

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

Purrfectly Obvious

Brought to you with a smile by
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This is the story of a runaway cat that helped me make a point in a customer service seminar I was presenting to a client company. We were talking about how easy it is to make false assumptions and how they can lead you astray when you're supporting customers.

The problem with assumptions, of course, is that you may not be aware you're making them. And it's so easy to be unaware when the situation is clear-cut and familiar.

In this instance, we were part way through the seminar when an administrative assistant appeared with a message for Tara, a manager in the group. The message was from Tara's neighbor who had called to say that Tara's cat, Panther, had gotten out of the apartment and was running around in the hallway of her building.

"Not again!" Tara exclaimed. She said the cat probably dashed out when her cleaning lady opened the door. I told her this was the first time I'd ever had a class interruption caused by a fleeing feline.

Fortunately, Tara lived only a few blocks away. Her admin was most accommodating and, as she'd done in previous runaway-cat episodes, offered to go to the apartment, retrieve the cat, and return it safely to Tara's apartment.

Which she did and didn't. That is, she did go over to the apartment. But she didn't retrieve the cat and return it. Why? It seems it wasn't Tara's cat. She'd met Tara's cat before, and knew this wasn't it.

Tara had made an assumption. She had assumed it was her cat. It sounded like her cat. It was the sort of thing her cat had done before. There was no reason for Tara to question



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the situation before leaping to conclusions. As a result, the idea of calling her neighbor back and asking a few questions to validate that it was her cat never occurred to her. So she didn't ask what the cat looked like. She didn't ask where, exactly, it was found. And she didn't bother to ask if it responded to "Panther." The odds were that it was her cat. Except that it wasn't.

The fact that Tara lived nearby eliminated the need to analyze the situation more carefully. It was easy enough to just check it out. If it *had* been her cat, the problem would have been quickly resolved. And even though it wasn't her cat, no one had been seriously inconvenienced.

But what if Tara had lived further away? Or her admin hadn't been available? Or as accommodating? Or what if the temperature had been below freezing or raining you know what and dogs? Would any of these conditions have caused Tara to challenge her assumptions, or ask some questions, or avoid allowing strong circumstantial evidence to lead her to a false conclusion? Who knows?

I was most appreciative of Tara. It's wonderful when real life intervenes in a non-threatening way to help drive home a point. This exquisitely-timed situation helped to reinforce for class participants how easy it is to make false assumptions. And false assumptions are every bit as easy to make when you're assisting customers. Questioning their every word and statement would be a bit extreme. But from time to time, mull over every word and statement, and see if it helps you identify some of the assumptions you or your customers might be making.

By the way, Tara isn't the manager's real name. And Panther isn't the name of her cat. I've changed both to protect Tara from the taunts and jeers of those know-it-alls who, in the same situation, would have automatically asked, "How do you know it's *my* cat?"

If I ever catch you in a situation that helps me make a point, I'll do the same for you, ☺

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