

R-E-S-P-E-C-T Aretha Knew What She Was Talking About - By Nektaria Hamister

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Respect Your Customer, For Better Or For Worse

Everybody jabbars about their excellent customer service. Think, however, of all the bad experiences you have had during the past few months. They are probably too many to count. Serving customers with courtesy and dedication is not a difficult concept. So why do so few people seem to get it? It's a lack of respect-for themselves, their companies, and their customers. This lack of respect leads to laziness, poor language, an inability to see customer problems as opportunities, and a pointless concern with being right.

Laziness. We all know what it's like to be served by someone who sees customers as an annoying interruption to a coffee break or an unwanted illustration of the fact that they do not really know how to do their jobs. Lazy people and lazy organizations go through the motions of work, but actually spend more time and energy complaining about it than doing it. They do not understand that they would be much happier if they took pride in their work and made an effort to be productive. They lack respect for themselves.

Poor language. When was the last time you brought a legitimate complaint or issue to the attention of a customer service person, only to be told that your issue was not very important? Here's an example of one that occurred to me. A pet sitter that had cared for my dog while I was away for the weekend refused to return my key, even though she had been paid in full. I called up the people who had referred her. They started to worry, suspected something un-kosher, and advised me to change the locks as soon as possible.

I went straight to my apartment complex office. There was one staff member present (let's call her Paula) was with a new customer. I told her that I had an urgent issue, she told me to come back later. I excused myself to the new customer and explained my predicament. The first thing that Paula said was that my problem was not a 'maintenance emergency.'

Aside: Paula loves this phrase. She used it when my shower plug (in a one-shower apartment) broke in the shut position during 110 degree weather, leaving me with an impossible bathing situation. That was on a Wednesday. She thought that classifying my problem as a 'non-maintenance emergency' was justification not to fix it until Monday.

Back to the present situation: I started getting angry when I heard Paula's answer, but I knew by then that she simply did not know how to speak. I told her that the problem was serious (and the new customer agreed). I asked when it would be fixed. Tomorrow morning, she replied. That was all I wanted in the first place! Paula, however, did not say this from the beginning because did not respect me as a customer. Speaking properly, however, is not only about respect for the customer. It is also proportionate to one's self-respect.

Inability to View Customer Problems as Opportunities. At The Hamister Group, we have seen that magic can happen when we respond positively and respectfully to customer needs, especially emotional needs. Let's continue with the Paula example. Since a person exhibiting suspicious behavior had the key to my apartment, you can guess that I was rather emotional. All Paula needed to do was eliminate that awful phrase 'this is not a maintenance emergency' from her repertoire and replace it with. 'Oh, that's terrible! The maintenance man has already left for today. If I can take care of it by tomorrow morning, would that be ok?' She would have become my hero and have made a positive impression on the new customer. This is about respecting your customer's position and yourself as a problem-solver and service hero.

Pointless Concern with Being Right. The customer is not always right. In fact, we all know that the customer is often wrong. But he is still the customer. And, as Mark Hamister says, you won't have to worry about who is wrong and who is right if you don't have any customers.

My high school and college employer, a garden shop in Williamsville, NY, gave me a wonderful lesson in this philosophy: one day an older man came to the shop and complained that a plant we sold him had died. This plant was in its original container, which had a size and shape that we did not use. I politely told him that he had made a mistake: the plant had come from somewhere else. The customer became furious and insisted that he had bought it from us. I took the plant to one of the owners and explained the situation. He said told me to replace it and not to mention again that the man had not bought his plant from us. 'Why?', I asked. It was from another store. 'It doesn't matter where he bought it. If he believes that he bought it here and we don't replace it, he'll tell people about his bad experience.' This is about respect for your company and your paycheck-which you won't have if your company turns away all of its customers.

There are times when being right are important. We must be right when dealing with laws, brand standards, company liability, etc. Most customer concerns, however, are not related to such issues.

RESPECT. Respect yourself, your customer, your company, and your paycheck. Show that you care at every opportunity. This will make you refreshingly different from bad customer service representatives.

Stop worrying about getting your way because you are right: even if you are right, you can still lose. All customers, right or wrong, can take their business elsewhere.

Show respect when you speak. Word your responses to customers carefully when facing difficult situations. A good answer to a complaint about the way you do things would be: 'That's a very good suggestion.' Validate your customers' emotions, even though it is best not to validate an unjust complaint: 'I understand how you must feel.'

Ask positive questions that lead to issue resolution: 'What can I do to resolve this for you?' 'What works for you?' 'What do you think would be a reasonable period of time to get this resolved?' Most people will not give absurd answers. They will appreciate your attention and may even become your most loyal customers . . . all because you showed them, yourself, and your company a small amount of respect.

And when you have a difficult customer in front of you, just pretend he's Aretha (although you might want to replace 'kisses' with 'services'):

'Ooo, your kisses

Sweeter than honey

And guess what?

So is my money

All I want you to do for me

Is give it to me

R-E-S-P-E-C-T'

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