

## “It Ain’t Easy being a Customer Anymore!”

**Preface:** This is the fourth in a series of eight articles on issues of importance to the management of organizations and the leadership of people. The first article created a Management “Jambalaya” using various ingredients - “leftover” ideas that still have application in the world of people and work. The articles that follow will use the same series of ingredients and a “fresh” approach to create an entrée – nutritious food for thought.

**Disclaimer:** The good news about being a “poor old Cajun boy”(I have been criticized for using this term to describe myself; forgive me – this is part of my life’s experience, my culture) is that most people’s expectations of us are low. I’m given latitude by the Politically Correct Police because I’m ... you know a “hick”.

This latitude allows me to write in unvarnished terms, based upon personal experiences and observations of the marketplace. What follows is my best effort to provide insight as a customer into the problems with service today as well as my suggestions as a consultant on ways to return to the good old days when the “customer was king.”

The first lesson of this article actually starts in this disclaimer. Please note the words “forgive me” only six lines above. If you offend someone or if you think you might have, APOLOGIZE. Acknowledge your mistakes. Don’t argue with customers. If what you did or said or if what they perceived you did or said offended them – make amends. At least apologize for hurting their feelings.

### The Ingredient / Entrée – Creating a Customer Focused Operation

Let’s start with positives – NOT ALL CUSTOMER SERVICE IS BAD. There are examples out there of great customer service – The best in my experience include Miss Billie at the teller line, Rose fitting glasses, and Larry introducing you to the next suit you are going to buy. These folks are the best at what they do.

When you walk into their “stores” they don’t greet you; they celebrate your arrival. At the moment of eye contact, you’ll feel like you are the only customer they have. They don’t know about you and your “demographics”; they know you. They’ll spend the appropriate time with you (uninterrupted by the phone) engaging in conversation (relationship building and market research). Their interest is first in you, your wants, and your needs.

Once this is complete they will convert what they’ve just learned and their knowledge of their products and services into a solution for your problem or to satisfy your expectations. Most importantly, when they commit to do something, they do it – when, where, and how they promise!

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**It's difficult to quantify the worse examples because there are so many experiences to choose from. Some examples include a monogram shop that promised me 4 shirts with my company logo on a certain day. For the next month after the promised delivery date, I called to check on the order over 17 times. Finally the owner "fired" me as a customer for being unreasonable.**

**A CPA firm sent me a letter threatening to charge me double their usual fee if I didn't deliver my tax information by a certain date. (I don't deny their need for the information in a timely fashion. I just believe a diplomatic phone call could have been more effective and would have kept me from "firing" them.)**

**One Bank (not its real name – but close) discourages its customer service personnel from acknowledging customers by name since this encourages conversations which slows down the transaction process.**

**REMEMBER – "STUFF HAPPENS." AS LONG AS HUMANS WORK IN BUSINESS (OR FOR YOU "TECHIES" – AS LONG AS HUMANS WRITE THE PROGRAMS FOR THE WEBSITE OR SYSTEMS THAT ARE YOUR BUSINESS) MISTAKES WILL HAPPEN. HOW YOU HANDLE THE MISTAKES MAKES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "GOOD" OR "BAD" SERVICE. SOMETIMES A "BAD" INITIAL EXPERIENCE GIVES YOU A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO SHINE OVER THE LONG TERM.**

**Adding to the deterioration of service is the "shrinkage" of manners and civility in today's world. An anthropologist once indicated that the difference between the north and the south is the South has a sense of manners and tradition. I hate to admit it, "Sir, it ain't as good as it used to be." Maybe we can bring manners back.**

**My favorite customer service story is about a woman who has to interrupt an employee's conversation with her friends to get help to make a purchase. When the employee "grumps" over to help, the customer explains, "remember around here, I'm profit and you're overhead."**

**The good news is that as the average for service deteriorates, the exceptional stands out all the more. If any business will make an effort to be friendly, fast, focused, and flexible, their service will be considered WORLD CLASS.**

**Here's the deal – today, customers have the power. They are sophisticated, have full access to information on products and services, and can buy what they want from an unlimited number of sources in a global economy. This means that you can no longer sell or service a "mass market" but rather need to focus on each customer as an individual – a niche of one. Customers are diverse – each is different.**

**Respect this diversity. Train your team to understand and act not only as the Golden Rule suggests that "do unto others as they would do unto you" but also honor the Platinum Rule, "do unto others as they would have you do unto them."**

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**In other words, don't let an old guy on your team talk down to a young customer about the "good old days" or anything else. Also don't let a young service person talk "street talk" to an old "Mo Fo" who's trying to buy from your company.**

**What's important in each relationship is: Who is this customer? What do they want and need? How do you profitably deliver it at a price they are willing to pay? As you plan your strategies consider these ideas and questions. Understand that success in customer service does not come down from on high (Harvard Business School, Business Books, or Seminars) but like beauty "is in the eye of the beholder (customer)." Customer service is a "bottom up" thing!**

**Part of your challenge is that not only do customers differ; as a niche of one their individual demands differ. Sometimes they want "high touch" – a relationship they can trust. Sometimes they need "high tech" – a transaction that is fast and seamless. Your problem is that you don't sell either – you sell products, commodities, and / or services. What do they expect you to do – alter your delivery system to their idiosyncrasies? THE BAD NEWS IS THAT THE ANSWER IS YES?**

**The good news is that if you narrow the market, it is doable! Customers want what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. They want a positive buying experience. Your job is to juggle your products, commodities, and services delivered through transactions and a basic relationship to create this experience.**

**The one absolute of this challenge is that people want to feel important and be respected. This is the bare minimum. Everyone in your organization who ever touches, talks to, or works with customers must understand and act on this minimum. Teach them the basic communication and human relationship skills. Smile, make eye contact, shake their hand (or offer the other appropriate cultural greeting), LISTEN, restate what you heard to verify what was heard is what was said, understand the need, agree on a solution, and DELIVER AS PROMISED.**

**After your team becomes effective in the basics of relationships with a niche of one – segment your market. A sign I saw yeas ago provided probably the most effective "screen" to segment customers. It stated simply:**

**Price (Cost), Quality, Service – Choose Any Two**

**The customers answer to this "survey" gives great insight into the individual and direction for your profitable delivery model. You can't be all things to all people so narrow your focus. The market self selects. Which segment can you best serve? Which segment will choose you?**

**If price (cost) is the first choice – streamline delivery. Customer service might actually endanger your effectiveness because service (other than the basic manners and respect mentioned earlier) adds cost to the product / system. Recognize that**

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discount merchants can be nice and yet not provide service (Wal-Mart has a greeter but you are serviced by a “shelf” or “rack”).

Service at Wal-Mart often requires you to stand in a long line at a service desk (that may intentionally be understaffed). This is the price customers must pay for cheap. The reality is that Wal-Mart loyalists are buying cheap not service so their expectations are being met.

A segment on NPR yesterday indicated that Amazon.com does not have a service number readily available. Customers buying “cheap” do not have high expectations for service.

If Quality is job 1, build it right the first time. If it don't work fix it or replace it without argument. What the customer wanted was to pay for the service in the cost of the quality of the product.

If service is the first choice – build on relationships. Spend time in dialogue. Ask questions. Listen and learn and learn and listen. Step into the shoes of the customer. Don't meet expectations. EXCEED THEM. To quote Stephen Covey – begin with the end in mind.

The end in a service driven relationship is a satisfied customer. Don't be focused on the product but rather look at the need. Weave an assortment of products, commodities, and services into a positive buying experience. Meet the customer where they are, don't look to the procedures manual. Break the rules if needed.

As an example, in about 1978 I purchased a Blazer from Larry. About 8 years and 25 pounds later, I'm wearing that Blazer at my son's basketball game. Larry approaches me and whispers quietly in my ear, “Mike, we've had a lot of problems with that brand of Blazer. The material over time shrinks.”

Larry offered to take the coat in, have it altered (he knew me and clothes well enough to “eyeball” the right adjustments) and return it to me two days later at no charge since the material was faulty. I agreed and he did. I can't remember some of the things I did yesterday but 25 years later I still vividly remember this experience and Larry remains on my all time Top Ten List for service personnel.

Did he owe me an alteration after 8 years and 25 pounds? No.

Did he provide an alteration anyway? Yes.

Did he break the rules? Yes.

Did he exceed my expectations and create a positive experience for me? Absolutely!

What are you doing to exceed the expectations of those who BUY SERVICE?

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