

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



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KARTEN

Speaker, Consultant, Author

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Tale of a Disgruntled Customer

Did you ever have the distinct displeasure of being a disgruntled, distressed, dissatisfied customer? I did recently. I had made a simple request that the service rep should have been able to handle in minutes. Her bungled efforts so annoyed me that I would have cancelled my account — except that that was exactly what I was trying to do in the first place: I was trying to cancel a service I no longer wanted.

Among other things, the service rep requested my address twice within minutes. She wasted my time asking irrelevant questions. She mumbled and fumbled, all the while repeating that she was pleased to be of assistance — which was ridiculous

since I was trying to cancel my account, not send the company a bucket of bills. After several iterations of previous iterations, she told

me I'd have to call a different number to get my account cancelled.

She was wrong. I had to call *three* different numbers, talk to three different people, get three different run-arounds, and hear all three describe how pleased they were to be able to help me, even as each of them referred me to one of the others. Maybe they were trying to wear me down so I'd discontinue my efforts to cancel my account; instead, thanks to this experience, I'll never again do business with this company.

You undoubtedly have your own sagas of spectacularly substandard service. So what can you do as a service provider to avoid having disgruntled customers? A few suggestions:

-  Carefully review your scripts for reasonableness. Telling customers once that you're pleased to be of assistance is fine. Telling them repeatedly is just plain annoying. Actions speak louder than you-know-whats.
-  Listen to the customer. Requesting the same information twice sends a clear message that you're not listening and don't care.
-  Don't ask irrelevant-sounding questions. But if it's information you need in order to help the customer, explain why you're asking.
-  When you need to refer the customer to other personnel, make sure they aren't sitting there just waiting to pass the customer back again. Most customers don't like being treated like volleyballs.
-  Recognize that sometimes, when the customer is angry, it's not because of a faulty product or service; it's because of the way they're being treated when they *call* about a faulty product or service.

Next time you have a negative experience as a customer, ask yourself what went wrong — and then make sure you do better for your own customers. 

COMMUNICATION

PositiveSpeak 101

A chap named Tony wasn't lacking for things to do. In fact, he had several projects in progress and an ample to-do list. But despite being a master craftsman, Tony had a serious flaw as a communicator: he was a master at putting a negative spin on things, telling customers what he couldn't do, rather than what he could. So when a prospective customer asked when he might be available, his response was, "Gee, I'm really sorry. I can't possibly be available for three months."

Worded this way, what the customer heard him say was, "Not now, not soon, no way, no, no, no!" Hardly a surprise, therefore, that the customer took his business elsewhere.

Certainly, Tony's response would have been appropriate if he didn't need the business, didn't want the business, or didn't care if he lost the revenue the project would have generated. But this was not the case. In fact, Tony's success depended on keeping new projects in the pipeline.

Consider, therefore, how much more positive his response would have sounded if he'd said, "Perfect timing! I expect to have some time available in only three months, and your project sounds like one I'd love to work on. How about if I send you some samples of work I've done that are similar to what you're looking for and you can begin to consider some of the options?"

Choosing your words vs. losing a customer
The words you use can make a huge difference in what customers hear and how they react. So if you can describe a situation in both a positive and a negative light — and both versions are truthful and non-deceptive — why not select the positive?

Here's another example: A plane I was on had some minor mechanical problems that delayed our departure. Minor though the problems were, the delay was major. Wisely, the pilot announced both the delay and his estimate of how long it would take to correct the problems. Just as his estimated departure time arrived, he came back on the loudspeaker and announced: "I'm really sorry to have to tell you this, but it's going to take us another ten minutes because we have to take care of the [blah-blah-blah-technomumble-jumble]."

Given that it was a matter of a mere ten minutes more after a lengthy wait, he might reasonably have said, "Good news! We're just about ready to depart. We have one final task to complete and we'll be on our way in about ten minutes."

See the difference? Why present something as bad news that can reasonably and honestly be presented as

good news — provided, of course, that you're not fiddling with the facts, tinkering with the truth, distorting the data, or seeking to mislead?

Making the negative positive

Once you start listening for situations like these, you'll hear them everywhere. Here's one final example: Many years ago, before I launched **Perceptions & Realities**, I used to write a 12-page monthly printed newsletter (a volume of output that I now find difficult to fathom).

As my publisher was preparing the very first issue, something happened that you may be familiar with: The schedule slipped. Due to my publisher's excellent marketing, subscriptions had been flowing in, but now the first issue wouldn't be ready for delivery by the promised date.

The words you use can make a huge difference in what customers hear and how they react.

My editor did the honorable thing and notified subscribers about the schedule slip. But how did she tell them? As though she had just graduated from NegativeSpeak 101, she wrote, "Some time ago you expressed interest in this newsletter. Unfortunately, there has been a delay in publication. You will receive your first issue shortly."

OK, not the worst thing in the world, and at least she was forthcoming about the delay. But how much more upbeat the message would have sounded if she'd said, "We're really excited. Our release of this newsletter has taken longer than we had hoped, but it's looking great. The first several issues will include articles on [this] [that] [the other thing], and we're eager to hear your reaction. We aim to get it to you by [new target date], so stay tuned."

Good news: a root canal!

Obviously, not every potentially-bad-news message can be expressed in good-news terms — at least, not without making you look foolish. ("We lost your room reservation! But what great luck — we're going to put you up at the Slovenly Inn in Faraway Town at our expense.") But if you pay attention to how you phrase your announcements, news and informational messages, you might find you can rephrase some of them in more enthusiastic, upbeat terms. And given the positive tone, don't be surprised if customers are more than willing to accept the conditions and situations you've described.



USABILITY

The Hole Thing

There's been a lot of punching around here lately. Of holes, that is. In paper. In fact, my three-hole punch had been working overtime and finally started balking at the idea of punching all three holes. First it stopped at two holes, then one. When it refused to punch anything at all, I could take a hint.

I bought a new hole punch and it's a delight to use. It punches three holes at a time every time. It handles 20 sheets at a time as easily as one. Its parts move smoothly and easily. Punching has never been so easy.

It turns out, though, that this hole punch has a minor flaw. One that somehow didn't get caught during testing. Not a hole-punching flaw, per se, but a flaw related to the meanderings of the holes after they've been punched. It seems there are openings in the punch so that if you move it, say, from one desk to another, and tip it ever so slightly in the process, punched holes spill out all over the place.

I can't understand why it was built this way. Given that the bottom of the punch is designed to be removed so that the accumulated paper pieces can be discarded, why have openings from which they will accidentally pour out?

In the scheme of things, this isn't the most egregious problem I've ever encountered. At least the

holes that spew out fall to the floor in interesting patterns. (I just tell people it's how I decorate my office floor. Don't you decorate your office floor?)

I've been imagining the testing process this punch probably went through. Most likely, it was tested for durability (it doesn't fall apart when dropped), punching strength (20 sheets at a time, no sweat) and endurance (it can probably punch holes in a billion sheets without showing signs of wear, though I'll never know). But it doesn't

appear to have been adequately tested in a real-world environment — such as one in which, from time to time, it's not only moved from point A to point B, but moved by someone who, like me, sometimes fails to keep things perfectly horizontal while in motion.

I've concluded that either the hole punch testing was faulty or the testers encountered the flaw and management decided it wasn't cost-effective to fix. Maybe they decided that we, the customers of the world, wouldn't notice. Or wouldn't care. Or wouldn't make a fuss over spilled holes.

People who design things often seem to do so based on what they see as important, not what's important to their customers. I'm not talking just about hole punches here. I'm

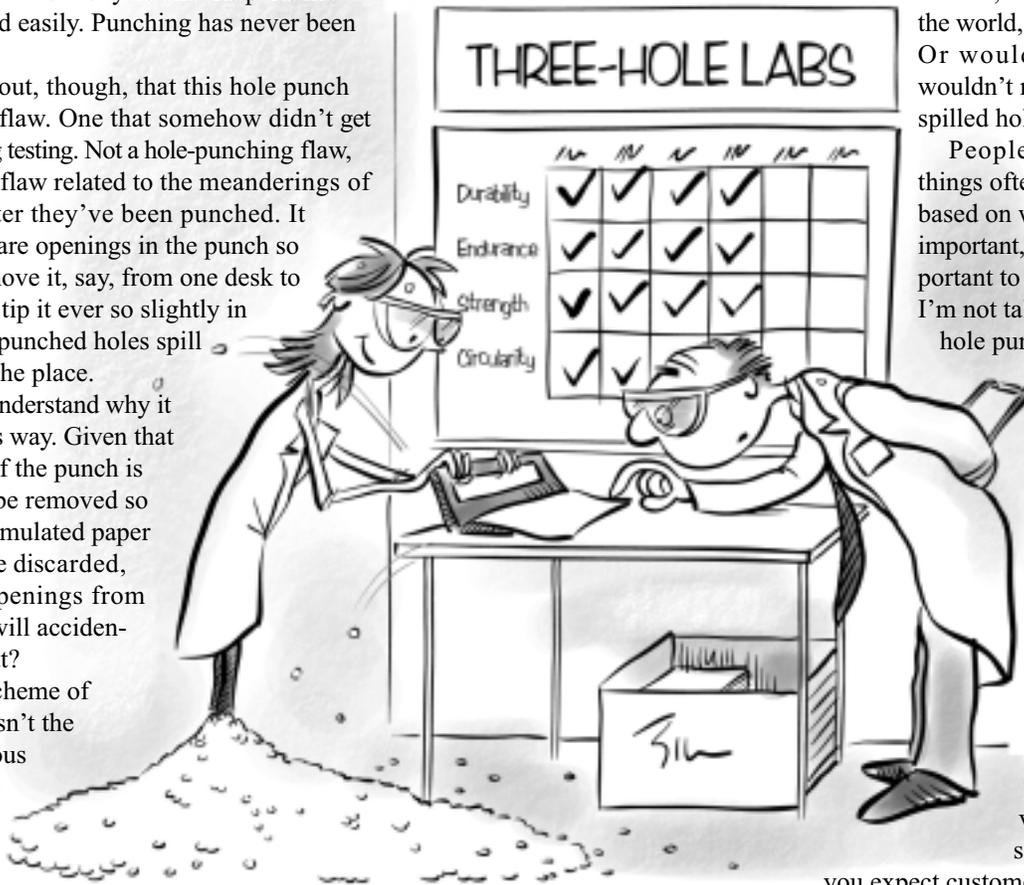
talking about software with cryptic error messages, and gadgets that require an advanced degree to use, and instructions written in gibberish. I'm also talking about anything you yourself are involved in designing where

you expect customers to comfortably

use it, and perhaps even understand it.

Do your customers ever misuse your products? If so, are you sure you gave them an adequate opportunity, before implementation, to perform their own assessment? Did you solicit their feedback about whether the product is usable? Do you ask them whether they can follow the instructions? Did you invite them to identify what they perceive as flaws, not just in the lab, but as they might use the product everyday?

Doing so would be a more hole-istic approach.



INFORMATION GATHERING

What To Do When You're Certain

Here's a situation I recently read about. The parents of a child with a serious medical condition were having her admitted to the hospital for treatment.

But her admission was delayed because a matter of concern to the parents wasn't being addressed as they wished. The doctor in charge approached the parents to inquire about the problem. After some prodding, the parents explained that they didn't want their daughter tended to by the student doctor assigned to the case.

Upon hearing this complaint, the doctor launched into a detailed response. He told the parents that he understood how they might feel uncomfortable with a student doctor, but that many others — interns, residents, and he himself — would be caring for their daughter. He reminded them that this was a teaching hospital. "This is how we train physicians," he pointed out. He explained that this is how he himself was trained as a medical student and intern and how he learned to do what was necessary in taking care of their daughter. That's how physicians learn, he emphasized.

The "ignore the problem" syndrome
Did you react as I did upon reading the doctor's response? My immediate thought was: How do you know that your response has anything to do with what the parents are concerned about?

It's an easy mistake to make, and one most of us are guilty of at times. Upon hearing the problem statement — the parents didn't want the student doctor to care for their daughter — the doctor assumed he understood what was troubling them. Without seeking any confirming information, he launched into an eloquent defense of teaching hospitals. All well and good — provided it addressed the parents' concern.

But if his assumption was wrong, then his response wasted his time and theirs. Worse, it risked further upsetting people who were already in a state of anxiety. Alienating dissatisfied customers is not a surefire route to winning them over, particularly when they're already under considerable stress.

Before responding, clarify

Instead of immediately responding to a problem statement, a better approach is to first ask yourself if you're sure you understand what the problem is. If your answer is no, then you need to ask some clarifying questions. But if you're sure you understand what the problem really is, ask yourself:

If I were *unsure*, what would I ask?

The doctor had lots of options for soliciting additional information from the parents. For example, he might have asked, "What is it about the student that concerns you?" Or he might have said, "What do you mean?" or "Say more about that." Or he could have just said, "I'm not sure I understand" or "I don't follow." You can probably come up with several other questions or statements he could have used to prompt the parents to elaborate on their concern.

Certainly, I'm uncertain

Certainty can be a dangerous thing when it leads us to jump to conclusions, to assume we know what others are thinking, to play mind-reader. It's in situations of absolute certainty that we're most likely to be wrong or at least misguided. And so it was with the doctor. Articulate though his defense of teaching hospitals was, it had nothing to do with the parents' concern.

Their concern, which they then explained (and which a simple "I don't understand" would have yielded) wasn't with student doctors in general, but with the specific student doctor assigned to their daughter's case. His attitude and appearance worried them, and they wanted him removed from the case. Whether their request was valid or not, their explanation enabled the doctor to respond based on the actual issue rather than the one he had assumed to be the case.

Bottom line: If in doubt, clarify. And if certain, clarify, clarify, clarify. 

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