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# Customer service

Part 1

**Attainable ideal or cunning oxymoron?** *Robin Chandler and Jo Ellen Grzyb from the Impact Factory find out.*

Most of us have experienced poor customer service at some point or another. Whether it's pressing 22 numbers on our push button phones in vain, in search of a human voice, being passed from one uninformed person to another, or being given information by a person who never draws breath, it is highly likely that we will be disappointed. Or frustrated. Or angry. Or all three.

Indeed, in some organisations, the term 'customer service' seems to be a kind of perverse oxymoron.

The good news, however, is that the pendulum does appear to be swinging in our — the customers' — favour, albeit slowly. For years, companies invested in technology as the answers to efficiency, cost savings and value. And there's nothing wrong with technology. Except technology doesn't do people. And customers are people. Sometimes unreasonable, often difficult, but still, people.

We're just glad that more and more companies are recognising that if their staff's customer facing (or telephony) skills are up to par (or beyond), they'll have a far better chance of pleasing and retaining their customers.

We rely more and more on technology in our daily lives, yet in an odd way, our expectations around customer service are higher than ever. As we can buy or book online instantly, we now want our queries or complaints dealt with instantly, as well. We want phones answered within three rings, we don't want to be put on hold (too bad Vivaldi isn't alive — he'd make a fortune in royalties for The

Four Seasons), and we most definitely don't want to be phoned back because we doubt we ever will.

Much like sitting around swapping estate agent stories, we're now all collecting our most frustrating day spent on the phone (waiting for a delivery etc) stories as well.

The council offices that want to pass you on to someone

**The sad thing is that we are surprised when we receive good service**

else so quickly you've barely had time to say your name. Or the washing machine repairman who doesn't have the one spare part needed and drives off never to be seen again. Or the day you stayed home from work to wait for your new sofa and you're waiting still. Or the phone agent who keeps telling you to calm down when the last thing you are is calm and being told to be isn't helping.

Actually, aren't there times when you feel you're doing other people's jobs for them? Like making phone calls to chase people to try to get



them to do what you're paying them to do?

Nowadays, the sad thing is that we are surprised when we receive good service. And some customer service is incredibly good. People who want to engage with you and make an effort to connect with you as someone they want to serve, as opposed to a problem they want to get rid of. People who are cheerful, empathetic, knowledgeable and will go the 'extra mile' if that's what it takes to get a result.

## Back for good

Here is a little exercise for you to try. Make a list of all the places, shops, restaurants, holiday destinations, service providers and brands that you return to time and again, and next to each one give a key reason.

- How do they make you feel special?
- Do they know your name (or at least pronounce it correctly)?
- Do they really listen to you?
- Are the waiters efficient and friendly, but not over the top? Or maybe you like over the top?

- Are you made to feel welcome?
- Do you forgive them their mistakes?
- Do you gain that indefinable extra?

We all have reasons for liking something, someone or somewhere. They don't necessarily have to be logical or make sense to anyone else. We worked with someone years ago who, when we did this exercise, said there was one Greek restaurant he always went back to. Not because the food was any better than another Greek restaurant nearby (indeed it was probably worse), but because on Friday nights he got to smash plates and dance around.

Now, you might be someone who avoids smashing plates and dancing around, which is why we say that everyone's reasons for liking a place or returning will be different.

So, see if you have any really quirky, plate-smashing reasons why you go back. Is it because "everybody knows your name" or no one does? Is it because they'll have you talking about your favourite football team within

# Customer service

## I can't get no satisfaction

about is the fact that day in and day out, hour after hour, these people have to deal with us.

Whether we're in the legitimately dissatisfied or perennial complainer category, most of us tend to find it easier to point out faults than to praise and acknowledge when things go right. And we're not always sensible when we do have a complaint. We make assumptions that the person in front of us or on the phone will know exactly what we're talking about. We take all our frustrations and annoyances out on the person who's representing the company, even if they had nothing to do with why we're angry. Not only that, we might use this particular forum to vent a whole lot of anger that doesn't have anything to do with the person, the company or the thing we're complaining about. This is called kicking the cat.

If, in the face of this, the person on the receiving end of our request (we were going to write rant, but we know things don't always come out of our mouths in rant form) is defensive, we don't like it. It makes us even more frustrated or angry.



Does your provider's service leave you feeling like this?

**Please rate Company's customer service overall :**

Poor

Average

Good

Excellent

Here's an exercise you can do with a friend. One of you has to think of something to complain about (something that you feel genuinely annoyed about) and the other person has to be the customer carer. The complainer must let rip about everything that is wrong, such as what the company didn't do, how they felt let down etc. The person on the receiving end of this can respond in whatever way they want (apart from resorting to physical violence please; you are friends after all).

In most cases it doesn't take too long to feel and become defensive, even if

you had the best intentions of staying calm. Even in a simple exercise like this where nothing is at stake, our sense of helplessness

**In an ideal world 'we' would be calm, collected and clear when we made our complaints**

and of feeling under attack are heightened really quickly. It's a natural response to become defensive, want to strike back or hide away inside ourselves until the storm subsides.

That is what's happening to the people we have a go at when we're unhappy about something. These front line people have a lot to contend with. If they haven't been trained well, then they are already going to be at a disadvantage. Especially because their job can feel like a very thankless one.

### 'Them' and 'us'

In an ideal world 'we' would be calm, collected and clear when we made our complaints or problems known. 'They' would be friendly, understanding, informative and efficient.

Well, as far as we're concerned, an ideal world isn't all that hard to achieve.

For the most part, people do like to be loyal; they like to have their special place, brand or company that makes them feel they matter. They're proud to recommend their bank, favourite watering hole or brand of cornflakes they could never do without.

And for the most part, people don't set out to be unhelpful, rude, difficult or uninformed. They have been hired in a customer service role and most of them genuinely want to help.

So what goes wrong? Both 'sides' contribute. Customers will, however, vote with their feet if let down too often. Customer servers, too, will be tipped over the edge if they get unreasonably harassed and badgered.

But really, we should both be on the same side, because ultimately, we want the same thing: 'we' want good service, and they want to do a good job for their organisation. ■

Next issue – find out what customers and companies should do to resolve complaints and how you really can have customers for life.

For more information about Impact's Factory customer service work, visit [www.impactfactory.com](http://www.impactfactory.com) or email enquiries@impactfactory.com

a minute of a conversation? Is it because they support your favourite charity or arts organisation?

Or, is it simply because, when you phone or show up in person, you feel really taken care of and that your business (large or small) counts?

#### Never again

Okay, so now make an opposite list. Places, companies, shops etc you'll never, ever go back to, not in a million years. Hotels that make Fawlty Towers look like the Ritz (okay, maybe not the Ritz, but . . .). Shops with untrained staff who enjoy chatting among themselves rather than serve a (gasp!) customer. People who don't listen. People who you can tell are just reading from a script and aren't hearing a word you're saying. Places or people that never keep their word and wouldn't know

You know what we mean when we say it takes a lot to make you complain

what exceeding expectations looked like, let alone ever tried to have a go at achieving it.

As you compile this list, you may find that you become annoyed just thinking about it. You'll revisit old frustrations and anger, even if the incidents happened years ago. You may even experience a lot more emotions thinking about the negative list than your positive one.

That's how potent bad customer service can be: it seems to stay in our cell structure.

#### Complaints culture

Have you ever complained? We mean gone out of your way to make a complaint to a company, store or service provider.

We ask because it usually takes a lot to get to the complaining stage. Most people have to be well and truly fed up to make the effort to ring up or write a letter. We know there are perennial complainers who will complain about anything and everything. If you're one of those, lighten up. We're not talking to you!

No, we're talking to the kind of regular folk who are generally satisfied; don't get too hot under the collar when things don't go all that smoothly; want to be pleasant and for people to be pleasant in return.

You know what we mean when we say it takes a lot to make you complain. So what happened? What did you have to do and did it work? Did getting on the phone and making your dissatisfaction known have any impact? Did you receive a response to your letter or email? Were you taken care of? Were your expectations met?

Companies could learn a lot if they looked at the reason why people complain and just how much it takes for them to do so. Now, fortunately, a lot more dissatisfied people are actually complaining, which is why many companies are offering customer hotlines and make a big deal of saying how much their customers matter.

Quite honestly, we think a lot of that is lip service. Companies may have loyalty schemes, retention teams, lapsed member squads, but they still haven't got fully under the skin of what customers want. They do try, but in our experience, if something is convenient for them, it often doesn't matter if it's inconvenient for us.

Are we being unfair? Probably. So, read on.

#### Kicking the cat

Up until now, we've been concentrating on what happens to 'us' the customers. But, what about 'them', the customer carers?

Since blaming them is what we think is the right thing to do when things go wrong, people who deal with the public, either face to face or on the phone, are confronted with a barrage of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, anger and frustration on an ongoing basis.

No wonder staff turnover in retail is so high. In fact, did you know that in the UK, pretty much the largest turnover of staff is in call centres? Well, how many of us would want to work in one? We're not talking about the environment that phone advisers work in (some are terrific and have a superb atmosphere); what we're on

