

Etiquette Excerpts

The Five Most Annoying Customer Service Practices

Last week I was shopping at my local branch of a large Canadian chain store when I heard a commotion coming from the customer service desk. I looked over just in time to see an employee yelling, "Why are you giving me a hard time?" to a customer who was trying to return something. Yikes! In a perfect world, customer service transactions would be settled without raised voices but whatever happened to "the customer is always right"?

I am always dismayed when organizations invest in research and development, make great products, conduct powerful marketing campaigns and then fail spectacularly when it comes to customer service. Some companies have horrible reputations based solely on their approach to customer service, even if their products or services are actually great.

Because I believe organizations benefit from constructive feedback, I spend a lot of time calling customer service lines. Based on my experience, here are my top five most annoying customer service practices:

1. Hidden contact info - Customers should not have to hunt through web pages, call directory assistance or do a Google search to find your customer service number. What are you afraid of? Put a Customer Service tab on your home page and list the various ways that make it easy for people to get in touch with you. It should take no more than one click for a customer to learn how to connect with you in the method of their choice.

2. Longer than normal wait times – How many times have you heard that "due to a higher-than-normal volume of calls, the customer service department is temporarily experiencing increased wait times"? If the call volume is genuinely higher than normal, then this message is somewhat useful. However, most of the organizations which use this recording have it playing all the time, every hour of every day, which suggests that in fact, call volume and wait times are always high and high = normal. Rather misleading.

3. Advertising to unhappy customers - People don't generally call customer service when everything is going great (although a little praise would go a long way). So why do companies think this is a good time to advertise to them? If you're upset because your brand new dishwasher has gone on the fritz, do you really want to hear a recorded loop about the wonderful deals on washing machines? Or worse still, a suggestion that, instead of staying on the line and talking to a human, you should hang up and go to the website. Chances are, you already tried the website and were not able to resolve your issue there and that's why you are on the phone.

4. Requesting the same information over and over again - Often, when calling customer service lines, you are asked to provide information in order to get past the first stage of the voice prompt system. You might be asked to give your phone number, membership number or mother's maiden name, etc. When you finally have an opportunity to talk to a human, the first thing they do is ask for the same information. If they're unable to help and need to transfer you to another department, the next person asks you for the same information. It's a small thing but it just adds fuel to an already volatile situation.

5. Lack of empathy - I know some people disagree with me on this but I don't think customer service representatives (or any employees) have a right to get upset or annoyed when customers are angry for legitimate reasons. I used to work on a 1-800 support line for the provincial government and people often phoned in a state of rage. I didn't take it personally. I just let them vent for a while and then I tried to help them. Even if I couldn't give them what they wanted, they were usually grateful for the opportunity to say their peace and lower their blood pressure. If you staff a customer service line, you need to remember that people usually call because your organization has let them down in some way. Getting uppity with them is only going to make things worse. Yes, it's tough to deal with angry people but that is the role and, if you can put aside your own need to be right, there's an opportunity to make someone's day.