



So This Is Customer Service? by Bill Bayer

Customer service, both the promise of it and the delivery of it, seems to be reaching new lows. In an effort to relentlessly cut costs, many businesses, especially large companies, have substituted electronic menus and non-human voices for human customer service people.

Even more frustrating, if by chance you can get to a live person before you die of old age, you are likely to reach someone in another country who is nearly impossible to understand. Or someone in the U.S. whose version of English sounds like a foreign language.

Before you over-react, please understand that I am not against moving functions overseas if this needs to be done for the company to compete. I am also not suggesting that people who struggle with English should not be employed in the U.S.

But the point of a customer service person is to provide *customer* service. This means the customer service person needs to understand and communicate in English, or in Spanish if you select the Spanish option. (By the way, sometimes I think I should learn Spanish so I can use Spanish option - perhaps the Spanish speaking reps are easier to understand. Unless they employ people in Asia trying to do customer service in Spanish.)

In addition to understanding and speaking English, or Spanish if you pressed 2, the customer service person needs to be knowledgeable. They also need to have the training and the authority to fix most of the problems quickly.

Our frustration only increases when we finally get someone who can communicate and then find out they have not been empowered to do anything. Or that they have to go step by step through a grade school level script instead of addressing the problem. Small businesses often fall into this trap because they try to deliver customer service with people that are low paid, inexperienced or untrained.

Remember this point if you are managing a customer service function. The customer service person must be able to solve a majority of the problems they encounter.

I predict that customer service, that is *real* customer service, will make a comeback. Some strategically advantaged companies will learn to deliver outstanding customer service (kind of like the old days). Their customer service delivery will set them apart from their competitors and they will gain a competitive advantage because they can truly deliver quality customer service.

What can we learn from the failure of big companies to provide good customer service?

First, we should check that we are not making the same mistakes on a smaller scale. Have we cut staff to the point where no one has the time or the ability to address customer issues? Are our policies designed to protect the company at all cost with no thought of the long term impact on our customers and the business? Have we allowed a few bad experiences or the paranoia caused by our attorney to result in us creating policies that will hasten our loss of customers.

In the current economy, the only way to grow is to keep your own customers and take customers away from your competitors. Happy customers don't generally leave. Good customer service delivered by happy and content employees will keep your customers loyal to you.

In addition, I recommend you think about ways you can excel at customer service. If you can master this capability, you will have a competitive advantage that will help you succeed no matter what position you are in or what industry you are in.

And remember, customer service requires a human being to listen to and understand a problem and then solve it quickly with as little pain and aggravation as possible. Invest in providing excellent customer service. It will pay off.



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