



...on customer service

We've all been there — 45 minutes on hold listening to a recording tell us how important we are to the company we are calling. Just when you are about to give up and hang up, finally, a phone bank operator comes on the line to repeat the “importance of your call” in a tone even less enthusiastic than the recorded message. And that's the start of your typical customer service experience.

Customer service departments need a lesson from restaurants.

Think about your most recent full-service restaurant experience. Chances are you were welcomed cheerfully by a smiling host. You were cordially escorted to a comfortable table and wished a sincere “Enjoy your meal.” Shortly thereafter, a server most probably approached you promptly and greeted you, again cheerfully. In most cases, you came to the restaurant hungry and thirsty and, before you had committed to spending a dime, the restaurant gave you bread and water for free, seeing to your immediate needs. Your servers, on greeting you, probably offered alternative beverage choices including alcohol. They advised you during the ordering process, did their best to translate your order, with any necessary alterations to the kitchen, and ensured that your meals arrived promptly and properly prepared. Throughout your meal, you were cared for by eager, well-meaning folks wanting to make your meal pleasurable. In worst cases, when something went wrong, these same people did their best to make things right.

Now think about your most recent customer service department experience — long hold times,

meaningless recorded messages, lousy hold music, (is there a study somewhere suggesting that mundane hold music makes people more receptive to bad news?), scripted platitudes about how much your business means, and, if the problem requires anything out of the ordinary, a further hold while a supervisor is hunted down.

Different businesses, but...

I understand that they are different businesses, and you, the reader, might feel that they are unrelated — different businesses with different purposes — but my argument is that they are not. The link that should tie them together is hospitality, and yet customer service departments don't seem to get that. The typical customer service transaction is exactly that — a transaction-based exchange of “You've got a problem, and I will fix it. Case closed.”

Hospitality, on the other hand, is based on establishing good will, something that should be the paramount mission of a customer

service department. In ancient cultures, hospitality was defined as welcoming the stranger and offering food, shelter, and safety. While customer service departments will probably not offer you a sandwich, they should be offering us a sense of shelter and safety by expressing that their purpose is to advocate on our behalf.

A case in point...

I recently had a terrible experience with Verizon customer service (I know, you're shocked!) in which my nine-year patronage was reduced to their valuing my continuing as a customer at \$35. Why? Because that is what the customer service guidelines allowed for. Neither the customer service rep nor the customer service supervisor could override the guidelines. In all, I spent over three hours on the phone or online with various Verizon employees. When pressed and with nothing else to offer, the customer service rep suggested I call the “customer retention team” and start the process over with them.

My response, of course, was that I shouldn't be the one working at continuing as a Verizon customer. Three hours was investment enough on my part.

Let's go back to a restaurant situation. Can you imagine any restaurant not responding positively to a guest spending three hours trying to remain a guest? Every restaurateur is going to bend over backwards to ensure that guests know how valuable they are to the business.

A sense of hospitality ought to be the driving force for all businesses. It creates trust and security that the relationship is not one-sided but rather mutually beneficial. Restaurants do that every day.

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