

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



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KARTEN

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If You Claim to Care, Care!

Service businesses that really care about their customers don't boast about how much they care. They don't need to. They simply deliver. Caring about customers is part of their service philosophy and it shows in the way they treat their customers. Conversely, service businesses that persistently proclaim how much they care often seem to fall short.

This mismatch between service philosophy and service delivery was evident at the hotel that failed to deliver my wake-up call. Nowadays, I set alarms on my cell phone, my travel clock, and the room clock (the ones I can figure out, at least) to yank me out of my State of SleepyHeadedness, but at the time of this non-wake-up call, I still depended on human intervention. Fortunately, I had managed to wake up in time.

Happily, the people who ran this hotel cared about their guests. I knew this was so because the feedback form in my room described the hotel's philosophy of caring and explained that hotel management met regularly to address ways to improve guest services. Furthermore, the

SERVICE ORIENTATION


feedback form stated that if I wanted an immediate response to any concern, I could describe it on the back of the form and drop it in a box located in the main lobby.

So I wrote out my complaint: I didn't get my wake-up call. When I left for the day, I watched the Front Desk staff watching me when I dropped the form into the box.

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine . . .

Upon returning to my room that evening, I expected to find . . . what? An offer of a free night's stay? Not at all. A bouquet of flowers? No. A bowl of fruit? Not really. I thought there might simply be a note or phone message with an apology or at least a promise that I could count on getting my wake-up call the next morning. Instead . . . nothing. No evidence of caring, either then or at any time since.

It doesn't take much for customers to start wondering if constant claims of caring are merely a promotional bluff. Customer satisfaction is based on service delivery, not *claims* about service delivery. And it's service delivery, not claims, that customers describe when they vent to friends and colleagues. So it might be worthwhile to examine your own service philosophy and analyze how well that philosophy translates into action. Conversely, examine your service delivery, and consider whether it reflects or contradicts your service philosophy.

If you aren't certain you can follow through on your promises, it may be best not to spout them too loudly or too visibly. Otherwise, when you fall short, your customers will catch you at it. And they'll quickly conclude that you don't really care. 

FEEDBACK GATHERING

How Survey Sally Gathers Customer Feedback

Of the several cases studies that I describe in my presentations on **Gathering Useful, Usable Customer Feedback**, my favorite is the clever approach used by one particular company.

Twice a year, a representative from each of this company's client organizations participates in a formal customer satisfaction survey. But this isn't one of those long boring surveys that ends up in the Long Boring Surveys file. That's because the survey is conducted by phone by Survey Sally, the name bestowed by the co-workers of an employee who is charged with conducting survey interviews. The fact that she conducts all the interviews confers consistency on the entire process.

The company wisely established survey objectives at the outset. The objectives are:

- to identify common problem areas
- to generate ideas for improving service
- to surface grievances that hadn't been voiced
- to identify complaints that can be acted on immediately
- to communicate to clients that their views matter

Before each interview, Survey Sally emails a set of questions to the designated client representative. The questions are the same for all interviews, and include the following:

- How have you found our response time in answering your calls?
- What is your level of confidence with the knowledge level of our support staff?
- How would you rate the ability of our staff to resolve problems that you've reported?
- Can you suggest one improvement we could make in the way we deliver support?

We're a 10, if we don't say so ourselves!

Most surveys ask respondents to rate various service attributes on a rating scale. But not this company's survey. Instead of asking for ratings, Survey Sally asks clients for open-ended feedback. She records the feedback — and afterwards assigns numerical ratings to the client's responses.

What? you may be thinking, *that's hardly subjective!*

But read on.

She then emails the survey to the client, along with the client's comments and the ratings she assigned to the person's responses. She asks clients to review the comments and to correct any inaccuracies. She also asks them to review

her ratings and to lower any they feel are too high.


Interestingly, the only changes clients have ever made have been to *raise* the ratings. It seems Survey Sally rates her company more severely than clients do!

What follows each survey is as formal as the survey itself. Escalation procedures ensure that dissatisfied clients or serious problems receive immediate attention. If clients voice complaints, management schedules a follow-up survey to ensure that improvements have been made to the client's satisfaction.

Every quarter, the company compiles the survey results and posts them for access by all employees. A summary of survey feedback is also distributed to all clients. And both employees and clients periodically receive a description of improvements the company is acting on or has implemented as a consequence of client feedback.

How you can do the same

This company's feedback process incorporates several keys to success that you might want to keep in mind in establishing or reworking your own feedback-gathering processes:

1. Assess client satisfaction regularly. The very process of periodically soliciting feedback tells clients that you are concerned about their viewpoint.
2. Give clients advance notice of the survey so they have time to gather their thoughts.
3. Don't rely entirely on ratings. Use open-ended feedback to the extent possible. You'll get more information that way, and better information.
4. Give clients a chance to confirm that you really heard their comments. Doing so further communicates that their views count.
5. Develop procedures to ensure that serious problems identified in the survey receive immediate attention.
6. Follow up with dissatisfied clients. And then follow up some more.
7. Communicate survey results to both employees and clients.
8. Let clients know the changes you're making based on their feedback. 

My guide, **40 Frequent Feedback-Gathering Flaws and How to Fix Them**, offers guidelines, recommendations and examples to help you quickly identify and eliminate flaws in your feedback-gathering processes. For information on this guide, see <http://www.nkarten.com/feedbackguide.html>.

PROBLEM SOLVING

How Might This Solution Backfire?

Next time you think you have a great solution to some thorny problem, analyze that solution carefully. Otherwise, it could prove to be worse than the problem that prompted it.

For example, many years ago in a city hereafter known as Bumper-to-Bumperville, officials were searching for ways to improve the flow of rush hour traffic. After much deliberation, traffic gurus came up with a solution; they would designate the high-speed lane of a 15-mile stretch of expressway into the city as an express lane and restrict its use to cars with at least three people. The hoopla leading up to the initiation of this solution convinced commuters they'd soon be able to breeze into work.

To implement the high-speed lane, traffic workers placed plastic orange cones between the express lane and the local lanes. Signs on the approach to the express lane explained its use and warned of stiff fines for drivers with too few passengers. It seemed like a good solution.

But was it?

Now, put on your visual thinking cap and picture this. The express lane began at a point at which two major highways merged to form the expressway. This meant that if you approached the expressway from the high-speed lane of the highway to the left, you would be channeled into the express

lane. Having anticipated this, officials provided a lengthy cone-free stretch to enable passenger-deficient cars coming from the left to move into the local lanes to the right. At the same time, well-peopled cars approaching from the highway to the right could move left into the express lane.

So what happened? Cars entering and exiting the approaching express lane within that cone-free stretch created such a tie-up that traffic backed up for miles on the two merging highways. Stop-and-go traffic became more stop than go. Local roads became alternative routes and also

became clogged, slowing traffic for miles around. People had to leave earlier than ever to get to work on time.

Local newspapers were soon filled with articles and letters to the editor about the solution being worse than the problem. If city officials had a nickel for every complaint from angry, late-to-work-again drivers, they could have built a skyway to relieve the congestion.


Something had to be done. Officials deliberated and debated and discussed and pondered — and finally came up with a solution. Not a solution to the original traffic problem, but a solution to the new traffic problem that was supposed to be the solution to the original problem. It was simple: eliminate the express lane.

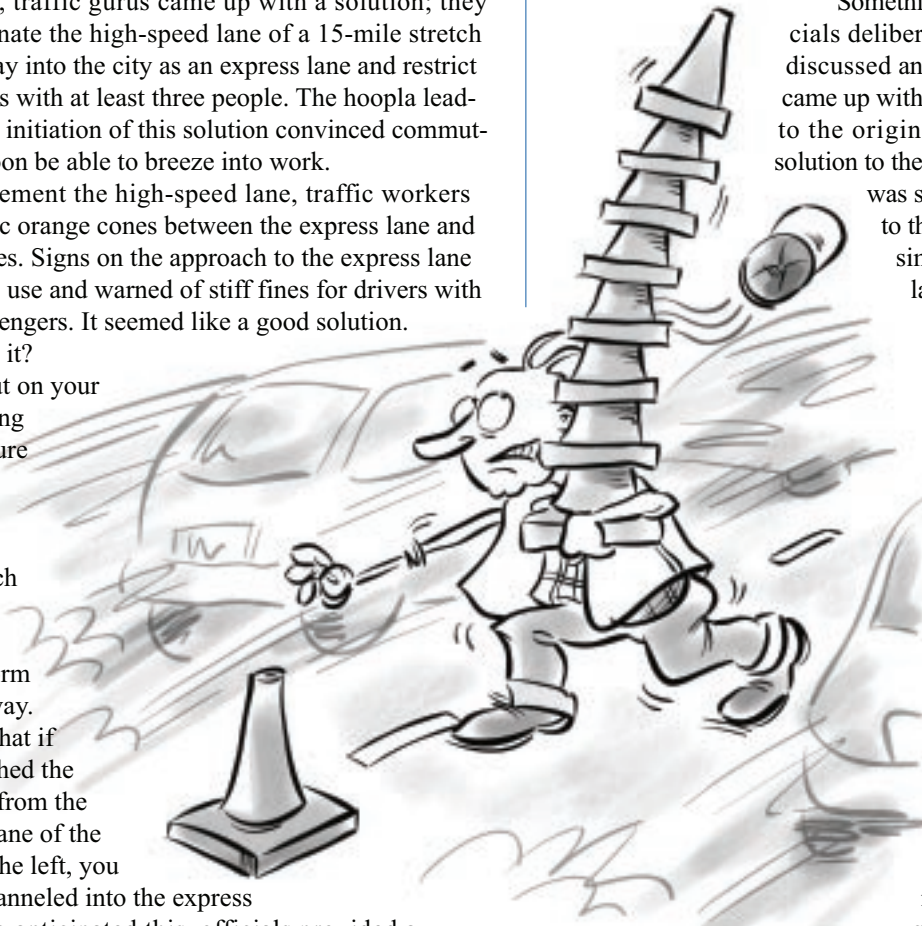
Down came the orange cones. Down came the signs explaining the express lane. Down came the warnings about fines and penalties. In short order, traffic conditions were restored to normal — or rather, restored to a condition that had been maddening till the solution made merely maddening seem tolerable.

And you know what? The drive into Bumper-to-Bumperville never seemed so easy. Not quick. Not without traffic

jams and congestion and fender-benders and worse. But by comparison to the express lane solution, it seemed like a dream.

Have you ever seen (or, gulp, implemented) a solution that proved to be worse than the problem it was intended to solve? Wise problem-solvers remember to ask: How might this solution backfire? What should we think about now so as to avoid surprises later?

Something to ponder the next time you're stuck in stalled traffic. 



BUSINESS SAVVY

Mind Your Business

Do you understand your customers' business? Here's why I ask: Technical departments sometimes ask me to interview their internal customers to assess their satisfaction with service delivery. In doing so, one of the most intense frustrations I hear from these customers is: "They don't understand our business."

In reflecting on these interviews, I've concluded that many of these customers mean something other than what it first sounds like. That is, they are not necessarily referring to a lack of understanding of their business processes. Instead, they often seem to be describing something far more basic, such as the following.

Take me seriously

Customers want their concerns to be acknowledged as real and important. For example, one customer who complained that "they don't understand our business" added that when she described her unit's need for quick access to technical support on weekends, the support manager didn't take her seriously.

Perhaps this was not the impression the manager intended to convey, but customers' perceptions are their reality, whether or not they match your reality. And customers who feel that their views are being belittled or trivialized are unlikely to be receptive to hearing the perspective of those who convey those attitudes. In fact, acknowledging the validity of customers' concerns is a crucial starting point in presenting your own perspective.

Speak my language

Technical groups who overdo their use of tech-talk in speaking to their customers risk having disgruntled customers. Business personnel want their service providers to know *their* language (business-speak, in other words) and to use that language in presenting their explanations, justifications and rationales.

For example, one customer I spoke to complained that IT personnel persisted in talking network nonsense (her term). "I don't know what they're talking about,"

this customer complained. "I work with loans and appraisals and mortgage applications, not servers and apps and hits and bits" (also her term). Shouldn't personnel who support customers' business needs have at least a rudimentary knowledge of business terminology and the ability to use it in a meaningful manner?

Understand that we have customers too


Technical personnel sometimes seem unaware that a chain of customers is affected by the quality of their service delivery. In one company I visited, call center reps described their frustration during phone conversations with the company's customers. Most callers were already in a state of stress when they called. To make matters worse, the reps often had to wait an embarrassingly long time for customer profile data to appear on their computer screens so they could respond to the callers' inquiries.

"They just don't understand," said several reps about the technical staff who had ignored requests to address this situation. Meanwhile, how many callers interpreted the slow response of a single call center rep as an entire company that didn't understand *their* needs?

Recognize the impact of service inadequacies

A disconcerting number of technical professionals don't appreciate — or worse, trivialize — the impact of service inadequacies on customer retention and customer loyalty. I recall a highly vocal business manager who complained that the systems staff didn't seem to grasp that repeated outages affected customer loyalty.

The next day, in one of my one-on-one interviews with systems personnel, I was shocked to find glaring evidence of this complaint when one manager exclaimed, "So they sold a few less policies. So what?" So what????

Do you respond to your customers in a way that shows you take them seriously? Do you attempt to speak their language? Do you appreciate that they have customers too? Do you recognize the impact of service inadequacies? In these critical ways, do *you* understand your organization's business? 

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