

Wednesday, September 26, 2007

Screw you, you're just the customer, go to hell

It was one of the comedians off an old "Women of the Night" tape I used to have, after a particular zinger against an ex quipped "some of these I do just for me". Which probably applies to this entire category which I've just created: How to lose customers. I've had one of those mornings which leaves me simply astounded. How can half the businesses I have interacted with today survive let alone turn a profit?

In the macro objective Vulcan view of things, times must simply be too good right now. Too much easy money sloshing around the economy, people clamoring to buy things they don't need with money they don't have. A sense of entitlement prevails among many businesses, kind of like "Give me your money. Shut up. We're doing you a favor. Now get stuffed".

In today's case the overall winners:

Home Depot Yes, I mention them by name. Going to Home Depot for me ranks somewhere below having having a tooth filled. There are not enough staff on the floor and when you catch somebody they tell you That's not my department, shrug and move on. Today I had a guy tell me "I don't work here". He was sitting at a desk in the middle of the flooring department, feet up on the desk, talking on the phone. He sure looked like he worked there to me. When I snagged another passing clerk for assistance she pointed at that guy. "He claims he doesn't work here" I told her. "Can you find somebody who will admit to working in this f***ing department so I can buy some f***ing underpad from you?" (Ok, I didn't say it quite that way, but the way she reacted to me, you'd think I did). She walked over to the intercom and made an announcement "Staff to flooring, staff to flooring, customer waiting". This has happened to me before in Home Depot. It's a ploy, the paged staffer will never arrive, and the one who made the page slinks off immediately afterwards, washing their hands of the situation.

I get back home, late, from Home Depot, and I've missed the heating and air tech who was to come by and look at our non-functioning forced air unit. The unit is still non-functioning. But it has a new filter. He told the person who let him in (and who pointed out to him that the unit was still non-functional) "that's not what I'm here for, I'm just here for a service call".

Call FIDO because they keep calling to renew a cell phone in the company fleet that I already renewed over a month ago. Fido's voice mail hell SUCKS:

Welcome to fido, blah blah blah, you now have 3 options....

beep you now have 4 options...

beep you now have 8 options

"Oh F*** off!" I scream, audibly, and within earshot, my wife admonishes me, of our 18 month old daughter.

All of the above activity is an affront to the customers of any business. Clearly, there is no incentive to do better. Home Depot is enjoying a red hot housing market and all the associated benefits, and a company like Fido, even with wireless number portability a reality in Canada, finally, seems to think there simply isn't an upside to eliminating byzantine call menu labyrinth's from their customer experience.

I would like to remind all the complacent, smug, dosile businesses out there that things won't remain flush and easy forever. There is a global recession of cataclysmic proportions headed our way, and I guess it is during times like that when "everybody sits down to a banquet of consequences" as they say.

Every time I get shabby treatment from a business, I briefly ponder starting up a competitor and entering that space myself. After the anger subsides, my opportunity radar kicks in.

easyDNS was built largely in the wake of another monolithic company's incompetence. 20 million+ disgruntled customers who back then had no other choice. It was a monopoly industry that was suddenly opened up to competition, and then 20 million customers fled like bats out of hell. They were getting treated so badly, being subjected to such rotten service, they'd sign up with anybody who didn't spit on them and it would feel like they were getting the royal treatment. Nevermind actually being helpful, respectful and courteous to them - that reeled them in for life.

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I have seen behaviour today that would never occur among my organization. While we don't have a lot of our strategies formally written in a manual or anything, I like to think that there is a prevailing common sense ingrained in the company. If a domain is down, for example, it is quite simply everybody's problem. Everybody in the company would know enough to take enough ownership of that problem that they aren't going to let it go until they've found somebody who can fix it and assigned it over.

You can bet that if one of our staff looks at a customer domain and finds another problem that has nothing to do with the original ticket, he or she isn't going to shrug and say "that's not in the trouble ticket" and move on. They're going to flag it.

There is no shrugging "that's not my department" at my company. There may be "I don't know how to answer that, but I'm going to find you somebody who can", and that is not the same thing as the aforementioned Home Depot mystery staff page.

We are on the cusp of a global transition from a seller's market to a buyer's market in pretty well everything. Smug, aloof businesses will either have to get real humble, real fast or they will simply be swept away into the economic dustbin of history where they belong. So it goes.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in How to lose customers at 13:10

I agree completely.

As a matter of fact I have been telling anyone who listens that there are huge opportunities in any industry for a firm that operates with respect for the customer to take over that industry.

The reason that your staff operate as they do is that the CEO sets the tone of an entire organisation. It's attitude by osmosis.

The problem is that most customer service departments are designed to fob you off until you get tired of complaining. They figure that the time spent is actually cheaper than correcting the actual problem. Therefore, it is every consumer's duty to press their point to the bitter end. File in small claims court if necessary. Then their legal beagles can kick in at \$500/hr. So, even if you abandon the case, it starts to get mighty expensive for them. Many jurisdictions now have the filing forms in pdf format now, so you can boiler plate the thing to cause the most grief possible.

ps. not to be rude, a really small point, dosile should probably be docile
Anonymous on Oct 7 2007, 06:46

My best tactic re: Home Depot is to drive right by and go to Rona. Much nicer, more knowledgeable staff.
Anonymous on Oct 12 2007, 16:22

Oh how i can relate! Voice Mail that drives me CRAZY! Associates who are just plain useless... customer service has been renamed Customer Shaft in all but name. Telus sucks. FIDO sucks. Rogers sucks..we have no other mobile / isp service to run to. have you ever dealt with TELUS voice mail.... if i could i'd shove a firecracker down the phone line at them.. F***N voice mail from hell!!
Anonymous on Oct 15 2007, 23:55