

Has Customer Service Gone From “Great” to “Geek”?

by Sandy Geroux

With the increase in our acceptance and use of technology come wonderful productivity advancements, as well as some very interesting social changes. Texting and IM'ing every conversation (even with people in the same room) is now common in social situations. We've probably all seen the commercial where several women are texting each other, asking what's going on in the movie they are all watching. They're texting back and forth, explaining plot lines and action, and texting, “Can you believe she just did that?” The camera then pans out to reveal the fact that all of them are in the same room, most on the same couch!

While this is certainly humorous in a commercial, it is no laughing matter in real life, especially in business, as it reflects a somewhat disconcerting preference for technology over human interaction... a preference which must be overcome in situations that involve direct communication with customers, as we must ask our customer service representatives to adapt their behavior and act like a friend (or even a human being) to strangers whom they are supposed to serve.

Case in point: I recently made online reservations to fly to RI for a funeral. Overwrought, I accidentally made the outbound reservation for 7:35 p.m. on the day I wanted to fly, rather than 7:35 a.m. The wake was that night, so this mistake could not be ignored. I called the travel company and explained my situation, hoping their representative could help me fix the problem as quickly (and with as little penalty) as possible. When I explained that someone had died, I truly expected the person on the other end of the phone to say something – anything – to me along the lines of, “I'm sorry to hear that” or “I'm sorry for your loss.” Nope... nothing.

Instead, she went completely silent, ignored my comment and proceeded to “fix” the problem... but not until after informing me that I'd probably have to pay penalties to both the airline and the travel company. It turned out that no penalties applied because I'd cancelled the reservation within 24 hours, so we were able to create a new reservation without penalty.

One troublesome element of this transaction was the fact that she didn't know her job well enough to have put my mind at ease from the start and reassure me there would be no penalties. More disturbing was the fact that I got about as much compassion from this *human* as I would have received from a *computer*... but at least with a computer, that's to be expected. They have no emotions. *Human beings are supposed to have emotions.*

This representative finally, at the end of our conversation, stammered out the words, “I – I – I hope you can, um, uh, get back on track with your life and stuff, OK.”

Well, it wasn't pretty, but at least it was there – a human emotion.



I realize that customer service representatives are not responsible for making people feel better in bad situations – that’s not their job. However, neither is being compassionate, empathetic and *human* toward others; but it unquestionably enhances the entire relationship when people are...

The fact is that if a friend had uttered the same words to her, those emotions would likely have surfaced automatically, and she would have tried to find some words of comfort for her friend. Her social skills may still have been lacking, but at least she would have let her emotions show.

This shocking lack of even the most basic social skills happens all too frequently:

- A customer makes a joke at the checkout counter in the grocery store, only to be completely ignored (or stared at) by a stone-faced clerk who apparently isn’t in the mood to laugh or have a good time with customers;
- Technical support representatives don’t listen to the nuances of a problem, assuming that the customer is clueless, just going through the “standard” actions in the script (have the customer crawl under the desk, unplug and re-plug cables, etc.), only to discover that if they’d listened, they could have saved the customer that hassle and done only what was really necessary;
- Sales and customer service people stick so closely to their script that they can’t even remember that a human being is on the other end of the phone; or they try to be so ingenuously “cheerful” and/or intimate with strangers that they waste prospective customers’ time and turn them off at the same time. For example, with the use of the person’s name: “Hello, Sandra. I’m here to talk to you, Sandra. What we really want to do, Sandra...” You can almost hear them say, “What we really want to do, [insert name here]...”

How do we turn employees back into humans who know how to be genuine, authentic and compassionate, and know how to properly use their social skills to demonstrate these desirable qualities? We must take some *reasonable and appropriate risks* to bring an atmosphere of creativity and innovation back into our cultures. Start with the following simple steps:

1. Create an atmosphere in your organization where your employees feel free enough to go “off script” long enough to make an impact on a customer who may simply be searching for one tiny speck of human compassion in that conversation. If an employee is so fearful of retribution that they can’t venture off script, you’ll never eliminate the “geek” in that person.
2. Hold “creativity” meetings to brainstorm ways to improve the customer experience; make them fun and productive, not boring and a waste of time. Ask employees for suggestions and opinions (and then *follow up* on them!). Hold roundtables where representatives in different departments interact with, bond, and get to know each other’s needs and learn how best to serve each other.
3. Have people role-play different situations. Only by getting more experience with personal, human contact can they improve their social and communication skills.
4. Put the right people in the job. Seek people who are warm and outgoing, compassionate by nature – not just anyone who can fill the slot. Do they smile easily? Do they go out of their way to fix problems, help others or just do something nice – and unexpected?
5. Encourage employees to smile when they speak. You can hear it when someone is smiling – just as you can hear it when it’s obvious they hate their job, the company... and the world.



6. Encourage employees to treat each other with as much care and concern as they treat customers. Employees who enjoy their job and the atmosphere surrounding it are much more likely to treat customers properly because they're being treated properly. This goes for management, supervisors, and entry level employees alike. If management mistreats employees, it's much tougher for those at lower levels to treat anyone else with kindness and compassion.

The key is to focus on the human aspect of communication and service. Technology is convenient and does increase productivity. But it's not all about technology. We too often forget that with all the technology around us, we're still dealing with human beings with human emotions and human needs.

Most of all, helping employees remember that the most seemingly insignificant action on their part may make a monumental difference to someone in need of that particular action, at that particular moment will make an incredible difference in your customer's experience with your company – and help us put the “human” back into human interactions.

With over 27 years of speaking and training experience, national speaker and author Sandy Geroux delivers motivational and educational programs to help "Turn Your Workplace Into a WOWplace™", helping organizations create WOW experiences for customers and employees alike by fostering a culture of trust, compassion and commitment to values, service and respect.

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