

Customer service: is it really all it can be?



Jerry Merola

*High expectations
of customer
service set
consumers up for
disappointment.*

In today's world, there isn't a retailer or service company out there that isn't touting the merits of its customer service program. Every ad and every commercial seems to focus on personal care, expedited service, and pleasing beyond expectation.

After watching all this stuff, one would think that every organization must now be on the "A" list of successful purveyors. Sadly, I'm just not buying it.

Let me share my experiences from a particularly remarkable day last month. Having finally found a way to take a day off, it became readily apparent that the "day off" was merely a lightly disguised get-all-the-stuff-done-that-normally-can't-get-done day. In my world, that makes for a whole lot of stuff.

SOMEBODY RANKED US #1, SO WE MUST BE

First stop was the auto dealer's service facility. These nice folks go out of their way to send me color brochures and postcards reminding me of the extreme need to service the car they sold me. Fortunately, as their literature clearly advises, they are the premier provider of my car model, with infinitely skilled technicians and white-glove service 24/7. Where do I sign up?

I make a point to arrive for my service appointment at 8 a.m. sharp as instructed, as I had opted to wait for the car instead of pursuing a loaner.

The only problem that became immediately appar-

ent was that I was the only human there. Well, at least the door was

unlocked. When another human finally showed (the "client advisor"), it was I who had to begin the dialog, as my clothing apparently blended in too closely with the color of the wallpaper.

"What do you mean I don't have an appointment? I booked the appointment online, here's the confirmation." A half hour later, somebody finally figured out that the dealership actually offers online reservations, pulled a few strings, and worked me into the schedule. Lucky me.

Two hours later, the verdict emerges, "Uh, Mr. Merola, the part will need to be ordered." Ordered? A light bulb needs to be ordered? "How could you not stock THAT part?"

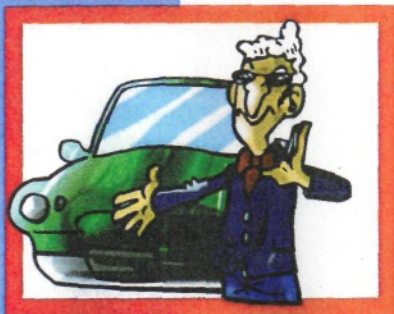
The employee advised me that, "Management won't let us stock anything but oil and oil filters. Can we provide you with a loaner?" Fail.

GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE, IF YOU'RE A COMPUTER

Next up on the day's itinerary was to contact one of the major airlines to change a flight return time. Sure, I know I'll be paying a change fee. Sure, I know there's a really stupendous reason why the fee will be five times the normal charge (for returning three Thursdays before the last Sunday of the month following a leap year).

Thank God I'm a good customer. At least I can count on an automated telephone scheduling system. What? No, I don't need a new flight. No, I'm not checking a flight status. The name is M-E-R-O-L-A, not McGregor.

Thank you, but I already know that I can buy magazines with my dividend miles account. Can I speak with a customer service representative? Does the "0" key on the phone even mean anything anymore? What do you mean you didn't get that and to please repeat?



Aren't you guys #1 in customer service 80 years running? Phew, finally. But wait, you're experiencing unusually long wait times? When aren't you experiencing unusually long wait times? Maybe this means you need to hire more people! After 20 minutes of this nonsense, I bailed. *Fail.* And I'm a million miles customer.

AT LEAST THE DRIVE UP WINDOW IS OPEN LATE

Well, after a day of getting almost nothing accomplished, I decided to de-stress, take the family out to dinner, and plan my strategy for the remainder of the week.

My wife suggested that we try somewhere new. Sure, why not? Nothing wrong with venturing out of the nest once in a while. Just to be sure, I suggested that we call ahead for a



reservation, no need to use those finicky and unreliable online reservation systems! As luck would have it, a table would be waiting for us at 8 p.m. Lakeside view to boot. Finally, a chance to de-stress.

At 8:15, I asked the front desk attendant, "How much longer?" Prob-

bly 10 minutes, tops. When asked the same question at 8:30, the answer changed to "about 15 minutes."

Excuse me, but didn't I make an 8 p.m. reservation? As luck would have it, our table became available at 8:55, just in time for darkness to eliminate any remaining view afforded by the lakefront table selection.

Not a problem, I'm here to eat. Our waiter seemed very nice and did an excellent job of outlining the evening's specials, no need to rush though, he'd be back to hear our selections momentarily.

Only one immediate request, "could we get some water, please?" was met with, "absolutely!" Our waiter extraordinary apparently had other plans, however, as in going home for the evening.

That's right. We are now waiter-

CONSULTANT'S CORNER

less, and water-less for that matter! Despite two attempts to encourage other members of the wait staff to assist, there was no joy. A trip to the concierge yielded a water delivery but no order taking.

I finally found the manager, who apologized profusely for the oversight and vowed to rectify the issue immediately. As the server's tray rounded the corner at 9:45 p.m., I breathed a sigh of relief that I would no longer die from starvation. But wait; there are only two dishes on the tray, and three people sitting at the table.

"Did you forget something?" I asked. "No, there's been a problem in the preparation of your swordfish selection and unfortunately there aren't any remaining swordfish filets available, we're sold out. Would you like something else?" *Fail.*

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

We've all been there before. A combination of savvy marketing and over-promising leads us, as consumers, to expect high standards of satisfaction.

The problem is, we're not getting it. The damage done to the consumer relationship is often well beyond what could possibly transpire if the bar had never been raised so high.

The old adage, "actions speak louder than words" applies more than ever today. We can't just claim to do something, we've got to do it, and do it well.

Fortunately, this is where the entertainment operator has the opportunity to shine. Caring staff, great entertainment selections, and a willingness to please guests is all it takes to set yourself apart.

From a societal standpoint, delivering great guest service certainly isn't rocket science, but it does require looking at the world through the customer's eyes. Let's remember, it's 10 times more difficult to capture a new customer than preserve the one you've got.

If anyone has a spare marker light bulb and a return ticket from Miami, I'm all ears. ▲

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