

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Customer Service: Getting It Right

by Dr. Mike Armour

Great customer service begins with our outlook – how we view ourselves, our job, and most of all our client or customer. Outlook leads to attitude. And attitude always bleeds through in the service we deliver.

Many attitudes go into great customer service. Respect and cordiality come immediately to mind. So does an eagerness to listen. But one quality looms above all others in importance. Take it out of the picture and customer service quickly breaks down.

Delayed Flights and Long Lines

I came to this conclusion recently as I returned from overseas. Storms had been over Texas most of the day, and several international flights were diverted to other cities for refueling. Once the storm clouds cleared, the delayed flights all descended on Dallas at once.

I pass through customs and immigration at Dallas-Fort Worth Airport several times a year. I usually get through passport control in 15 or 20 minutes. But not on this occasion. This time the line overflowed the massive receiving hall, wrapped into an adjacent corridor, around the corner, and into another long passageway.

Finally, after an hour and a half, I reached the control point. Two minutes later I was off to retrieve my luggage – only to discover another line. All of those people who had been ahead of me at passport control were now ahead of me at the checkpoint for customs. I immediately saw that I had at least another half hour to practice my waiting skills.

As the line inched slowly along, I fell into conversation with a business executive from Great Britain. When I commented on the long delays at passport control, he replied, “I know. I went through the line twice.”

“Twice?” I asked. “Yes, twice,” he answered.

Technicalities, Technicalities

The passport control officer, it seems had rejected his customs form. “You’ve used an old form,” the officer told him. “You must go to that far wall, get the new form, fill it out, and get back in line.” At the back of the line, no less. A plea that it was the form given him on the plane fell on deaf ears. It was the back of the line for him.

As the two of us talked, he still had the original form in his pocket, along with the new one which he was about to turn in. We compared the two. For the life of us we could not see any difference between the two other than the form's date printed in small letters along the bottom edge. For this he had stood in line an extra hour!!

By now we were beginning to notice that the other three lines were moving faster than ours. Much faster. We kept trying to peer ahead to see what was causing the delay. Only when we were near the head of the line did we discover the holdup.

The officer who was processing our line was a rotund, jolly soul. Smiling, he gave a warm greeting to everyone who approached his position. It took him no more than five or six seconds to glance at the form and put it aside.

But to demonstrate his friendliness and concern, he then launched a personal conversation. "With all of the storms, how was your flight?" he would ask. "Was your plane diverted to another airport? You're not going to miss a connecting flight, are you?"

The Missing Ingredient

Each conversation took at least a full minute, if not longer. The parallel lines processed at least six people for every one that he processed. Standing there, waiting my turn, it struck me that what was missing with both officers – the one who turned my acquaintance back at passport control and this one who was trying to show his concern – was appropriate empathy.

I choose the phrase "appropriate empathy" purposefully. The first officer clearly showed no empathy at all. The second officer, on the other hand, appeared to be empathetic. But in truth, he was not.

While his questions were intended to demonstrate empathy, he was not in fact properly empathetic. He failed to put himself in the mindset of someone who had stood in line for over an hour at passport control and almost that long again to turn in the customs form. At that particular moment passengers did not want friendly chit-chat. They simply wanted to get through the doors and on with their lives.

Nor was he empathetic toward the people still in line. He was oblivious to the delay that his chit-chat was creating for them. Once people were close enough to the front of the line to observe what he was doing, their impatience began to boil. I heard more than one of them mutter, "Cut out the chatter and process the line!"

He got everything else about customer service right. He was friendly, cordial, respectful. He carried out the critical transaction quickly and efficiently. He tried to show genuine concern. But no one walked away from his station feeling that they had received great customer service.

That's why my nominee for the most vital attitude in great customer service is appropriate empathy. When empathy is out of balance, the customer's experience is likely to suffer.

It's probably easier to train people to be polite and cordial than to help them be appropriately empathetic. Appropriate empathy is a by-product of emotional intelligence, which is sometimes in short supply. But I'm convinced that balanced empathy can be learned. It starts with the self-discipline of putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Or in the case of that day at the airport, putting yourself in the other person's line.

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