Even when it is not your fault, this only creates the impression that you are trying to avoid taking responsibility. The customer is more interested in a solution to their problem than the root cause - give them one.

3. Delight them with anticipation

Avoid becoming a black hole where information seems to only enter and very seldom never exits. Remember that the customer cannot see you. The customer cannot see what you are busy with or how busy you are and quite frankly they aren't interested. You need to keep your customers up to date.

Anticipate their next question and make sure that they have the answer before they could even ask. The challenge is to ensure that they have no need to be emailing or phoning you. Every time they have to contact you, you cost them time and time is a precious commodity - save theirs!

Delight them with your proactivity. Knowledge breeds understanding, whereas in contrast, the black hole is the breeding ground for irritation and customer dissatisfaction. Did they receive my enquiry? Are they attending to it? How long will I have to wait before I can get an answer?

Delighting them with anticipation will only work if your word is also your honour. If you reply on an enquiry stating that you have received it and will provide feedback within three working days, make sure that you do! Consistently delivering on your promises will establish trust and reliability.

Keeping in mind that despite all the advancements in technology, things do sometimes still go wrong, this could also save you from inadvertently disappointing a customer one day.

- John always sends a confirmation of receipt e-mail within one hour of receiving a customer's purchase order. When customer Z suddenly one day does not receive this confirmation mail, they phoned John to check if everything was in order and by doing so uncovered an issue with John's e-mail account.

If it wasn't for this, the due date for customer Z's delivery may have come with no product being ready, because John had not received the purchase order in the first instance, through no fault of his own.

4. Where do you draw the line?

When a customer complains, be grateful. Realise that by complaining this customer is really saying that they still have a good perception of your business - they still believe that you are better than this and that you will listen to them when they speak. It is when customers give up on you that you should become really concerned.

Change the way you look at complaints. Change is inevitable, be grateful that someone else has done the work for you to find another wonderful opportunity for you to become better. Here your customers are telling you what they want instead of you having to try and figure it out. Giving your customers what they want is the key to success and after all it must be something that is important to your customer if they are bothering to raise the topic.

Yes the customer is king, but that does not give them a licence to abuse - there is a balance to be kept. Some customers sadly, just aren't worth the misery (and I am not necessarily referring to all high maintenance customers). You need to calculate the ROI (return on investment) for each of your customers. When you are consistently spending more than you are making from them, it may be time to consider walking away.

5. Are we all aligned?

How do you track and evaluate customer service? Are all of your employees aligned? Never just assume that they are. Measurements are a way of objectively measuring performance. Remember that your customers will evaluate your business's customer service based on their dealings with the individual(s) from your business that they interact with - everyone from the switchboard operator to the driver making the delivery.

What you measure sends an important signal to your employees. It shows what a business considers to be important and

generally what is measured will drive the performance focus of employees. Keep in mind that collecting and analysing information takes time and therefore it is critical that the selected KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) really add value.

ABOUT SU-MARI DU BRUYN

Su-Mari Du Bruyn is co-founder of the company Adapt To Change. She is a qualified HR practitioner and logistics specialist and is passionate about Continuous Improvement and people development.

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