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Sales Solutions

Communicate to customers, even the bad news

Andrea Sittig-Rolf

As I sit stuck at the Newark airport on a Sunday night, I ponder, what is it that defines good customer service? As one now on the receiving end of a very frustrating, lack of good customer service situation with the airline, I feel compelled to share what I believe are the essentials of good customer service.

First, communicate communicate communicate! This is a must. If the original plan you have mapped out for your customer fails to come to fruition, whatever you do, communicate this to your customer in a clear, concise manner as soon as possible. If feasible, tell your customers about the problem before they realize it's an issue. Leaving it up to your customer to have to track you down and ask for an explanation of why your plan has failed is not a good idea! Let me explain what I mean.

Before the later-than-scheduled boarding of the flight I'm on tonight, there was no announcement from the airline that the flight was delayed; no explanation, no "we're sorry for the delay," nothing. I watched the departure time on the flight departure board change a few times before finally boarding the plane, 90 minutes past the scheduled boarding time. Then, after sitting on the plane at the gate, for more than an hour, the pilot finally decided to bless us with his knowledge of what the heck was going on. After several announcements about a broken hydraulic pump, and another 90 minutes later, we were all asked to wait in the boarding area at the gate until further notice.

During the time of waiting for further notice, now two hours since we were asked to wait at the boarding area at the gate, still no announcement has been made. Because of this, I find myself asking an agent what's going on and although she tells me one version, the story seems to change about every 30 minutes or so, but only if I ask of course, as still no announcements are being made to keep us all informed.

The point is that most customers don't expect perfection. And actually, should things go wrong along the way, you have the opportunity to become a hero by the way you handle the situation. Not communicating with your customer is not the way to handle it, as I have shown in my previous example.

The second essential component of good customer service is to try to make up for your mistake by giving the customers options to choose from on how they would like the situation to be resolved. Telling your customer, "it's our way or the highway" -- quite literally in my case of not being able to fly home, leaving the highway as the only option, is also not good customer service. Allow your customer to decide from several different options what will best work for him to bring resolution to the predicament.

Next, consider offering an incentive to continue doing business with you after the initial faux pas has been resolved. You might offer a discount on future business, add something of further value or benefit at no extra charge to your next project, or offer a gift certificate to provide a nice meal or event for your client and a friend.

Finally, don't forget about the basics. Treat your customers with respect, stay calm in a harried situation, maintain a positive attitude -- even if you have to fake it, and most of all, do whatever you can do to show how much you appreciate their business.

ANDREA SITTIG-ROLF is a public speaker, author, and president of Sittig Inc., a sales training and consulting firm. Her new book, "Business-to-Business Prospecting: Innovative Techniques to Get Your Foot in the Door with Any Prospect" (Aspatore Books) is available on Amazon.com. Reach her at 206-769-4886 or www.sittiginc.com, and send your "Sales Solutions" questions to info@sittiginc.com.