

From "Ready for Pickup" to "Ready to Give Up": One Best Buy Customer's Frustrating Journey

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Executive Summary

A single customer's frustrating curbside pickup experience reveals potential breakdowns across Best Buy's processes, communication, and service, raising risks relating to customer loyalty, technical system failures, and operational efficiency. This case study should not be seen entirely as just one specific case, but rather a lens through which to examine systemic vulnerabilities that could threaten brand reputation and retention. This is a deep-dive analysis intended to identify critical failure points and prompt vital conversations, not to provide simple answers.

The question for Best Buy isn't about easy fixes, but rather, how can it leverage this failure to better understand its systems and their impact on customer experience?

The exploration starts here.

Introduction

In today's retail battleground, customer experience reigns supreme and brand loyalty hangs in the balance. This case study dissects a seemingly simple Best Buy curbside pickup—gone wrong—to reveal the real-world impact of flawed processes and inconsistent service. "Sam's" experience, an open box TV purchase turned ordeal, illuminates critical themes: expectation management, the strategic value of seamless

customer journeys, and the impact of inconsistent execution. This isn't just one bad experience; it's a symptom of systemic issues that can cost Best Buy customer loyalty and revenue. By analyzing Sam's journey, we'll pinpoint areas for improvement in order to spur conversations about opportunities for improvement.

Scenario

The scenario described below is a retelling of an actual customer experience. Some details have been generalized for brevity and dialog has been simplified in certain areas. Every effort has been made to maintain accuracy. Characteristics of the individuals described (including names) may have been altered to prevent attribution of behaviors to any individual.

One cold night in January Sam found himself on his way to Best Buy to pick up a TV he had purchased a week earlier for curbside pickup. He was excited. His wife had gotten him a “Plufl” for Christmas. While a human-sized dog bed wasn’t on his list, the idea of cuddling up with his dog on the floor of his office between meetings to watch some TV was almost palpable. The one thing missing from that scenario? The TV. After the holiday craziness Sam went to the Best Buy app to find a good deal on a TV. He had some rewards certificates from credit card purchases and Christmas gifts he bought. He had come across the perfect deal. An open-box 43” TCL 4k TV for \$105.99. It was a 2023 model, a Black Friday one, no doubt. But it was in excellent condition. All original parts and accessories, original packaging, and no noticeable scratches or dents. Seeing as it was an open box there was no shipping available, but it was available at the store closest to him. Excitedly he went through check out, making sure to select curbside pickup (it was January after all), and most importantly touse his \$30 in rewards certificates.

Within a few hours Sam got a notification that his TV was ready. He noted that he had 7 days to pick up the TV. He kept the email confirmation in his inbox as a reminder. A few days later he was reminded again. He definitely hadn’t forgotten about the TV, but hadn’t had a chance to make it to the store. Finally, on the sixth day he had his chance. This is where we find Sam tonight: on his way to Best Buy to pick up his order.

Sam checked the app before he left home. He was used to being able to let the store know he was on his way and wanted to do the same in this case. Unfortunately, he couldn't do that, but saw clear instructions for what to do when he got to the store. About 20 minutes later he arrived at the store. He located the curbside pickup parking spots. The app asked for the curbside pickup space number. Sam looked at the sign for the space he had parked in. It was turned sideways. He could only read one side. It was a handwritten 6. Next to him was 7, but on the other side was 4. Unable to determine for sure which spot he was in, he entered 6. He put in the information for his car and once he saw that he had been assigned a four-digit code, he sat back to wait.

Sam browsed Amazon on his phone. He opened Google News to scroll through the headlines. All the while he kept a close eye on the door of the store. He wanted to make sure that if someone came out carrying his TV he could make sure they knew where to find him. After a few minutes using other apps Sam went back to the Best Buy app to see if there was any message about what was taking so long. There wasn't any indication of how long he might have to wait so his only expectations were based on his experience with curbside pickup at other stores. Fortunately for the associates working that night, those expectations had been set pretty low elsewhere. When he opened the app it had restarted and he could no longer see the four-digit code. So he went through the process to check in again. Selected space 6. Entered his car information. And sat back to wait. One eye on the door, another on the customers walking by. Not wanting to have to start over for a third time, Sam kept the app open. After 10 minutes passed Sam was frustrated. He turned off his car and walked into the store.

As Sam was walking toward the door of the store he was hoping there would be an associate standing there with his TV ready to go. After all, he had been waiting almost 15 minutes with no communication at all about the reason for the delay. When he walked into the store there were four associates huddled around what he assumed was the loss prevention desk. He stood in front of them for a moment; not wanting to interrupt their conversation. Eventually they looked up and asked, with their eyes,

how they could help. Sam explained that he had been sitting in his car waiting for a curbside pickup order.

“Are you the TV?” a woman asked.

“Well, I’m not a TV, but that’s what I’m hoping to pick up, yes,” he responded.

“We actually can’t find it,” the same woman responded.

“Oh,” Sam replied.

Another associate asked, “Did you already pick it up?”

“No,” Sam said slowly. “That’s why I’m here.”

The associates hurriedly went back to their screens and continued their muffled conversation. It was clear they were hoping that was the solution. A man separated himself from the clump of associates and asked, “Is it possible that a friend, relative, or spouse picked up the item on your behalf?”

“No...”, Sam responded with a hint of frustration. “Wouldn’t the app show it was picked up if that was the case?”

“Oh, yeah, good point,” he replied.

The woman who spoke first looked up and said, “We are still looking for it. It’s going to be a few minutes. You can wait over there and we’ll bring it up when it’s ready.”

“Ok, I’m just going to go browse the aisles and I’ll come back up in a few minutes to get it,” Sam replied.

The associates turned back into their huddle and Sam walked into the store. He walked back to the TV section. He had been eyeing the Hisense line of mini-LED TVs and wanted to see one in person. Sam browsed the flagship brands in search of the Hisense display. Realizing that there wasn’t a section dedicated to Hisense, he went browsing the aisles of TVs. Several had error messages displayed on them. Others looked like they were trying to boot into Android, but were stopped at a green prompt on a black

screen to reinstall the operating system. Unimpressed, Sam decided to browse the PC aisle. As he was walking to the PCs he heard a, “Yo!” in his direction. He turned around.

“We got it. It’s up front,” a man told him from several aisles away.

Sam walked to the front. He didn’t see a box with a TV so he was curious what was going on. He got to the service desk as two associates brought out a TV wrapped in bubble wrap.

“Here you go,” one said.

“Uh, ok,” Sam replied. “That is an Excellent condition TV?”

“Yep.” They replied.

Sam looked at the woman behind the counter; the same woman that had greeted him earlier. She nodded approvingly.

“Uh, ok. Where is the remote?” Sam asked, knowing the answer.

“Umm, I’m not sure,” the woman responded as she poked and prodded the bubble wrap hoping to find a remote. “Let me call the back and see if they can bring one up.”

Sam remembered the description of an Excellent condition open box TV. Just to be sure he opened his app, found his order, opened the product page for the TV, and selected Excellent as the condition. Sure enough, an excellent condition open box TV was supposed to come with all original accessories. Sam also noticed that the description included original packaging. Sam made the fair assumption that bubble wrap was not the original packaging.

“What about the box?” Sam asked.

“It doesn’t have a box,” the woman replied.

“What about the legs?” Sam asked, with his frustration beginning to show.

“Umm, I’m not sure,” the woman replied.

Sam opened the app again and read the description of Excellent condition to the woman. She stared back blankly. "Where is the original packaging? Surely this isn't it," Sam said to try to prompt a response. The woman went to the computer.

"The computer says this one doesn't have a box," she concluded.

Sam again read the description of excellent box condition. Again he was met with a blank stare. This kind of back and forth continued for a few minutes until the woman plainly said, "so do you want to return it?"

Sam wanted to speak to someone else, but he saw that this woman was a supervisor so he assumed he was talking to the right person. He decided to call 1-800-BEST-BUY to try to talk to someone there since the order did originate online. He navigated the prompts. Curiously, when the automated system read out the status of the order he was there to pick up it said the pickup was completed. Sam took the phone from his ear and asked, "Why is the status of my order saying it was picked up?" The woman looked down at the computer and did not respond. Sam was annoyed now. He went back to the phone call. At this point he was on hold waiting to speak to someone. Realizing waiting on hold was only frustrating him more, he decided it was time to hang up and try to escalate the issue in the store.

"I see that your badge says supervisor. Is it fair to assume that you're the right person for me to be speaking to? Is there a manager or someone else that I could talk to?" he asked.

"Well I'm a supervisor, but there are managers here," she responded.

"Could I speak to the store manager, or whoever is on duty?" Sam asked.

"Sure let me see if I can get him to come up here," she said in a muffled voice.

Sam turned away from the counter towards the appliance display. It was clear the woman had made contact with someone and it seemed like someone was coming to talk to him. After a few minutes a man appeared at the counter. It seemed like he was getting an overview of the situation from the woman Sam had been dealing with. For

several minutes they huddled over the computer. Sam was already discouraged at the thought that this was the next level he was about to escalate to.

The man broke away from the woman and the computer as she called the customer in line behind Sam to help them with a return. Sam asked the manager, or he assumed to be the manager since there was no introduction, if he thought that the TV, still in bubble wrap, should be considered Excellent condition.

“That is what Geek Squad evaluated it as, yes,” he responded plainly.

“What about the description online? That it should come in the original packaging with original accessories?” Sam asked.

“Well,” he demurred as he looked down at the wrapped TV. “So, do you want to take it with you? We have a remote and power cord.”

“I mean, I was hoping for the originals, but it was a great deal so I can probably make it work. Do you mind unwrapping it so that I can see if the physical condition at least matches the description?” Sam asked.

“Sure,” the manager responded as he peeled open the bubble wrap. Immediately Sam saw a small, but noticeable scratch at the top of the screen.

“What’s this?” Sam asked.

The manager put his finger on it. “Looks like a scratch,” he said.

Sam pulled out his phone. He brought up the description of Excellent condition and read it aloud. When he finished he looked up inquisitively. “That doesn’t seem to match what I’m looking at here.”

“No, it doesn’t,” the manager said.

At this point, hoping for a higher level conversation about the entire situation Sam summarized what had happened for the manager. His tone was easily identifiable as frustrated.

Once Sam finished the manager stared blankly and asked, “so do you want to return it?”

“Is there a store manager or district manager whose contact information I could have?” Sam asked.

“1-800-BEST-BUY,” the manager responded plainly with no expression.

“Is there an individual I can contact?” Sam asked.

“1-800-BEST-BUY,” the manager repeated.

Sam looked down in an attempt to suppress his anger to refocus on the problem at hand. He picked up his head and said, “look, we are where we are with the TV. I can accept that I’m probably not walking out of here with the TV and that you guys will issue a refund. But what I’m more interested in now is what you, as the manager, will do to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“Well, when we figured out that your TV was missing I went looking for a new one, but it’s a Black Friday special from last year so we don’t have any and there aren’t really any that are similar to it. But I’m going to talk to Geek Squad and make sure they give things the right condition before we put them back out for sale,” he said.

Sam looked at him incredulously. “That’s it? What about me waiting for 15 minutes in my car? What about the lack of urgency when I came in? What about the fact that someone completed the pickup without ever asking for my acknowledgement? What about the fact that I was told by multiple people that the condition of the TV was Excellent? Right up until the point that I found the scratch myself? What about the fact that at least one person knew you no longer had the TV I ordered and never bothered to update the order or even contact me?” he asked with wide eyes.

“Well, sir, like I said, I’m going to talk to Geek Squad about putting the right condition on open box items,” he said matter of factly.

“Could I just get the Store Manager’s name? Just the name. I want to be able to follow up with him about this,” Sam said, almost begging.

“It’s Tom. Tom Henderson,” the manager responded. “But he’s not really going to be able to help you because this order started at bestbuy.com so the only way to get any help is to call 1-800-BEST-BUY.”

Sam paused for a moment. He let out a sigh. “All I want is to make sure that this doesn’t happen to someone else. I’m not looking for anyone to get in trouble. I’m not looking for a free TV. I’m not looking for anything except to know that someone with the power to change things knows what happened and plans to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Yeah, Xavier is the right guy. He also oversees Geek Squad so he can help there, too. If you want I can give you a \$20 store credit,” the manager suggested.

Somewhat taken aback that the offer came so late, after he explicitly said he wasn’t looking for any compensation, and as he was prepared to walk out, Sam responded, “Well, I’m not going to say no to that, but I’m still disappointed that I’m walking out of here without the TV that I ordered.”

“Yeah, I know, sorry about that. It was a good deal, too,” the manager said with a look suggesting he thought that was helpful.

“Ok, goodnight,” Sam said as he walked out of the store.

Conclusion

Sam's Best Buy experience, a curbside pickup gone wrong, reveals critical flaws that threaten customer loyalty. Broken communication, inconsistent product representation, and a lack of staff ownership point to systemic issues demanding immediate attention. This case highlights how a single touchpoint breakdown can quickly escalate, creating frustration and a lost customer. The cost isn't just a refund; it's potential customer attrition and damaged brand reputation. To prevent similar experiences, we must understand where Sam’s journey failed and commit to meaningful process improvements. The following questions are designed to guide that exploration and provoke action-oriented solutions.

Questions for Reflection

- How can Best Buy use all of the tools at its disposal to prevent a situation like what happened with Sam's TV order from happening to other customers?
- How can Best Buy leverage its post-purchase communication (e.g. app, emails, text messages) to manage customer expectations, reducing delays or unexpected conditions for curbside pickup?
- How can the training of front-line associates improve to efficiently handle customer complaints and de-escalate tensions, especially during the initial interaction?
- What systemic issues contribute to the inaccurate inventory and product condition issues experienced by Sam, and how can Best Buy improve these operational areas to prevent similar experiences?
- What steps can be taken in terms of employee training and technological upgrades to prevent such experiences from happening to other customers and how will Best Buy assess the success of these initiatives?
- How can Best Buy create an escalation protocol that addresses the concerns of customers, especially when staff is unable to provide solutions at the local store level?
- How can Best Buy use this specific case to analyze its customer service processes and initiate specific changes that lead to improvement in customer satisfaction and retention?