

CUSTOMER SERVICE IS DEAD IN BRITAIN!

A Working Man's View

So What? Who cares? What is Customer Service? What are the repercussions? What does it represent? Who are the culprits? What can be done about it?

Dear Reader,

I've had enough. After being brought to the point of anger where profanity would've been my next utterance, I've decided to 'vent my spleen' in this article, highlighting the cause & effect the breakdown of quality customer service is having on our society.

I'm sure if you've ever had a bad experience with customer service, you will appreciate some of the points and suggestions I make in this article. Before I begin, let us first establish what is 'good' & 'bad' customer service.

WHAT IS GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE?

To be greeted politely with eye contact & a pleasant countenance;
To be spoken to with a clear, even, tone.
Always ready to listen than assume;
Always prepared to provide assistance.
Ensuring the customer is never kept waiting unnecessarily.
Ensuring your attitude is geared to assistance & understanding;
Providing unknown but helpful advice to the customer;
Delivering/responding on time.

WHAT IS BAD CUSTOMER SERVICE?

Intolerably long queues/idle staff;
Calls not answered within 2 minutes.
To be put on hold for more than 3-5 minutes;
Following call-scripts instead of listening to the customer's problem;
Late or no arrival of delivery with no explanation;
Unexplained & unwarranted blocks on credit/debit cards;
Unjustified high service charges or penalties by financial institutions;
Misinformation causing expense to customer;
Poor workmanship;
Sour, cynical, unhelpful attitudes;
Overcharging/hidden charges;
Withholding useful/valuable information;
Inadequately trained staff.

WHO ARE THE MAIN CULPRITS?

Mainly Banks, Supermarkets, Home Shopping Centres, Mobile Phone Companies, Mechanics, Fast Food outlets, Service engineers – plumbers, gas fitters etc.

Virtually any large institution is, but not exclusively, a culprit of bad service.

WHO CARES?

We are in a time where a majority of people are in debt and we are in debt to the very major institutions that provide poor service.

If I'm going to spend my hard earned money with you and possibly add to my debt, the very least I can expect is to get what I pay for without fuss, rudeness and with value for money. It's as if these institutions think "you or someone else is going to spend your money with us anyway, so why should we bother about customer service? – You'll be back!"

Banks, Home Shopping Centres et al

We all lead busy lives where time is of the essence, yet the queues in Banks etc. get longer & longer. *It is not unusual now for someone to spend 45 minutes of their lunch hour waiting to be served in a bank.*

There have been numerous times when I've had to ask a member of staff to open another till to alleviate the queuing – why couldn't they do this of their own accord? Why did it need me to point out the obvious? This is indicative of the attitude business has towards their customers.

By the way, you are legitimately allowed to ask a member of staff or management at any venue or outlet to open another till & start serving customers if it's obvious the queues are too much for the member/members of staff currently serving.

WHY ARE THEY GETTING AWAY WITH THIS?

We are in a time where government is increasingly forcing us to 'accept our lot' in life; **'SHUT UP, BE HAPPY'!**

(To prove my point I could expand here into 'Game Theory', 'Negative Freedom' and our budding totalitarian state, but I'll leave that for a future article!).

Add to this the 'sheep' & 'don't make waves' mentality of the British and you have a nation that is ripe for arrogant, sloppy business practices. *If we can't be bothered to take action, they don't need to respond.*

The irony is that under the present political climate it is assumed by government and the captains of industry that what we buy is a true representation of our wants & needs and therefore a true representation of democracy.

Yet we fail to see the power that belief gives us, the consumer. No matter how much small print and word trickery is invested into an organisation's Terms & Conditions, we are still protected under Consumer Law which has been strengthened considerably over the past decade.

HOW DID THESE PRACTICES SEEP INTO OUR NATION?

I would like to suggest a number of possible factors:

One factor is the Americanisation of Britain – our government taking existing American policies and tailoring them to suit the British economy – that was started under the Thatcher era, and continued with fervour under the Blair government.

Anyone who's visited the West Coast of America frequently like I have will know that 'service with a smile' is not a standard approach, be it from a public servant or an average serving citizen. *The "Time Is Money" principle is applied with fervour.*

A second factor is the practice of globalisation. We are in a world where foreign companies can own any company in any country, even if it's considered to be a major culturally important institution of that country.

Successive British governments from the Thatcher era onwards have made it clear that anyone willing to invest is welcome & ensure our virtually non-existent union laws make this country a viable prospect.

Add to this the fact that a company residing in Britain may have a telephony service in India and a production factory in South-East Asia, and you can see how loyalty to an ideal can become a passing thought.

A third factor is technology. The advent of automated lines, email & text communications, in addition to internet shopping, is creating a nation where person-to-person communication is rarely practised, therefore there is less patience when performing the art of speech. *Pitch, Inflection, Courtesy, Tone, Understanding, Rate & Enunciability are fast becoming a quaint approach to communicating.*

A fourth factor is immigration. With a large influx of people from all over the globe, the importance of good customer service in this nation needs to be highlighted when you have people from Australia to Zaire whom haven't been raised with the British shopkeeper mentality & may have been brought up to believe that getting the job done is good enough. It isn't.

A fifth factor is staff consideration - which may range from poor pay to poor working practices to poor working environment. Good pay is not enough to motivate staff; *almost every employee survey carried out on job satisfaction puts pay 3rd as the most important requirement for an employee.*

Giving an employee a sense of worth goes a long way to a happy workforce - although this needs to come from the employee as well; if money is the only motivation to work and nothing else, make sure you never deal with customers. Go and work on a production line somewhere – we don't have to deal with your lack of ambition or self-worth.

Taking pride in whatever you do goes a long way to affecting your approach to a task.

HOW WOULD THIS AFFECT CUSTOMER SERVICE IN BRITAIN?

Policies can direct and shape a culture.

Policies shape the decisions of what products will or will not be available; how they will be available; how much they cost. These in turn will shape our buying and shopping habits.

This in turn will help to shape attitudes and practices throughout society.

Modern day communications have made vast savings for big business; the trade off of unhappy customers as a result seems to be worthwhile in their eyes.

Britain's reputation and culture was built on its customer service. The nation continues to trade on that reputation from being the first called to provide UN relief to being the first contacted to train police forces of the developing nations. The British workforce used to think it a grave slight on their character if they were accused of bad service. Now, in the event of a complaint, the manager pretends indignation in front of the customer and ridicules their 'pettiness' behind their back. *"The Customer Is Always Right" is from a bygone age.*

WHAT ARE THE REPERCUSSIONS?

The repercussions are already being felt.

The increase in these no-win, no-fee companies is a testament to that.

The second stage is the unpleasant aspect of public servants being attacked, verbally or otherwise. Indeed, were the figures for physical assault on public servants and shop assistants to be measured over the past 20 years, I'm guessing they would show a sharp increase.

The third stage - which has already begun - is when customers start taking individual action in small claims courts when they are not happy with the conclusion of a complaint to a Customer Services Dept. Increased, continuous litigation on big business cannot be a good thing for a company in terms of cost and man hours.

WHAT CAN BUSINESSES DO?

Branch Services

- ❖ Any organisation that makes sure customers are not queuing for more than 5 minutes per customer will see their volume of visits triple.
- ❖ Make sure there are never more than 5 customers per till person.
- ❖ Make sure that whatever your staffs is doing – no matter how important & time sensitive they think it is – as soon as a long queue has developed, get them on the tills or assisting to clear the queue.
- ❖ Even if customers are still queuing for some time, they will appreciate the attempt and the importance you place on their custom.
- ❖ If there are processes & procedures that have to be performed throughout a business day e.g. bank staff, there should be a flexible contingency method that enables the staff member to help clear long queues then get back to their procedural matters or conclude them in a quiet period.
- ❖ Any branch of any business that takes the above stance will see their volume of customers increase.

Telephony Services

- ❖ Ensure the option to talk to an actual person is on the 1st list of menu options offered.
- ❖ Teach your staff to actually listen to the problem.
- ❖ Teach your staff not to be menu-driven when giving support.
- ❖ Ensure the Reduction of waiting times is a constant priority.
- ❖ Design the menu options you offer from the customer's point of view.

WHAT CAN CUSTOMERS DO?

Vote with your feet!

&

COMPLAIN! COMPLAIN! COMPLAIN!

- ❖ When making a telephone call, have a piece of paper and pen ready.
- ❖ Always seek the name & job title of the person you're speaking to and write it down.
- ❖ Ask to speak to/see the manager or senior member to make a verbal complaint.

- ❖ If that fails, seek the name of their customer services manager – they have to give to you.
- ❖ Seek the address of the customer services department for complaints – it may be different than their standard customer service dept.
- ❖ Find out the email address of the person or department you need to speak to.
- ❖ Write to the relevant person. In these instances the pen is truly mightier than the sword.
- ❖ Send letters recorded delivery. Someone has to sign for it.
- ❖ ***Organisations still have to reply to a written letter by law.***

Go to www.parkingletters.co.uk, click on "Useful Links" and you will see links and information on a number of organisations who provide invaluable help in this area.

WHAT WOULD I LIKE TO SEE?

The Present

- Customers to respond to bad service with their feet. Don't go back.
- If it's a chain store, don't visit that branch; better still, the whole chain.
- If we can't be bothered to take action, they don't need to respond.

The Future?

- A website database where a customer enters the place of business, the person who served them, their own name and a contact no.
- A list of the good and bad accessible to all.
- Management of respective business presented with a daily/weekly/monthly list of complaints to resolve. Their response monitored.
- Highlight bad/good Company of the week/month.
- Arrange boycott of bad company/branch through their respective local press. Promote good company/branch.

Big Business Beware, *We The Consumer Have Had Enough!*

This article has been brought to you by Mark Robinson, the owner and leading correspondent specialist at www.parkingletters.co.uk.

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