

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



NAOMI


KARTEN

Speaker, Consultant, Author

VOL. 8 No. 2

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The Waiting (and Waiting) Room

One aspect of delivering superior service is managing your customers' perception of your service. This is not a trivial matter; their perception can strongly influence their satisfaction level. A medical office study I once heard about provides a fascinating example. This study found that when, upon entering the examining room, the doctor smiled, exhibited a friendly manner, and made immediate eye contact, patients' estimates of the time they spent waiting dropped by half.

Now, I don't know about you, but I can't imagine having my estimate of how long I've waited influenced by a doctor's

friendliness. Nevertheless, I recall an experience in which the doctor's manner immediately improved my attitude about what had initially seemed like an interminable wait. The situation was this: After

a minor condition escalated into a Nasty Nuisance, I called my doctor first thing in the morning for an appointment. He was on vacation, I was told, but if I could come in at 3:30 that afternoon, one of his office-mates would see me.

I arrived at the appointed time. Naturally, I had to wait. I've never understood why a doctor's office staff can't notify patients when it's certain the doctor will be delayed. But given the doctor's willingness to see me that very day, I resolved to try to be a patient patient. Still, I waited a l-o-n-g time. Finally, a nurse guided me into the examining room, where I waited an additional long time.

At length, the doctor appeared, and to my amazement, he apologized profusely for keeping me waiting. I told him I appreciated his willingness to see me after a near-endless day. He said he nevertheless felt bad that he had kept me waiting so long.

Had this doctor just graduated from Bedside Manner 101? Was it perchance Be Kind to Patients Day? Or could it be that this attentiveness to patients was his normal behavior? I had never seen him before and didn't know. But because of his warm and gracious manner, I was willing to ignore the delay.

Hardly anyone likes to be kept waiting. Sometimes, though, the only way you can give current customers adequate attention and reasonable service is to make other customers wait. In such circumstances, the way you treat those who've had to wait can make a big difference in how satisfied they are with your service. If your customers have ever complained about the time they've spent waiting for your help (or even if they haven't), try exhibiting the same sort of caring behavior that this doctor did.

Don't make customers wait if you can avoid it. But when circumstances leave you no choice, exhibit a friendly manner, make immediate eye contact, smile, and offer a sincere apology. You may find your customers willing to forgive and forget.



INFORMATION GATHERING

Ask Appropriately and Ye Shall Receive

To learn as much as possible about customers' needs, skilled interviewers use several types of questions and statements, such as those listed below. Used in combination, these types of questions can generate more information and better quality information than if you simply ask "What do you need?"

1. Probing questions help you learn more about the problem or situation under discussion. For example:

- "Can you give me some examples of your concerns with the current approach?"
- "What does your past experience suggest we should consider in tackling this project?"

Probing questions are open-ended, tell-me-more questions that prompt the customer for additional information. Focus on questions that will help you assess your customers' experience, concerns, hopes and fears.

2. Clarifying questions help you double-check your understanding of what the customer has told you. For example:

- "Do I understand correctly that what you're saying is . . .?"
- "When you say there are communication problems, what do you mean?"

Questions such as these improve the odds that you catch errors in your understanding. In addition, they signal that you're really listening and prompt the customer to add information.

3. Process questions help you ensure that the customer is comfortable with the way you're conducting the interview. Just a few such questions suffice. For example:

- "Do you have any concerns about what we've discussed so far?"

- "Would you like a little time to mull it over?"

Process questions tell customers that they have a say about the conduct of the interview. These questions help to put your customer at ease — and customers who are at ease are more likely to be forthcoming with helpful information than those who feel like they're undergoing an interrogation.

4. Empathetic questions and statements are a simple and very effective way to exhibit a sense of caring during the interview. For example:

- "Are you as busy as it looks like?"
- "It sounds like you're constantly juggling priorities."

Just a little bit of empathy can go a long way in making a human connection. And it's not unusual for customers to respond to expressions of empathy with, "You're right, and as a matter of fact, . . ." thus giving you additional pertinent information that you might not have obtained otherwise.

5. What-if questions invite customers to consider hypothetical situations. For example:

- "If I were to pose the same question to your staff members, how might they respond?"
- "If you could eliminate one impediment in this project, what would it be?"

Questions such as these invite customers to speculate about factors that could affect your success in working with them. Responses may give you insight into important issues that might not have surfaced otherwise.

When you can smoothly incorporate these types of questions into your customer interviews, you will be pleased with the amount and quality of information that you generate. 

Perceptions & Realities

ISSN 1079-5952

Illustrations by Mark Tatro, Rotate Graphics, www.rotategraphics.comDesigned and typeset by *Bartleby Scriveners*, bartleby@rcn.com

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CLIENT RELATIONS

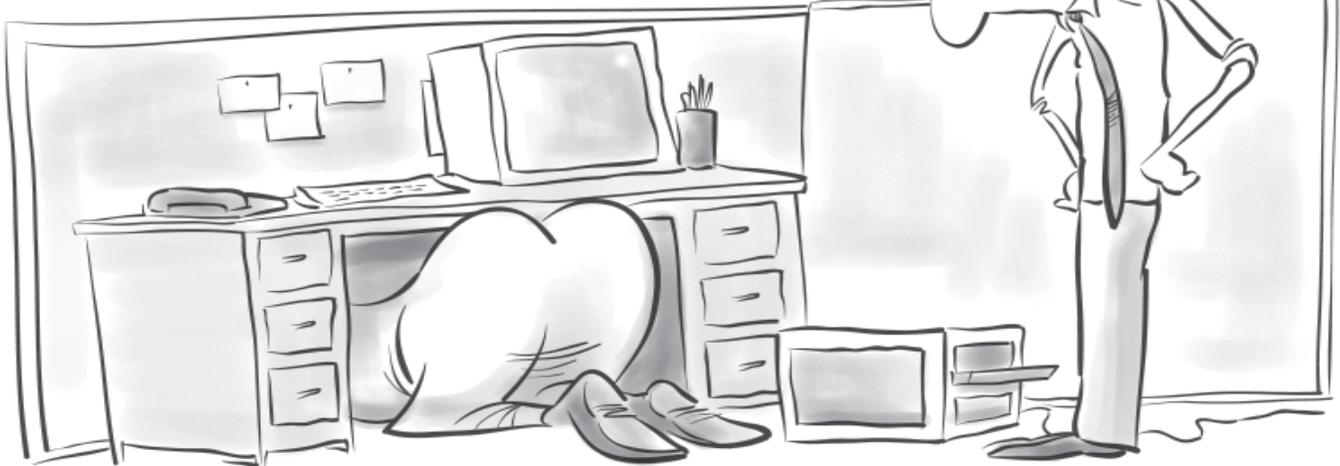
Service with No Ifs, Ands or Butts

Being a customer can be so frustrating, especially when you send a request for help and get no response. For example, here's an email message sent by Chris, a business department employee, to the company's internal tech support department:

"We were advised that we could request a bookcase for our group printer. We did this some time ago, *but we have yet to receive any kind of confirmation or response.* The dedicated PC and keyboard for our group printer are located on the floor under my desk. This causes me difficulties when it needs to be rebooted (which is almost every day) as I have arthritis in my knees."

I added the italics in the above message, in case the critical sentence fragment didn't jump out at you.

It's not hard to empathize with the plight of someone who must do a painful low crawl almost every day. But even if you're a perfect physical specimen (and your computer *doesn't* need a daily reboot), when you submit a request for help, you're justified in expecting a response.



Some response. *Any* response. Receiving a response gives you something to know rather than something to fuss and fume about. Most customers prefer to be informed that their service provider can't do what they want than to be told nothing at all. The absence of a response — or any idea of whether they'll ever receive a response — drives people crazy.

Often, in my Managing Customer Expectations seminars, I ask participants to describe negative experiences they've had as customers. A disproportionate number of the experiences they describe are about a lack of responsiveness on the part of their suppliers, vendors, service providers, colleagues, and others. Sadly, their stories are not unique. Most of us

want others to return our calls and answer our email requests for help. We quite reasonably want those serving us to keep us informed about matters that will affect us and to let us know if something has changed in what we've agreed to. It's natural to want these things when *you're* the customer. But what about when you're on the other side? How would you rate your responsiveness to your customers?

One of the most important things you can do to help both your customers and yourselves is to document your services. Many groups that deliver services to customers have done a less than adequate job of this. Yet, by describing your services, including procedures for obtaining those services and the timeframes and conditions under which the services are (and are not) available, your customers would be better informed about what they can reasonably expect.

Of course, customers have responsibilities too. For

example, in the sad saga of the bookcase, Chris might have ensured that the email request was submitted to the right group — just in case supplying bookcases was the domain of the facilities department or the purchasing department or the Spare-Furniture-R-Us department, rather than the tech support group. Chris might also have contacted the support department by phone rather than relying on email. Talking with someone might have revealed an explanation for why no response had been forthcoming. It may even have resulted in some information about the whereabouts of an available bookcase.

Good service takes effort on behalf of both parties. No butts about it!



CUSTOMER SERVICE

My Name is George, and I'll Be Your Nuisance Tonight

There's a hotel near my office which is a popular site for business meetings and conferences. It's part of a hotel chain that prides itself on its service, and it shows. I've given presentations and attended numerous events at this hotel chain, and I've been impressed with the staff's attentiveness and responsiveness.

But when I visited the hotel restaurant recently for a dinner meeting, something was different. I sensed that hotel management had implemented some new customer service initiatives when I noticed signs stating how important customer service is to them. Signs like this have always struck me as curious, because if you provide good service, you don't need a sign to tell people you're doing it. And if your service is dreadful, displaying a sign won't fool people into seeing it as otherwise. If anything, it'll emphasize the disparity between the service as promised and as delivered.

How may I interrupt you this evening?

As soon as my client and I were seated, we were approached by an obnoxious waiter. I don't know much about restaurantology, but I know what I don't like, and I knew as soon as the

waiter started to speak that I wasn't going to like him. He was too effervescent and bubbly. He was excessively and effusively gracious. He was quite simply too eager to be at our service.

After he brought our dinners, he hovered, lavishing unwanted attention on us. He kept interrupting us to find out if everything was OK, which it was except for his interruptions to find out if everything was OK. It should have been obvious that we were engaged in serious conversation. But he was so busy attending to our needs that he failed to notice that we didn't have any.

To serve or not to serve: that is the question. Being customer-oriented means knowing when and how to serve customers. It also means knowing when and how *not* to. Just saying you care about customer service isn't enough, nor is posting signs in every nook and cranny. And overdoing it, as this waiter did, is just as bad as underdoing it.

Of course, we could have asked the waiter to back off, but this experience was clearly a story in the making, so I began taking mental notes right from his opening, gushy, smily-faced, "And how are you this evening?" I just knew that he was destined to be featured on this page. 

PERSUASION SKILLS

You Can Read This Article in Four Minutes

Does this title help you decide if you have time to read this article? If you want to inspire people to read material they might otherwise ignore (not that this newsletter falls into that category, of course), tell them roughly how long it will take them to read it.

For example, a user manual I saw stated in its opening paragraph, "This guide takes only 15 minutes to read from cover to cover. In only 15 minutes, you'll know everything you need to get started in using the network." It actually took me well under 15 minutes to read, though as an ex-techie, I may have been able to read it faster than a nervous network novice.

It takes 2 seconds to read this heading

You can use this idea to your advantage in improving the odds that people read your procedures, instructions and guidelines. In applying the idea:

1. Keep time chunks to 20 minutes. If you can't write it so they can read it in 20 minutes, it's too long. ("Attention:

This chapter on Sleep-Inducing Regulations takes 9 hours to read.") A lot of material takes more than 20 minutes, of course, but you can design each chunk to take less. In fact, aim for six-minute chunks. Almost everyone can spare six minutes, as long as they don't have to do it ten or twelve times an hour.

2. Estimate high. There's something about seeing a time estimate that makes some people (me, for example) wonder whether they can do it faster. By specifying a reading time that's longer than your estimate, most readers will finish faster and pat themselves on the back. Anyway, it works for me.

3. Use attention-getting stickers. For example, make up stickers that say: "Reading time: 5 minutes" and apply them to material you want people to read (provided, of course, that 5 minutes is a valid estimate). Try this idea with material you prepare for customers, co-workers, and even your management. It'll catch their attention and improve the odds that they read it.

So how long did it take you to read this article? It took me two minutes. I sure do feel good about that. 