

# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



N A M I

K A R T E N

Speaker, Consultant, Author

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## Specializing in helping organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Deliver superior service
- Improve communications
- Build trusting, supportive relationships

## Author of:

- *Managing Expectations*
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## Curing the Jabber Jabbers

**T**he Jabber Jabbers is an affliction that sometimes strikes people who have important information to share and an eagerness to share it. What happens is that these good-hearted people first encourage their listeners to ask questions; then they act in a way that stifles those very listeners. For example:

- A senior manager gave a presentation to customers to explain the complex computer system her team was developing for them. Before she began, she told them they could ask questions at any point. **COMMUNICATION** Then she launched into a fast-paced, jargon-filled, catch-me-if-you-can presentation. She later told me she couldn't understand why no one asked any questions.

- An instructor periodically stopped abruptly during his class and asked students if they had any questions. After waiting a full quarter-second, he resumed his teaching. He concluded that students must have "gotten it" the first time through since they asked so few questions.

- A doctor told me he was going to explain his recommendations and I could feel free to ask questions. Then he talked non-stop. Jabber jabber. That's what it sounded like. Not to be deterred, I interrupted him repeatedly, but each question I asked seemed like an intrusion into his fact-filled spoutings.

### Jabber . . . pause . . . jabber . . . pause . . .

Assuming that these people were genuinely willing to answer questions, what might they have done differently?

The senior manager could have spoken more slowly to make her information easier to absorb. And she might have stopped at intervals and explicitly invited questions. The instructor might have scheduled a Q&A period after each segment, or provided quiet time for students to reflect on what they'd heard and to identify their questions. If he wanted to stop periodically to ask if they had any questions, he should have done just that. He should have stopped. And waited for several l-o-n-g moments, so that those who needed time to organize their thoughts could do so.

And if the doctor had allowed several seconds of silence after each sentence, I could have inserted my questions. (This, of course, won't work with people whose entire discourse is one interminable sentence!) Or he might have periodically asked what questions I had. Then I wouldn't have had to compete for air time.

People who really do welcome questions need to make sure their behavior supports their good intentions. Any questionsjabberjabberblahblahlahyakketyak-guessnotI'lljustcontinue.

## CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

## The Perception of Improvements

**W**hen an organization with a bad case of customer dissatisfaction takes major steps to reverse the situation, customers ought to be happy — or at least less *unhappy*. Yet, often, customers continue to grumble and grouse. Why? Because of what I've dubbed the perceptual lag. That is, the perception of an improvement often lags far behind the reality of that improvement.

If you're striving to improve customer satisfaction, you might reasonably consider this perceptual lag to be unfair, and you'd be right. But it's a fact of life, and once you become aware of the lag, you can take steps to minimize or prevent it. One of the best ways to do this is to publicize the improvements to the customers who've agitated for them or will benefit from them.

### A lag lesson

Consider, for example, a company I'll call HodgePodge Corp. whose customers had been contending with service snags, slips and snafus. These customers were internal business units, and they would have gladly obtained the services on the outside if they had that option. But they didn't. They felt trapped and were very unhappy.

At length, inspired by the determination of new management to right the wrongs, the service group undertook a major series of improvements. Over the course of a year and with significant effort, they accomplished a great deal. They were justifiably proud of the changes they'd made and badly needed a pat on the back from their customers.

Yet, when they ran a customer satisfaction survey, the ratings barely surpassed the ratings in the previous year's survey. In reviewing the results of the two surveys, I could see how unhappy many customers still were. Even customers who felt that service was on the upswing rated it far from optimal. HodgePodge service personnel were devastated. Despite all they had accomplished, their customers seemed to neither notice nor appreciate their efforts.

Although customers may be swift to complain, they're usually much slower to notice changes made as a result of those complaints. As in HodgePodge's experience, what customers saw wasn't what was fixed, but what was still broken. Actually, that's not surprising: If customers have endured an extended period of shoddy service, they adopt a "prove it" mentality and require an even longer period of consistently good service before they believe it's real and enduring.

### A lag avoidance strategy

A major reason that customers don't notice service improvements is that provider personnel have done a lackadaisical job of publicizing the improvement effort and the benefits of the implemented improvements. In most organizations, this public relations function falls short or, more often, is non-existent. As a result, even if customers recognize that things have gotten better, time has passed and they don't associate the improvement with the complaint they had voiced.

To minimize the perceptual lag, start by identifying customer grievances. Use surveys, customer interviews, a review of service records, and other methods of your choice. Summarize the grievances into a small number of categories. Identify specific actions you can take for each category, or at least those deemed highest priority. Then put on your public relations hat and notify customers about your proposed plan for making improvements. Involve key customers in evaluating and finalizing the plan, so they'll have a stake in your success. Let them know the part they can play in helping you help them.

Make sure customers are aware of the improvements you're working on. Report your progress regularly, and keep making the linkage between their grievances and the action you're taking. When you've made a change, inform them, remind them, then tell them again. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Don't let them not know. And while you're at it, be forthcoming in acknowledging that there's much left to do.

### Above all, communicate your concern

Supplement these activities with as much face-to-face contact with customers as possible. When service has slipped, what customers often want as much as anything else is to know you take their needs seriously. Visiting them is time-consuming, but it pays great dividends. In fact, personal attention often leads to higher ratings in subsequent surveys, even in the absence of service improvements. And if on-site visits aren't feasible, make the phone your friend. Resist the urge to rely entirely on email for maintaining contact with disgruntled customers.

If you have deliriously happy customers, the perceptual lag is a problem you'll never face. But if you're still working toward that goal, learn the lesson of HodgePodge Corp., and do everything you can to limit the lag.



## MEASUREMENT

## Are You in Data Denial?

**A**s psychology majors many eons ago, my husband Howard and I took a course in experimental methods with a professor who was always telling us, “The data are trying to tell you something.” Little did we appreciate that this was not just laboratory wisdom.

Years later, we were driving home from Vermont on a drizzly, dreary Sunday when the car started acting funny (a technical term meaning something is wrong and I don’t know what). Then the dashboard began to glow with indicator lights. We should have stopped immediately. Instead, we continued to the next exit and the first available repair shop. The result? A cracked block and a major repair bill. Oh, and a hotel bill since the repair shop was closed on Sunday. And a car rental bill, so we could get home while our car was in the shop and back again to retrieve it.

Afterwards (long afterwards, when we were able to laugh about it), we reflected on the wisdom of our professor’s statement: If you ignore the data — the numbers, indicator lights, customer complaints, project glitches, recurring outages, or other evidence of a looming problem — you could misinterpret or miss signs of trouble and suffer uncomfortable or expensive consequences. Such as getting stranded in a tiny Vermont town on a cold, damp Sunday.

If you work with customers, you probably don’t have indicator lights that flash to signal something is wrong. That’s why it’s important to continually gather and assess service data so that you can identify patterns and trends, and know both what’s working and what needs adjustment. When an incident occurs that deviates from the norm, it could be a sign that something is seriously wrong. And the best course

of action may be to cease what you’re doing, and ask: “Are the data trying to tell me something?”

The *absence* of a familiar pattern is also data. For example, if an enterprise-wide software upgrade normally leads to an immediate surge in demand for help, and you’ve yet to receive a single inquiry regarding Monday’s upgrade, the absence of reported problems is itself data. This response could signify anything from a well-thought-out upgrade plan to customers so dismayed by another botched upgrade that they no longer bother to contact you. A significant departure from what’s customary certainly bears investigating.

Despite the importance of service data, many groups either don’t collect any, or they do little or no analysis of what they’ve collected. For example, many organizations that conduct customer satisfaction surveys don’t analyze the findings and modify their service strategies accordingly. Similarly, many help desks use

the oodles of data they collect to service customer calls, but not to gain insight into changing patterns, unusual deviations, or opportunities to provide better service. Training departments

tend to track “countables” — number of people trained, number of new course offerings, and so on — rather than seeking evidence of business value with which to justify their services to management. And once their project is done, many project teams don’t track how much additional time they spend re-doing and fixing and patching so that things function the way they ought to.

Are you in data denial? Remember, ignorance of the data is not bliss. If you don’t know *how* you’re doing, you can’t make an effective case that you know *what* you’re doing. 



## MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

### Due Dates

If you want your expectations met, it's important to ask a few key questions at the outset. I know this now. But not so a few years ago. See, I was preparing material for an upcoming speaking engagement, and I wanted to have some design work done to give my material that bit of extra pizzazz.

I went to a small design firm that touted its creative capabilities and explained to the woman in charge what I had in mind. No problem, she said, she'd do it herself and call me when it was ready. We'll have the whole thing done by next Tuesday, she assured me.

#### Bulging evidence

I was pleased with the woman's responsiveness. At the same time, I couldn't help noticing that she was pregnant. Very pregnant, actually. I had a feeling I ought to inquire about her ability to deliver (my design work, that is). But I thought it might be politically incorrect to indicate that I noticed, so I said nothing.

Tuesday came and went with no phone call from her. The next morning I called to see what the story was. "Sorry," I was told, "she's not here, she's in the hospital with her baby." "What???" I shouted. "Without finishing my design work?"

No, I didn't really say that. But I needed my material — and she was in the hospital nurturing the next generation. Imagine, letting her due date take precedence over mine! My real concern, though, was that not only was I not informed that the job wouldn't be completed as promised, but there didn't seem to be a process for ensuring the job *would* get done. If I hadn't called to inquire, I'm not sure anyone would have contacted me.

#### The terrible twos

I asked the woman on the phone what they could do for me. She said to come into the shop and we'd figure it out. When I arrived, two women were there. Both were named Debbie. I think it was some sort of redundancy system: Neither one was able to help me.

The two Debbies said Richard would make the design changes as soon as he came in. When was Richard expected? (*Expected*, mind you, not *expecting*.) "Tomorrow," said the double Debbies. OK, I thought, I still have a few days before my speaking engagement. In retrospect, I can see that when your instincts warn you to bail out while there's still time, go with your instincts and take your business elsewhere.

I called the next day. Two Debbies, no Richard. "For sure, I'll snag him tomorrow when he shows up," one of the Debbies said. But Richard didn't show up. By then, it was too late for me to do anything but have my material printed without the changes I'd hoped for.

When I retrieved my material, I asked who Richard was. "Oh, Richard," the Debbie-duo spouted, "he's the owner." And here I was thinking he was a backup person who made design changes when there's a pregnant pause.

#### How to avoid labor pains

Now, when I have an important due date, I pose two questions to those I'm depending on. First, "Here's my due date. Can you meet it?" I want a clear yes or no, and if there are some "depending on's," I want to know about them right up front.

And second, "If circumstances change so that you can't meet my due date, what can I count on from you?" Naturally, most providers would prefer not to acknowledge the possibility of missing a deadline they've committed to. But when *I'm* the one who's expecting (a result, that is) and the delivery is going to be late, I want to know in advance that they *will* notify me, and I want to know when and how they'll do so. Take it from me. It's never premature to ask.

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My books, *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them* and *Managing Expectations: Working With People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!* offer strategies and recommendations for managing expectations. For information, see <http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html>.

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Illustrations by Mark Taturo, Rotate Graphics, [www.rotategraphics.com](http://www.rotategraphics.com)

Designed and typeset by Bartleby Scriveners, [bartleby@rcn.com](mailto:bartleby@rcn.com)

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