

# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



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## Evidence of Caring

They don't care how much you know till they know how much you care. This is a statement I often hear service providers make about their customers. I like these sorts of cleverly-worded statements. I call them twistaphors. The only problem is that, as stated, this twistaphor is false. What's important to most customers is not how much you care, but how well you display *evidence* of caring. This is not a trivial difference: If you claim to care, and your actions contradict those claims, what customers quickly conclude is that you *don't* care.

Yet, when I visit service providers who are striving to strengthen customer satisfaction, I often encounter mismatches between the caring they express and the evidence of that caring. Most of these people truly want to do a good job, but their actions suggest otherwise: They respond to customers' email messages slowly — or not at all. They withhold information about delivery delays and distort the status of service snafus. They ignore complaints. And the list goes on.

One group I visited touted its long-term goal of delivering world-class service.

### SERVICE ORIENTATION

On walls and desks were posters and placards proclaiming the forthcoming superior service. Trouble was, service delivery at the moment was far from world-class; in fact, it was barely even neighborhood-class. These people deserved credit for their ambitious goal, but their customers might have felt less discouraged if the group promised a succession of tiny improvements and then delivered on them.

### Pot-hole class service

I can appreciate the frustration these customers felt. In my travels, I often encounter false promises of top-notch service, such as the hotel that touted its service orientation, yet neglected to deliver my wake-up call. OK, no one's perfect and mistakes happen. But when I told the front desk staff about the missing call, all I got in return was a blank stare. No apology. No acknowledgement that I had a legitimate grievance. No promise to be more careful next time. Nothing.

Then there's the store where I couldn't find anyone to help me find some items I needed. When the checkout clerk asked if I had found everything I was looking for, I said no. What did she do about it? You got it, nothing. And my favorite, the business whose on-hold phone message emphasized, every 15 seconds for 15 minutes, how important my business was to them. And which then disconnected me! As in Goodbye, we care, but not that much!!

And disconnects is what it's all about. When there's a disconnect between your claims of caring and what your customers experience, your claims are worthless. It's what customers experience that determines their level of satisfaction. So with a bit of twistaphor tweaking, let us remember:

Customers don't care how much you know until they see *evidence* of how much you care.



## COMMUNICATIONS

## When is a Response Not a Response?

Since I recognize the words you use, I obviously understand you. And my nouns and verbs and dangling participles are all familiar to you, so you must understand me.

Well . . . maybe not. Actually, one of the biggest mistakes we make in working together is assuming we understand each other. But although we may be speaking the same language, we often mean different things by the words we use.

For this reason, when clients ask me to critique their service level agreements and service guides, one of the first things I look for is explanations of service terminology. Consider for example the ambiguity inherent in such terms as respond, acknowledge, problem, and resolve. It's not a stretch to imagine how providers and customers might interpret these terms in contradictory ways.

Let's say, for example, that you're a provider who has agreed to respond to a customer's problem within four hours. Does "respond" mean that you'll have the problem solved within four hours? Or does it simply mean that you will have confirmed receipt of the problem description? Not surprisingly, in the absence of established definitions, customers might reasonably assume that a four-hour response time means that the problem will be resolved in four hours and they'll be back in business.

That, in fact, was exactly the case with one customer I visited. But it turned out (as the customer learned, to his dismay, when a problem arose), the vendor's intention for this four-hour period was to acknowledge receipt of the reported problem and establish a timeline for resolving it. Given the complexity of the problems their customers often faced, the provider was understandably averse to guaranteeing a solution time frame.

But that's not all the ambiguity in this situation, because this four-hour response commitment is ambiguous in several other ways as well.

#### Ambiguity amplified

For example, what determines the start of the four-hour countdown? How must the customer report the problem to start the clock running? Which customers are authorized to submit problems? And does the starting point slide if the information the customer submits is confusing or incomplete?

Alas, these questions lead to even more. What, for example, is the definition of "problem"? From whose perspective must it be seen as a problem? Is the same response time available to a customer whose mission critical work is abruptly halted due to a product malfunction — and a customer who is puzzled about a particular product feature? After all, both customers experience their situation as a problem.

Furthermore, even if "respond within four hours" actually meant "resolve within four hours," what in the world does resolve mean? Does it mean restoring service to its previous functionality by any means? What about solutions that can be implemented within four hours, but only at exorbitant expense? Must the resolution be a permanent fix? Do work-arounds count? What about temporary fixes that will keep the problem in check until the next release?

By the way, who determines that the problem has indeed been resolved? The provider? The customer? Both? By what means is it determined that the solution is satisfactory? And who is authorized to declare the problem closed?

Of or pertaining to

Clearly, these questions are not about mere dictionary definitions, but about how providers and customers intend to interact, communicate, and work together. As a result, almost every word in a service commitment bears examination for potential differences in interpretation, because clashing views about service delivery can often be traced to ambiguities such as these.

Actually, the dialog about the meanings of such service terminology is one of the most important facets of the communication between providers and customers. In fact, I've found that this dialog invariably leads to a wide-ranging discussion of how each party perceives service delivery. The result, when they've reached agreement, is a shared vocabulary that minimizes misunderstandings.

If you already have SLAs or other service commitments in use, I challenge you to review them and satisfy yourself that they adequately explain potentially ambiguous service terms. And if you're currently creating SLAs, beware of possible ambiguities and take care in explaining such terminology. Otherwise, gulp-inducing surprises are likely sooner or later. And that's the case, no matter how you define "sooner" and "later"! 

## FEEDBACK GATHERING

### More Oatmeal Raisin, Please

Service providers, take note: Many customers don't bother responding to your requests for feedback because they don't believe anyone pays attention to it. So if you truly want their feedback, demonstrate that you *are* paying attention. How? By providing feedback to them about their feedback to you.

Consider, for example, the approach used at a large cafeteria at a major university. It was there that I came across a delightfully low-tech approach for collecting meaningful feedback on a timely basis and sharing it with not only those who provided it, but all other patrons of this dining establishment as well.

In the center of this cafeteria was a small table on which was a stack of small slips of paper. A large sign invited people to provide feedback on the slips of paper and to post their comments on the adjacent bulletin board.

Among the numerous posted slips were complaints, compliments and questions. Complaints included the scarcity of clams in the clam chowder, delays at the cash register, and the out-of-applesauce condition at the salad bar. Compliments focused on the quality of the desserts and the cheerfulness of some of the cafeteria employees. And questions concerned whether a certain brand of jam could be provided and how the recently featured soup was made. Oh, yes, and when oh when would they ever serve oatmeal raisin cookies again?

Posting these comments publicly was clever because it enabled people to learn what pleased, bugged or puzzled their fellow diners, and encouraged people to post their own feedback. It also gave cafeteria management quick access to concerns and grievances, without the cost, effort and time-consuming hassle of a formal survey.

But what made this feedback-gathering process most valuable was that on the lower part of each slip, below the diner's input, was a response from cafeteria management. Responses ranged from "Thanks for letting us know" to "We're looking into it" to "See me for the recipe" to "Sorry, we can't please everyone."

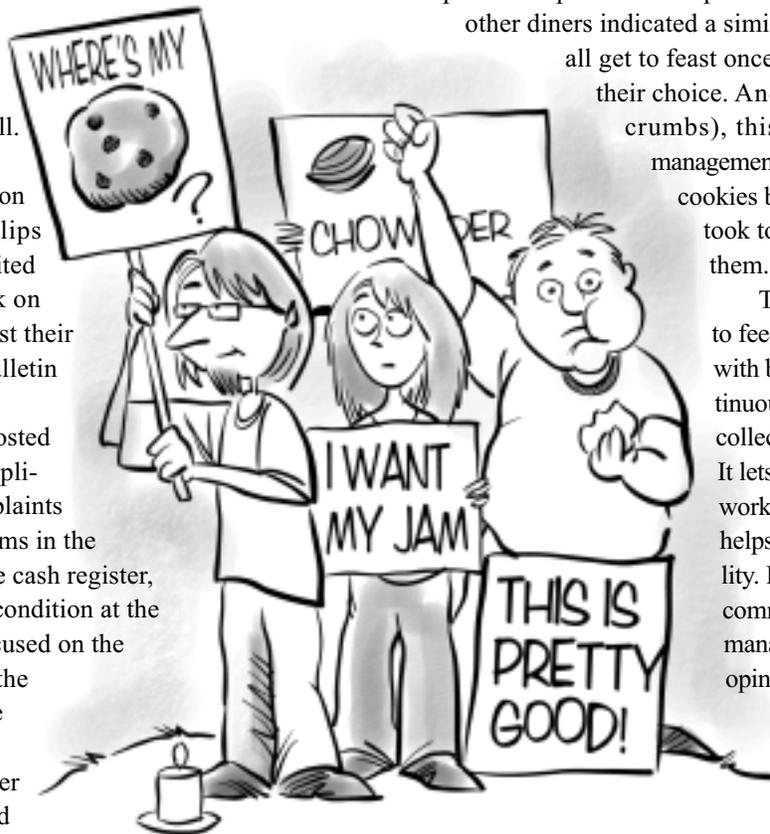
Plus the response that said, "We'll start offering them again if there is sufficient demand." That was the response to the oatmeal raisin fan. Although it may not have been the response that person had hoped for, it implied that if enough other diners indicated a similar preference, they might all get to feast once again on the cookies of their choice. And (reading between the crumbs), this response suggested that management had stopped offering these cookies because too few diners partook to justify continuing to offer them.

This bulletin board approach to feedback gathering abounds with benefits: It provides a continuous and ongoing method of collecting and sharing feedback. It lets management know what's working and what's not, and helps them improve service quality. It invites participation and communicates to customers that management cares about their opinions.

In addition, it provides an outlet for people to voice grievances about matters that are less than earth-shattering, yet

nevertheless deserve a response. And it provides a readily available forum for explaining to cafeteria diners why certain of their gustatory cravings can't be fulfilled.

Finally, it provides a way to call attention to other options that cafeteria patrons might not have considered. After all, if management can persuade oatmeal raisin fans to switch to those luscious, freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies, everyone wins.



## SERVICE TRACKING

## Objective and Subjective Tracking

In helping organizations create service level agreements, I often encounter a misconception about service tracking:

Some providers mistakenly believe that by tracking such service metrics as up-time, accuracy and turnaround time, they'll know how satisfied their customers are. But excellent service as reflected by these metrics may not translate into customer satisfaction if customers experience their providers as rude, impatient or arrogant. Conversely, customers who view their providers as friendly, enthusiastic, and attentive often declare themselves satisfied even if service has slipped below the commitments set forth in the SLA. Clearly, a well-designed tracking program requires the tracking of both objective indicators and subjective perceptions.

Note the difference between the two: Objective tracking reflects *what is* — that is, actual service delivery — by focusing on performance data generated by automated or manual measuring tools. By contrast, subjective tracking reflects *what is perceived* — that is, customer perceptions as they relate to service personnel attributes such as empathy, patience and courtesy, and product attributes such as ease of use, convenience, and accessibility. These perceptions often do more to influence customer satisfaction than what the measuring devices report.

## Tracking of subjective indicators

In doing subjective tracking, I recommend using a mix of feedback-gathering methods, such as:

-  Periodic customer surveys, which can be used to gather data from a large number of customers at one time
-  Service-specific assessments, which invite customers to rate service they've recently received
-  Customer interviews, which allow for in-depth, open-ended feedback

-  Evaluation of complaints, in order to identify, classify and resolve problems

Of these methods, I favor in-person interviews. In conducting service assessments for clients, I generally gain extensive, high-quality information about customer perceptions in as few as eight to ten interviews — although I may conduct additional interviews to ensure that I haven't missed any critical perspectives and to give additional customers a chance to have their say.

## Tracking of objective indicators

Of course, subjective tracking alone is insufficient. For example, if problem resolution time has steadily improved, but customers insist it's just as slow as six months ago, objective tracking can demonstrate the flaw in their perceptions.

In analyzing the data generated by objective tracking, I recommend reviewing patterns of service delivery over time, so as to identify looming problems, unusual variations, or circumstances warranting a closer look. For example, by examining several months of data, you can:

-  Determine whether a service slippage in a given month is an aberration or a persistent problem
-  Analyze variations in average monthly response time so as to improve overall response time and strive towards consistency
-  Detect seasonal, time-specific, or event-specific variations in volume so as to better anticipate peak periods and plan accordingly

Taken together, the tracking of objective indicators and subjective perceptions provide a comprehensive picture of service effectiveness. 

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