

Oranges and Lemons

By Stuart White
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In every business you are going to experience customer complaints from time to time in a variety of forms. There is no such thing as 100 percent perfect service 100 percent of the time, no matter how high your delivery standards are. Human error can creep in, physical factors may impede or even an untimely act of God can cause disruption. It happens in the best of businesses and it's how you handle these problems that categorise your company as good or bad. Some will bury their heads in the sand with the hope that it will go away, get defensive with a whole bunch of excuses that justifies why they suck at what they do, others can choose to be more proactive and attempt to make their customer satisfied again. It's the choice every company has – how will we respond to complaints.

Last week I complained about the service that I received at Mascom. It certainly was not worse than what I experience in other establishments around town – not by a long shot. I was a bit irritated by the lack of efficiency blah, blah and the apparent gap between the marketing departments' promises and the behaviours of staff on the ground. Now this column is not a customer service column but I do often find myself writing about my experiences and what the link with people/HR and performance is. What normally happens is I rant and rave (in the past victims of my lashing-out have included SAA, Air Botswana, Pick 'n' Pay, Primi, Department of Immigration, Equatorial Coffee...the list is endless). And here's the thing – I never get a response from any manager or staff member despite me defaming them in print and placing my dissatisfaction as a customer right out there. It never fails to amaze me that these companies never fail to do nothing – not even acknowledge my public complaint.

So imagine my sheer delight when this week I received a very professional, timely and friendly email from Ponego Lempadi, Retail Sales Manager from Mascom who said "Mr. White we saw your article in the news paper dated 18 April 2010 in which you expressed your dissatisfaction of our Customer Service in the Service Centres. In your article you indicated that you were not happy with the way the customers were being handled and that the service you received was unsatisfactory.

Thank you for taking time to communicate to us why our service did not meet your expectation and rest assured that we appreciate how frustrating this experience has been." She went on to say "We have noted your concerns and recommendations & suggestions and are taking immediate corrective steps to re – enforce the correct process and we hope to regain your confidence in us. We have begun putting a comprehensive plan in place to provide better and more efficient service to our customers and improve procedures for handling operational difficulties in the future. We are confident, as a result of these actions that Mascom will continue to be number 1 because of you. We are committed to you, our valued customer; please accept our apologies and assurance that this will not occur again."

I was thrilled with this response, in fact quite over the moon. At least my voice was heard and complaint acknowledged. I told everyone in the office and I am now telling you. For a long time I have advocated that the best way to impress customers is to turn their unhappiness to happiness by acknowledging them, listening and taking them seriously. Dealing with complaints is serious business, if you are serious about business that is.

Consider this;

- 98% of dissatisfied customers never complain, they just leave.
- 85% of dissatisfied customers tell nine people about their poor experience. 13% tell 20 people. (I told the whole Sunday standard readership)
- Over five years, a typical company loses 80% of its customers; 65% because of a negative experience with the company.
- 75% of the reasons a customer leaves has nothing to do with the product.
- Retain just 5% of your customers, and profits will increase from 25% to 55%.
- The top five businesses in any industry have over 90% customer retention. Most businesses average 80%.
- For every 1% improvement in customer rate sustained over five years, there is a 20% improvement in operating income, and finally...
- The number one reason why customers switch companies is that they don't feel appreciated.

There are not many companies that offer a completely unique product or service. There are other cellular network providers out there, just as there are other airlines, other coffee shops and restaurants, other supermarkets and even other HR consultancies. Dissatisfied customers don't have to put up and shut up, as though in some hard-line, state-controlled dictatorship. They can and sometimes do complain but they can just as easily vote with their feet and take their business elsewhere.

But if you really and truly listen to their complaint, if you take their justified criticism on board, show genuine contrition and a desire to right any wrongs done, you will find, as happened to me this week, that you take the wind right out of their sails and leave them becalmed and soothed. They, like me, will no longer want to shift brand loyalties in a mood of high dudgeon and righteous indignation. Rather they will take the view that though they had one bad experience; it can happen in the best of organisations. Further they will convince themselves that the rival company is probably just as bad, worse even as they may not pay such personal attention to their clients' complaints. In short you will have created a satisfied customer and built brand loyalty, not because your brand is perfect but because you acknowledge those times when it is not and you do your best to make amends.

So next time you encounter a customer complaint in your own organization, don't ignore it and hope it's an isolated incident. Chances are it's not so take it not as a slur or an aberration but an opportunity to demonstrate some real customer service. Empathise, personalise, improvise and customize. To paraphrase the late JFK, 'Ask not what your company can do for you, ask what you can do for your company'. You'll discover that it doesn't matter what field that company operates in, not where you fit within it, your Number 1 priority is still the same – keeping the customer satisfied.

Take a leaf out of Mascom's book and see how easy it is to turn a snappy customer into a happy customer. The hardest word in business isn't 'sorry', it's 'goodbye'.

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