

Customer Service – Peeves and Pleasures

By David McNair

In a previous *Customer Focus* article, we asked for your personal experiences regarding *customer service gaffes* and *glories*. Apparently we touched a few raw nerves. As expected, your reported gaffes well outnumbered the glories. While I would not pretend to offer the following summary as some sort of statistical research, business owners and managers would be well served to glance at the following shortlist of customer peeves...

- a simple acknowledgement of my presence – a slight nod will do
- automated phone answering services, especially with lengthy menu options
- excessive waiting times, in person or electronically (and then the gall to say I'm a valued customer)
- nonsensical bills/invoices. When was the last time you were on the receiving end of one of your own?

Due to column inches (that's newspaper talk for 'space'), I will only address two of the above this month. Look for the others in article to follow.

Peeve One: What's happened to good ol' fashioned eye contact? I am astounded continually by the number of *in-person service* interactions where eye-to-eye contact is never made. I somehow managed to check out 12 items at the grocery store the other day, and not once did this young check-out robot look me in the eye (or even remotely in the face). This cashier managed to greet me, scan the items, pack them, take my money and give me change without so much as a knowing if I had blonde hair, green hair – or any hair at all (which is closest to the truth). Is a remedy to this lack of acknowledgement a matter of training? Is it basic kindergarten etiquette, or does the fix require enrollment in Toastmasters? It might be a little of all three, but too rarely do businesses set (and put in writing) basic expectations of our front-line service providers.

As I proceed through a normal day of typical transactions, I have an almost obsessive desire to jump behind a service counter and demonstrate how to properly acknowledge a customer's existence. No matter how busy one is, whether serving another or at a computer, a simple nod with eye contact in the direction of the customer would do wonders to say – *I'll be with you as soon as I can*.

I don't know how many of you may have had the pleasure, and I do mean *pleasure*, of dealing with our Charleston Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. This is the hard-working team of professionals that promote our area as a travel and meeting destination. Let me tell you – here's a group where the 'eyes' have it. Meet the members of this staff and you'll remember the genuine interest in their eyes and the warmth in their smiles. Judging from their success – it works!

Peeve Two: Menu mania. You know this scenario all too well. You've dialed your favorite 1-800 call center. Before you realize it, the handcuffs are on...*Please pay close attention as the following menu has changed. Press ONE if you would like to report a service outage, Press TWO if you'd like to review a record of your latest bill, Press THREE to review your last payment...(now 5 minutes into the recording) Press TWENTY-FOUR if you'd like to hear these options again.* Sometimes I feel like I should have been taking notes. And ain't it sweet when you press 'three' only to receive another

menu of 12 additional items! Personally, I'm still waiting for the recording that says, "*Press POUND if you'd like this automated phone system to self-destruct and take its inventor with it!*"

What gives? Are we so obsessed with technological toys that we've forgotten our customers are on the other end of the line? Or do we employ these automated systems in the name of business efficiency or cost savings? The worst ones are those that don't even allow you to press "0" for operator, or some live body that can talk back to you. Have you ever found yourself jumping right to the "0" only to be told (by a machine of course) that '*0 is not an option. Goodbye.*'

Now don't take the above ribbing to an extreme. There are situations where automated phone systems are appropriate and even helpful. A litmus test is to dial your own business line from a cell phone. It's best to do this while 'roaming charges' are being applied. This ensures your attention to the efficiency of it all. Make sure you attempt this while driving at high speeds so that you can feel the excitement of entering your 13 digit account code while passing the eighteen-wheeler. Now use your own good judgement as to whether or not this is what you want your customers to experience. Think of the dollars you spent to attract your customers in the first place – sales, advertising, merchandising, etc. Is this all making sense?

A Happy Ending: The Postman Cometh. As suggested by a few readers – why not end each article with a little recognition of those rare individuals or businesses that really do offer exceptional service. Smashing good idea. And for this month, our hero is Paul at Mount Pleasant's Post Office. You see, no matter the postal frenzy of the day – April 15th for example, you can always count on Paul's personable and attentive service. He greets and treats all customers as if they're his only one. Bottom line, as one customer so succinctly put it, he leaves you feeling special in an otherwise bulk delivery sort of world. Thanks Paul.