

# The customer service obstacle course

 By [Aki Kalliatakis](#)

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I don't know if it's the same for you, but have you ever noticed how some companies seem to go out of their way to place obstacles between their customers and great service? I sometimes imagine that there is a special director in charge of creating as much difficulty as possible for customers.

Please allow me to share some examples of just a few of the customer service barriers I've bumped into during the past few weeks and how to overcome these obstacles.

## The first obstacle is signs that give orders to customers

- "You must stand behind the line until you're called."
- "Absolutely NO PARKING: Reserved for Directors"
- "Business Banking Customers ONLY."
- "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service!" (On a beach)
- "Authorised persons only."
- "Credit card payment only for purchases over R50."
- "Wait your turn!"
- Lots of pictures with a big red cross drawn through them.
- "No cheques unless previously authorised with management."
  
- ... And many signed "By Order of Management."

Harsh words like "should", "must", and "only" are likely to offend your customers. Your signs need to include words like "welcome", "please" and "thank you." Sometimes humour can be used to soften the message on a sign. I saw something at a hospital on a maternity room door. It said: "Push. Push. Push." And another one in a non-smoking area: "If we see smoke, we will assume you're on fire and take appropriate action."

## The second obstacle is business hours as opposed to customer hours

My local library locks the book return drop-box during the hours that the library is open. This means customers have to find a parking place, get the kids out of the car, lock it and traipse into the library just to return a book.

Here's another one: The Post Office has a sign posted by the mailbox rental area. It reads, "Box mail that is too large is available for pick up after 10:30 a.m." Located next to that area is a service window for mailbox renters. The sign on that

door reads, "Mailbox service window is open 8 - 9 a.m." In other words, you can only pick up your mail after 10:30 but, if you need to pick up a package that was too large for your mailbox, you have to come back the following day to catch the service window hours.

Obstacles that waste a customers' time will eventually drive them away. Review your business hours to see if there is an opportunity to expand them or eliminate out-dated rules.

### **The third obstacle is incompetent or unknowledgeable employees**

On my very first visit to my new gym club the other day, I asked for some basic information about hours and pool rules at the customer service desk. I also wanted to know why, as a bald man who keeps his sparse hair very short, I needed to wear a special swimming cap. The employee looked up at me and said, "You're asking the wrong guy... I haven't got a clue!" He was also clueless about who could provide the answers.



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It is totally unforgivable when employees are unable to answer the basic questions asked by your customers. Just because employees have gone through training, don't assume that they remember everything they've been taught. Test, coach and train your people on a regular basis to make sure they know the answers to frequently asked questions. If you can't help me, who can?

### **The fourth obstacle is paperwork and bureaucracy**

Why do so many companies want all of this information, which I know they never use? If you're not going to ever phone me on my birthday, then you don't need that information. And I would love to know who designs the forms that we have to fill in. I personally find it impossible to fill in those little blocks which need one letter per block.

And why is it that nobody else in the business can even start processing my order, like stacking bags of things into my trailer, until all five forms have been completed, stamped and signed?

### **The fifth obstacle is rules and inflexibility**

I was at the airport quite early the other day, and I had a R5 coin and R100 notes. I wanted a newspaper, took out the coin to pay, and then saw some breath mints at the till that I also wanted. So I took out the R100 note. The lady indifferently, almost rudely, asked if I had something smaller, and I said no. She said she didn't have change. So I left the sweets, and paid for the paper. When she opened the till, I saw a whole bunch of change, so I asked why she couldn't help me. She said: "The change is for the customers who come later." Huh? They just converted a R25 sale into a R4 sale.

I know that businesses need to have certain things that guide the way in which they operate. I also know that many of them have somehow lost money or upset someone or had a problem, and that's why they do these things. But, when it's my money, I don't have to put up with this rudeness and inflexibility.

I say kill the obstacles for the majority of your customers, and deal with the minute number of difficult situations as they come up.

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