

Title:

Butchering Customer Service

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Summary:

It's one thing to be attentive and meet customers' needs; it's another to be so present and "in their face" that customers think you want them to adopt you. This article will help you understand the difference so that your customers will continue to reward you with loyalty.

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Article Body:

All businesses strive to provide excellent customer service, but there's a fine line between service and servility. Extreme servility is called obsequiousness. Now there's a word for you to know. Even if you don't know what it means, you've experienced it—maybe in a restaurant, a clothing store, a car dealership, anywhere where employees hope that by virtue of their attention they will make sales or garner large tips. It's one thing to be attentive and meet customers' needs; it's another to be so present and "in their face" that customers think you want them to adopt you.

A few months ago, I ordered a gift of steaks and roasts from a meat mail order business for some family members. When no acknowledgement came, I called to find out if they had gotten their present. As it turned out, the parcel delivery service had left the package at the wrong address, but the people who had received it in error were honest enough to immediately call the intended recipients to let them know about the mix up.

The only person who had made a mistake was the delivery man who'd misread the mailing label, and no one ever heard a word out of him or his company. The same can't be said for the meat company. In its relentless pursuit to keep customers satisfied, company representatives started calling me—daily—to make sure I was still happy and to see if I didn't want to order more meat.

After the umpteenth call that resulted in no additional purchases from me, I asked to have my name and number removed from the calling list. Being nice hadn't worked. Maybe some force would be more effective. Keep in mind I had had

absolutely no beef with the mail order company until now. It was at this point, however, that customer service attention turned into customer obsession.

I thought I'd gotten the point across, but about a week later I started receiving calls at my work number. When I would take advantage of the caller ID feature on my phone, I saw an area code and number I didn't recognize. I answered in my usual way, but each time the caller said nothing and simply hung up. This happened several times until I checked the number and discovered it was the cattle crew. This was out of control. I'd said no from my home number. The answer wasn't going to be any different on my business line. Now they were intruding on my work day without saying a word.

One final call (and I emphasize the word final) came at 9:17 p.m. last week. Dinner was long over, and no one in the house was thinking about food, especially not about T-bones. No one was consciously thinking about anything since we were all asleep. It had taken almost an hour to get the three-year-old to quit fussing about having to go to bed, but at last he'd drifted off. That is, until the phone rang. I was roused from a very deep sleep by the phone ringing and our child yelling for Mommy.

Too unawake to check the caller ID, I answered. To my utter amazement, it was another company rep wanting to know if I was ready to order more filets. It was time to take this bull by the horns. "No," I said, "not now, not ever again!" I can't remember exactly, but I'm sure I pointed out that I'd asked to have my name and number removed from their list. That he had had the audacity to call so late in the evening was absolutely beyond my comprehension.

This experience is a clear illustration of how customer service can go terribly wrong. Probably part of this was due to someone misreading the data and assuming that since I had placed a substantial order, I would likely do so again. Who knows? Maybe I would have at a later time, but the "overkill" from the sales staff turned out to be a deal breaker as far as I'm concerned.

Let this be a cautionary tale for any businesses out there that think "hard selling" is going to work every time. In many cases it will backfire and have just the opposite effect from the one you want.

I've recently conducted a less-than-statistically-valid study polling people (my office manager, my aunt, and a very nice woman behind me in a line at Safeway) about customer disservice. Although not all the results are in, here are ten tips to take to heart to keep your customers truly satisfied:

1. Just because your business model says customers should, in all probability,

be interested in buying something, don't assume they're kidding when they tell you no.

2. Limit unsolicited calls to the same person.
3. Call at a reasonable time.
4. After you hear "Hello," really listen to what the other person says to you.
5. Don't argue when the customer says "no."
6. Honor the customer's wishes.
7. If you are offering service to someone in person, be available, but don't hover.
8. An internet order does not give you authorization to call someone at home or work to offer add-on purchases or services.
9. Know that a lot of people have caller ID, so don't call and hang up without saying something.
10. Ask yourself: Would you want to get the call you're getting ready to make?

This is just a starting point. Maybe you have some pet peeves of your own. If so, send them to our website. There are plenty of people we like to hear from. Just don't contact me about buying anything that was standing on four legs and had a pulse until recently. I'm now a vegetarian thanks to the last person who did!