

# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



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Speaker, Consultant, Author

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## What's Unique About You?

**Y**ou probably have several open-ended, tell-me-more questions that you like to ask customers when you're seeking to understand their needs. A question I've found particularly effective in drawing useful information from customers is the "What's unique about?" question. For example: What's unique about this problem? What's unique about your current process? What's unique about your particular responsibilities? What's unique about the way management makes decisions here? What's unique about your company relative to your competitors?

### INFORMATION GATHERING

The reason questions such as these work so well is that people often see their situation as more unusual, exceptional, or noteworthy than everyone else's. And they see their problems as

bigger, more troublesome, and more idiosyncratic.

Of course, what customers see as unique may be something you've seen dozens of times elsewhere. But whether what any customer sees as unique actually is or not is irrelevant. If that's how the customer experiences it, that makes the perception valid for that customer. And customers who perceive their situation as unique — or tough or demanding or complicated — often want more than anything else for others to understand, acknowledge and appreciate the unusual nature of what they're coping with.

The result is that when asked a "what's unique about?" question, customers often respond at length, revealing pertinent particulars that they may not have thought to tell you otherwise and that you may not have known to ask about. For example, in responding to a "what's unique about?" question that I posed to a client, she told me more about her organization's structure, decision-making process, politics, project snafus, and sources of frustration — from her perspective, of course — than I might ever have learned if I had relied on more narrowly focused questions.

What's unusual about your uniqueness?

You can vary the wording of the questions in numerous ways to broaden the "what's unique about?" angle, such as by asking:

- What's unusual about the process you use?
- What's particularly troublesome about this situation?
- What's especially challenging about the way people interact here?
- What's the hardest aspect of managing this team?
- What's the biggest dilemma you face?

If you pose these questions to people in different groups and at different levels in the organization, don't be surprised if their responses vary widely. What's dependably not at all unique is how differently they view what makes their situation unique.

## LISTENING

## Carrot-Chomping and Milkshake Slurping!

It's easy to give the impression that you're not listening even when you are. I discovered this in one of my seminars when Terry, a participant, made a key point, and I started riffling through my material to find a quote that reinforced the point. Afterwards, in an evaluation form, I found the comment that when I was flipping through my material while Terry was talking, it looked like I wasn't listening.

"Oh, but I was listening," I thought, quickly rising to my own defense. I'd heard everything Terry said. But it didn't matter. I had given someone the impression that I wasn't listening, and if one person had that reaction, others may have as well.

I'm now more conscientious about how I look when I'm listening. I think of this aspect of listening — the impression you convey that you *are* listening — as persuasive listening. So what about you? Do you listen persuasively? Because if your customers perceive that you're not listening, they may react accordingly.

For example, they might shut down, withholding the very information you need to help them. Or, conversely, they might raise their voice to the deadly decibel level in an attempt to get your attention. As trivial as the appearance of non-listening might seem, it can undermine your ability to successfully assess needs, solve problems, and build strong relationships with your customers — and with all others with whom you interact.

Still, we all have preferred styles of listening. Some people look at the ceiling when they're listening. Others hear better

by turning their head so their ear is closer to the speaker. Sometimes, people can concentrate best if they close their eyes (though snoring may signify a more advanced level of concentration). Many people can listen attentively while carrying out 47 other tasks. But how do these listening styles affect those who are speaking? Most people are unaware of their listening style and its possible negative impact on the person who is speaking.

Might your customers ever feel discouraged, annoyed or resentful when they're speaking to you? If

so, try to become a more persuasive listener. Make eye contact. Occasionally play back what you've heard. Ask clarifying questions. If you need to take notes to retain what you're hearing, first explain why you're doing so, and ask if it's OK. The other person will invariably say yes.

Most important, *stop whatever else you're doing and pay attention.*

Use all these listening tips in moderation; intense, prolonged eye contact can be even more annoy-

ing than none at all. And since many of these signs of listening vary from one country to another and one culture to another, learn about the variations if you travel elsewhere or interact with people from other cultures, so as not to cause offense.

More important than exhibiting just the right level of eye contact or verbal responsiveness is simply appreciating the serious impact that apparent non-listening can have. If a good relationship with your customers and others is important to you, make it your responsibility to ensure that those you speak to see you as attentive and fully focused on what they're saying. Simply stop, look and . . . 



## MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

## To B or Not To B

While en route to present a class in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, I had to change planes in Denver. On arrival in Denver, I checked the departure monitor for my connecting flight. There it was, Gate B52 at 3:20 p.m. Just as I expected. It was a short flight on a tiny plane. I had taken many such flights from Denver and they had all departed from B gates numbered in the 50's.

Having time to kill, I wandered around, periodically re-checking the monitor in case of a gate or time change. Nope, still B52 at 3:20.

At 2:50, a half-hour before my flight, I moseyed to Gate B52. Strangely, the flight information wasn't yet posted. And no service agents were in sight. Hmmmm. But I knew that flights on tiny planes often board right at departure time, so the service agents were surely on their way, and we'd soon be Scottsbluff-bound.

Finally, at 3:00, the flight information was posted.

But wait a minute. It said: San Francisco, departing 4:15. San Francisco? 4:15? I checked the departure monitor again: Scottsbluff, B52 at 3:20. How could this be? I quickly checked the nearby gates, but they all displayed other destinations.

And now it was 3:10. *Something was very wrong.* Once more, I checked the departure monitor. And that's when I saw.....

Ohnooooooo!!

My departure gate wasn't B52, *it was A52!* Up till now, the monitor had said B52. I'm sure of it. I'm absolutely positive. But now it said A52! And I was *very far* from A52, even at run-like-crazy speed. The next day, I was scheduled to present a Managing Client Expectations seminar, and one of the

keys to managing *my* client's expectations was showing up!! Imagine having to explain that I'm alphabetically challenged???

Off I went, hurrying, scurrying and worrying, doing the airport slalom, swerving around people, veering this way and that while setting a personal best for inter-terminal travel. 3:11. . . . 3:12 . . . . 3:13. . . .

Have you ever had a dream where you try to run, but your legs barely move? Despite huffin' and puffin' regularly at the gym, I quickly became winded; of course, on the treadmill, I don't carry a computer and carry-on bag. 3:14 . . . . 3:15 . . . . 3:16 . . . .



Reaching Gate A52 entailed racing through Concourse B, then hippety-hopping down two escalators, then impatiently awaiting the train to Concourse A (the 45-second wait was twice as long as Forever), then riding to Concourse A, then dashing up two escalators (each slower than the other), then speeding to the end of Concourse A. Whereupon I discovered that A52 was actually downstairs at ground level. And my gate wasn't just A52, it was A52, door H, each door serving a particular tiny plane.

It was 3:19. I raced downstairs and gasped my way to door H. The plane was still there. Whew! It was 3:20 on the dot.

Alas, I had fallen victim to the "believing is seeing" syndrome. Once my heart rate slowed to a normal thumpety-thump and I reflected on the situation, I realized that when I first looked at the monitor, I saw what I expected to see, a B gate. It fit my mental model of how things were. And once I "saw" B52, I kept seeing it each time I checked even when the facts suggested otherwise. Has this ever happened to you?

In preparation for future travels, I'm taking a remedial course in my ABCs.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE

## Are You Happy Just Reading This Article?

It's an interaction that occurs regularly in retail establishments: The salesperson asks, "Do you need any help?" and the customer responds, "No, just looking." This perfunctory exchange ends quickly with the customer's go-away-sounding No. Yet with just a slight modification, the tone of this exchange could be reversed so that the sales staff convey a positive, customers-matter service attitude. Here's how one store that I visited did just that.

As I looked at this item and that, adding up what I was saving by not buying anything, the inevitable salesperson approached me. I readied my "No, just looking" response. But I was taken by surprise; instead of asking, "Do you need any help?", she asked, "Do you need any help, or are you happy just looking?"

"I'm happy just looking," I responded. What a pleasant

variation on the usual theme. In phrasing the question as she did, the salesperson was conveying the store's service orientation: customers who are just looking are welcome. And in responding as I did, I heard myself exclaim that I was happy to be there — and realized I really was. The sales staff in this store understand that today's Lookers may become tomorrow's Spenders — as I did a few days later when I dipped into my "savings" to make a purchase.

Don't go away mad, just . . . stay and enjoy yourself. Think about your interactions with your own customers. Can you identify interactions that occur perfunctorily or have negative overtones? If so, can you transform them so that they convey your service orientation and allow customers to respond affirmatively? 

## SERVICE STRATEGIES

## Gone Fishing, Back at 3:00

At 9:00 a.m. one Thursday during a visit to a faraway city, I found this sign on the outside door of the main library. "We open a half-hour later on Thursdays to give our staff an opportunity for training." I didn't know about this delayed opening time, so I had arrived too early. But I appreciated the fact that management allowed time for staff training.

Several customer support groups have told me about their frustration with a lack of time for their own skills enhancement. They explain that always having to be available to customers leaves them no time for their own training. And time for cross-training is out of the question, putting them in an uncomfortable, oh-no-what-do-I-do-now position when they need to fill in for each other.

Time for a time out?

This library provided a wonderful example of one way to deal with this problem: Build time for training into your schedule.

If you're forthright about the fact that you need this time, and you let your customers know about it in advance, most of them will accept your temporary lack of availability.

Try this low-risk experiment. Notify customers that in order to serve them better, your group will be undergoing internal training for a few hours on a specified day, and you'll be unavailable during that time. Explain how they can reach you in the event of a genuine emergency. To ensure that people get the notification, make it available via voice mail, email and both electronic and thumb-tack-oriented bulletin boards. Then use the allocated time wisely, just in case it's the last chance you ever get.

If your experiment indicates that the world didn't collapse as a result of your brief absence, and you decide to schedule such training time-outs every so often, most customers will adapt just fine. (Caution: just don't come back with a sun tan!) 

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