

I like to write and talk about things TO do, instead of things NOT to do. Talking about what not to do is similar to telling someone not to think of a pink elephant. What immediately comes to mind of course is a pink elephant. Cliche perhaps, but true. We tend to do that upon which we focus, regardless of whether it's what to do or what not to do. Having said that, I'm going to break my own rule with this list. These are five fatal flaws of customer service.

### Complaining

No one likes to hear someone else complaining. People are simply not interested in hearing about your aches and pains, your spouse's shortcomings, the bad weather, your car's mechanical problems, your fights with city hall, or anything else. I recently visited a small coffee shop that had just opened near my home. I'd heard good things about it, it looked great from the street, and when I walked in the door, I was greeted by very pleasant decor. I was excited to be there and looking forward to coming back. Then it happened. The owner started complaining to the other customer and me about his fights with city hall. He didn't just tell us about the problem he was having, but he went on and on and on. He spent so much time complaining that it took him ten minutes to prepare my drink. The negativity was draining. By the time I left, I'd changed from "Excited to be here" to "Can't wait to get out of here". The next day, I stopped in at our neighborhood Starbucks and was greeted cheerfully by the baristas who had my drink ready within about three minutes. It was a 180 degree change from the previous day's experience. If a giant like Starbucks can master great customer service, there's no excuse for a small business not to do the same. Our jobs, as business people, are to create a great experience for our customers in every way possible. Certainly it includes the products and services we offer, but it also includes the way we make our customers feel. Consumer decisions are emotional in nature. The better we make people feel, the more likely they are to do business with us. No whining!

### Ignoring

In another recent experience, I dropped my lawn mower blade off to be sharpened. I spoke briefly with the owner who assured me the blade would be ready by a certain time on a certain day. He and I chatted briefly about a subject of common interest and I left, looking forward to picking up my blade on the promised day and time. I was also looking forward to chatting with him more about our common interest. I went back to his shop on the agreed upon day and time to pick up the blade. He was talking with another customer. I waited fifteen minutes, but he never even acknowledged my presence. He didn't greet me, he didn't say, "I'll be with you in a

minute." He did nothing to acknowledge the fact that I was in his shop. Eventually I noticed my blade, still unsharpened. I retrieved it and left, never to return. We all get busy, we all have customers that required more time than others, but we must always acknowledge our customers. A simple "Hi. I'll be with you in a minute." would have made all the difference in the world.

### **Deceiving**

This seems obvious, but it bears mention. We must always be completely honest with our customers about matters related to our business relationship with them. If there's a problem with an order, if something goes wrong during a delivery of service, we must be candid about what happened and we must do so in a timely manner. In spite of our best efforts, mistakes happen. When we handle our mistakes with integrity, we have an opportunity to earn customers for life. It's not, however, just a matter of dealing with mistakes and problems. I once had a customer ask my firm to do something for which we weren't qualified. When I declined the job, I was shocked to discover the customer was angry with me. I would much rather have declined the job and maintained my integrity than accepted a job for which we weren't qualified and dealt with repercussions afterward. This may seem especially difficult in today's world when we want to accept every piece of business that comes our way, but it's even more important now. Maintaining our integrity today is what will position us for tremendous success when business picks back up.

### **Not Following Through**

This also seems simple, but bears mention. Do what you say you'll do. If you need to do some research to provide an answer for a customer, make sure you actually get back to your customer. It's okay to say you weren't able to find an answer. It's not okay to not get back to them with something. In my customer service seminars, we talk about under-promising so we can over-deliver. If you think something is going to take two hours, promise it in four. Customers rarely complain when something is ready ahead of time. When something isn't ready on schedule, however, it can have a negative effect on their business or life. Of course, things happen sometimes to cause delays. Make sure, when that happens, that you contact your customer with an update before they contact you asking what happened.

### **Not Communicating**

In the absence of communication, our customers' minds fill-in-the-blanks. Answer every email, return every phone call, even if it's an auto-responder or a staff member who returns the call. Several things are possible when our customers don't hear back from us (none of them are good):

- They get angry at us
- They think there's a problem with the business relationship
- They think there's a problem with our company
- They think we're sick (this only applies to our compassionate customers)
- They start looking for a replacement

Always respond to your customer in some way. When you don't respond, in effect you're suggesting to your customers that they should sample your competitors.

Communication is not limited to just answering emails and returning phone calls. Communication can be information you provide in printed materials or on your website. The more information you provide, the more comfortable your customers are with your company and the easier it is for them to do business with you. This concept even applies to restaurant menus: I love fried chicken (it's necessary occasionally to feed one's soul), but great fried chicken takes longer to prepare than many other foods. I appreciate restaurants that say, on their menu, "Please allow 30 minutes for preparation." Armed with knowledge, I can make a decision about whether I have enough time for fried chicken or whether to just order a salad. Restaurants that do that have done a good job of communicating with me.

Review your own customer relationship practices and those of your employees to ensure that these five fatal flaws are not part of your customer's experiences.

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