

IMPROVE SERVICE

WITH A STORY



By Lori L. Silverman

This past month, how many poor customer service situations have you experienced? At work, how many challenges do you think customers experienced that they believe your organization should have handled differently? For myself, not a week goes by without some sort of incident taking place. Take these situations:

- A bank employee inadvertently puts a “stop payment” notice on two checks that trigger additional loan interest and penalties. The bank cannot explain how this occurred and is hesitant to fix the situation.
- An insurance company acknowledges the receipt of three completed forms needed to cancel a policy. Instead of processing them, it mails identical blank forms several weeks later along with an additional request for information. When queried, a customer service representative says not all employees are good at remembering what is needed to cancel a policy.
- A printing company sends an invoice that is triple the agreed-upon amount. Upon inquiry, the sales representative says his manager felt the originally quoted prices did not take all the company’s costs into consideration.

All three of these organizations pride themselves on their customer service culture. They screen prospective employees on their service approach, they provide basic and follow-up training, and they have initiatives that focus on providing quality to customers. Yet, these uncomfortable experiences still occur, robbing all parties of precious time and money.

WHAT COULD BE HAPPENING?

So, what is it that is continuing to challenge these organizations? Here are three possibilities.

- Work procedures. Work procedures may not be fully documented or they may be flawed in their design. While these items can be fixed, there is still the issue of successfully communicating work processes to staff. Unfortunately,

providing step-by-step procedures or reminder memos does not ensure employee follow through, even if they are discussed in meetings.

- Lack of caring. Perhaps today’s service employees really do not care about customers. Yet, it is hard to imagine that employees screened for a service attitude would consciously start their workday intending not to serve and satisfy customers. More likely, they do not fully comprehend the impact of their actions, or lack thereof, on customers. Furthermore, without ongoing two-way communications that are both sufficient and appropriate, they may think the organization does not care about them and become disinterested in their work.
- Training. Data reported by organizations in 2002 to the American Society for Training & Development shows that eight percent of total training expenditures are spent on customer relations. However, teaching and learning are not the same thing. Putting employees through formal customer relations training does not guarantee demonstration of these behaviors in the workplace with customers. Even with rigorous training, some employees may not be able to remember and accurately recall critical learning points over time. Nor does it mean they will fully understand the rationale behind using these skill sets.

Each of these challenges has a significant communications component. What all organizations need to ask themselves is whether their communications are truly effective, whether they occur on a timely and routine basis, and whether they address the what’s, the how’s, and the why’s of customer service.

THE BENEFITS OF STORIES

In your own enterprise, how is customer service information transmitted to employees? In most places, people are verbally told what to do (or not do) in training, meetings, and one-on-one conversations. This communication is accompanied by emails, lists of do’s and don’ts, and PowerPoint slides that relay similar information and satisfaction data.

Organizations such as NASA, The World Bank, Armstrong Industries, Disney, and 3M have discovered that the singular use of these communication tools do not fully convey organizational strategies and behaviors and motivate people to follow them. These organizations are using storytelling as a communications tool because stories:

- Capture people’s interest and make them more attentive,
- Make information more believable and memorable,
- Improve the accuracy of recalling key points over time,
- Rapidly and successfully convey the meaning of complex concepts,
- Enhance creativity and problem solving,
- Heighten individual and organizational learning,
- Make jobs more meaningful, and
- Strengthen relationships.

Since stories engage people’s minds, hearts, physical beings and the human spirit, they inspire people to change—to try a new behavior, to let go of an old attitude, to embrace the future, and to take action.

COMMUNICATING WITH A STORY

Here is an example of a customer service story. Time how long it takes you to read it out loud. Then, identify the story's main point and how it could be used with employees. Also ask yourself whether it would be remembered more easily and for a longer period of time than a memo on how to respond to angry customers.

I WAS ACHING FOR A FIGHT

Contributed by Marcy Fisher, former vice president, Organization Development and Human Resources, Shell Technology Venture, Inc.

One day while fixing the garbage disposal, I broke the allen wrench that I had just purchased at a major department store. Given the hassles I'd experienced in the past with this store, I got myself really angry and really pumped up. Not more than two months earlier, it took five phone calls to get a repairman out to the house to do warranty work on my new garage door opener. First, he missed two appointments. And then when he finally did show up, he said, "I'm not leaving until you pay me!" The nerve of that guy! I had to place a call to the store manager to get him to leave my house.

And then there was the incident with my new refrigerator. I carefully measured the size of the opening for it—even checked it twice! Three weeks after I ordered it, it came alright—only it was two sizes wider than what I'd ordered. The delivery guys wouldn't even help me put my old refrigerator back in place. When I called about the mishap, customer service said they sent the larger model because the one I wanted was on back order. Finally, four weeks after the wrong model was sent, I got the refrigerator I wanted.

When I got in the car, I knew I was in for a fight. Defiantly, I walked into the store and over to the hardware department and boldly set the tool on the counter. Ready for an argument, I gave the clerk my story. "My new garbage disposal seized up on me. So I got out the booklet that came with it and found the instruc-

tions on how to fix the damn thing. I put this wrench exactly where it tells you to and pushed hard—just like it said to do. Look at this thing—it snapped in two, right in my hand. See the bruise I got? My hand flew back and hit the back of the cupboard." In a very pleasant manner, she said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'd be happy to replace the wrench for you." Her response took all the air out of me. I was so surprised that I didn't quite know how to respond. In fact, I actually tried to start an argument with this woman about giving me a new allen wrench. I was convinced that returning the tool would be a difficult situation. She just kept saying, "No, ma'am. Really. I want to replace it." And she did. How could I have known that I would leave with two gifts: the new allen wrench and the experience of being treated well despite my best efforts to pick a fight?

When faced with angry customers, "go for the gift." Search for the opportunity to extend a higher level of service. While it may be a challenge—in the moment—to treat customers better than they're treating you, it is truly a gift you can—and need to give them in order to recover the situation. Try it the next time you have an angry customer.

Usually it takes under three minutes to tell the story to others, probably less time than it takes to write and discuss a memo on dealing with angry customers in a meeting. And there is a greater chance the story will be told again by those who heard it.

For service providers, the main point of this story is realizing that customers may not be able to let go of the anger they are feeling no matter how skillfully the problem is handled. Before customers can problem solve, they may need to carry out the communications they had planned in advance by telling their story and verbalizing their anger. Providing support to them through listening fully and letting them vent is a way to "go for the gift."

You can use this story in several ways. It can be incorporated into training and followed-up with exploratory questions

and an activity to deepen the learning. In the same manner, it can be shared in a department meeting. It can also be used to coach employees who are having difficulty interacting with irate customers on how to act and what to say to them. Finally the story can be used in new hire orientation to introduce the value of treating customers with respect.

STORIES CAN HELP

There are many ways to improve customer service. Memorable stories can enhance the effectiveness of these approaches, while also helping to quicken and deepen learning. Stories are a powerful employee communications tool that can help your organization "wow" its customers. What are you waiting for?

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An adaptation of this article appeared in *Sales & Marketing Excellence*, October 2003 (Vol. 3, No. 10, pg. 13). All uses, including reprints, require advance permission from the author.

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