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Where In The World Did Service Go?



By Carolyn West Price

How many times have you called a so-called “customer service” line, only to get a nice sounding lady on a recording giving you a menu of choices, which may or may not include how to get to a live body?

Once you determine which obscure number will put you in line for that live body (if you get one), you sit on hold for minutes...more minutes. Granted, some companies are like the rides at Disney—they tell you how long the wait will be based on your place in line. But, does that make you feel much better?

I recently had the great pleasure of being on hold with my previous mortgage company for more than 35 minutes BEFORE I reached a live person. Then, when she could not resolve the problem because the title company which handled my recent re-finance had closed for the day, all she could do was offer to put a note on the account so I could start again tomorrow. You know—sitting on hold, explaining the problem, and having another person tell me it is my title company’s problem, not the bank. Then, of course, when I call the title company, they claim it’s the bank they paid-off for me.

And, the worst part to all of this, is when you don’t even get a phone number to call when you have a problem with a piece of equipment you’ve just spent hundreds or thousands of dollars on. For

me to reach Apple regarding a new computer I purchased, I combed through the manuals page by page—no phone number. Then, when we discover a number through a friend, we get no live-body option.

Now what? I’m stuck in the middle, and all this waiting served to do was inspire me for another marketing column on service.

Every day, it seems, I hear the comments from entrepreneurs that they don’t want to be forced to compete on price, just because that is what the competition is doing. Well, then, differentiate yourself with service.

If your competition has voice greetings, you go with the live body. If your competition does not deliver for free, you should. If your competition’s “customer service” necessitates a customer jump through hoops for service, especially when the problem is clear-cut, make dealing with you easy...a pleasure. Don’t forget that simple “thank you” note or call to acknowledge a customer’s business. Won’t that make an impression?

You get the idea. In today’s business environment, which is becoming increasingly impersonal all in the name of “efficiency,” let’s go back to personal and see how business increases. You know, a call instead of an email; a handwritten note, instead of a fax or email; a customer appreciation event with no strings attached...just a thank you.

Sure, technology and automated services have their place and I’m the first to applaud them IF they are designed to assist the customer. A voice mail system,

which buries the way to get to a human at the bottom of some choice menu, is not in the best interest of the customer. A company that blames a related company, such as the computer company that says it’s the ISP, while the ISP says it has to be the computer, is not concerned about solving the customer’s problem—they just want the customer to go away and don’t care if the problem is solved regardless of who is “at fault.”

In the long run, however, how wise is that? If the customer does, in fact, go away, discouraged and still having to deal with the problem, that customer is probably lost for life...not to mention the number of people with whom he or she will share such a miserable experience.

What does a customer do?

To answer this, test your company from the customer’s point of view—any possible interaction, from the initial greeting to the post-sale follow-up, and certainly customer service when the customer generates the call or visit. If any experience with your company makes a customer feel frustrated, poorly served, or dissatisfied in any way, you may be grateful to compete on price ... since without resolving their problems or answering their questions in a timely fashion you may not have to compete at all.

So, what can you do to enhance the customer’s experience with your company? It may not take much to outshine your competitors, and then price will be a non-issue, won’t it?

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