

CUSTOMER-FOCUS: Customer Confidentiality

By David H. McNair

Take me away NOW.

Haven't we all found ourselves in some sort of customer situation where we just wanted to become invisible? It's the moment where you want to slink away...turn back the clock...live the day over if you could only erase that incident. It reminds me of the credit card commercial where Mr. Jones is dining with a group of business associates, and his credit card is DENIED. It's done with such full authority and volume that the entire restaurant is at attention. How humiliating!

As customers – these moments are unforgettable. As service providers – these moments often go unnoticed. After all it's just another transaction in the day.

The money thing.

More times than most, this embarrassment of the customer revolves around money. Just last week, I was in line at the bank, waiting dutifully for my turn at the counter. I couldn't help but overhear the woman in front of me ask the teller for her account balance...a question I'm sure she wished she could have retracted. After a few punching of keys, the teller looked squarely at the customer and said, "*Honey, not much there.*" Now what was the young woman to say? "*Oh, not to worry, that's just my play account. My serious money is at your competitor.*" Instead, the young woman sort of slumped, gathered her things and left looking at the floor.

Similarly, I received an email about a utility customer in North Carolina. As relayed, an elderly woman approached the cashier in a public office with a soft voice saying, "*I've come to pay my bill, but I only have \$20. Can you keep my power on 'til I can get the rest?*" At this, the utility cashier turned to pass the request to what appeared to be a supervisor sitting at the desk behind her. "*Hey Betty,*" she shouts in front of other employees and customers alike, "*Ms. XXXX has only got \$20 to pay on her bill, and she owes \$84. Anyway we can extend her?*"

Please understand, we're not here pointing a finger at the big, bad utility company, as we build pity for the poor, elderly woman struggling to make ends meet. For all we know, this customer was what many businesses affectionately call a "*deadbeat.*" Our point is – it is the service provider's responsibility to protect the personal dignity of the customer... always!

Just think how easily the above situations could have been handled without shredding the customers' self-worth. Most banks' procedures call for the writing down of account information and handing it to the customer. And while passing the written information, what a good time for the teller to say something like, "*I noticed from looking at your*

records Ms. XXXX, that you've been a customer of ours for over 8 years. Thank you for your business." A simple message like this would have left the customer feeling valued, not devalued. As for the utility worker, if it were a situation requiring permission, shouldn't she have asked the customer to wait for a moment while the supervisor could come around the counter and meet with her off to the side? You see, situations such as this are not only demoralizing for the customers being handled, but they are uncomfortable for anyone within earshot of the event.

A healthy respect for privacy.

While we think of embarrassing situations as typically involving money (or lack thereof), many other encounters can lead to the same level of customer embarrassment. Any worker that deals with patients and their health issues must be especially sensitive. From doctors to nurses and medical receptionists...to pharmacists, insurance providers and other health technicians – the message is: people don't like having their health matters discussed openly in front of others. So why is it that reception counters in doctors' offices, clinics and hospitals are so public? It's like being on stage. If eight other people are waiting...it's as if they all pause from their reading to give the newest arrival a once-over. It's a wonder that some medical offices don't have a microphone at the counter so no one misses out on the discussion.

Not to pick on the medical profession – the same respect for privacy applies to lawyers, accountants, brokers, and any personal/professional service provider. I once had a mortgage broker fax (without warning) some rather personal information to a work fax machine, never considering that I'd prefer others in the office not see the closing documents for my house.

I have witnessed inappropriate conversations in venues from hotel registration desks to video rental counters. Bottom line – respect your customer's privacy and dignity.

Creating Customer Delight

As with each article, I am committed to bringing you some of the service stars in our tri-county area. This month, I am proud to bring you two. First, a reader has nominated the folks from Glasspro. As a two-time customer of theirs myself, I have to agree. From the moment you call for an appointment, until the time to pick up your car, they are accommodating at every step. They've embraced customer service from day one of business, and it remains a cornerstone of what they deliver. Secondly, I'd like to recognize the cheerful and hard workers at John's Island Café. Not only do they have one great cheeseburger, and some of the tastiest homemade desserts around, but the attention and smiles of their staff are what nourishes the soul. Congrats to you both!