

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS WRONG

“Your call is important to us. Please remain on the line and your call will be answered in the order it was received.”

Perhaps it is just me, but have you ever wondered why “customer service” operators just don’t answer the phone? Instead we are subjected to a series of automated questions that require instant answers. If you don’t know the answer you’re doomed. If you enter something wrong you either have to start over or are disconnected. Then, when someone does answer you are typically asked the same questions again! It is maddening and definitely not service.

This is modern day customer service. While waiting we are forced to listen to music and pre-recorded messages about how “important” our call is. Adding insult to injury, some service centers ask that you “stay on the line to take a customer survey.” If you are like me, you’re upset enough about having to call in the first place and have no interest in taking a survey.

What bothers me most is the assumption that the customer is wrong or caused the problem resulting in the call. It is a corporate Borderline Personality Disorder. Somehow, some way, it is our fault.

My experience with these highly orchestrated and formulaic customer service operations is that they don’t really pay any attention to what you’re saying but stick to a well-crafted script which they think you should not dare question.

Whatever happened to the idea of the customer is always right?

My recent trips down the diamond lane of disaster included Verizon, Dell and Netgear. All three of these industry dynamos have similar unpleasant characteristics when it comes to customer service.

My adventure started with a call to Verizon regarding failure of my DSL service one recent Sunday morning. The technician told me that it was my equipment. After going through the ritual of testing, resetting and reprogramming it became clear that once again it was Verizon’s equipment that had failed.

The next day I happened across a Verizon repairman at a local outdoor telephone cabinet. Apparently thieves had cut the lock and remove line cards disabling the local DSL network the day before. Naturally, customer service had no information about this.

While my router and modem were in fact working fine prior to the disruption something had changed so I had to call Netgear. Two new routers out of the box later I had one that worked. The process included two trips to the electronics store and several hours of English translation

challenges on the phone. When it comes to customer service, speaking English and understanding English are two distinctly different skills.

Four years ago I purchased my Dell computer because of my last computer nightmare that included extended warranty and support. This has paid off in more ways than I can describe but even so over the years conversations of four to six hours with customer service have not been uncommon.

Interestingly, the majority of my computer problems are related to Microsoft updates and compatibility issues not Dell hardware - at least, until now. My recent three week tortuous trek included shipments of defective parts and a technician who came to the house.

Ultimately the computer was packed up and shipped back to the factory. Countless emails back and forth yielded nothing but frustration. The solution is obvious and it is not Dell.

Virtually everyone has stories like this about companies that say they care when in fact they don't. Why do we put up with it? After all, it is our money, our time and our loss of productivity.

My brother is an executive with a major software company that most everyone hates. I gave him a call for some candid answers about why pathetic customer support is such a pervasive problem.

He told me that the computer world is driven by two opposing forces: Extensive funding towards marketing while at the same time finding ways to keep customers from calling. Customer service is a "cost center" and must be kept at a minimum.

Amazingly, management is baffled as to why customer retention is problematic discovering that "It is hard to get customers and it is hard to keep them." Gee, I wonder why?

If you are like me, you expect products to work out of the box as advertised. Alas, this is often not the case. The computer industry calls this "Ship and Fix." This is driven in large part because "delivering product per deadlines often comes at the expense of quality. Testing resources and tools are an operational expense and are often sacrificed in order for product managers to hit delivery metrics. Often the product manager is not even accountable for service and support costs."

Not to worry my fellow consumer. If something doesn't work a new one will be shipped to you without question. Quality control has become a thing of the past.

To me it would seem that upset customers would be bad for business. Profit centers are disrupted by defective products and time spent with customers trying to resolve preventable problems. Why not do it right the first time?

Customers today are better educated and have many resources where they can vent their frustrations. "The new approach is a reflection that more companies realize that they need to start

being more mindful of all aspects of the customer interaction with the company and its products and services. Supportability of a product is just as important as the features.”

The growing trend is taking a more “holistic customer experience” approach to customer relationships.

The idea of “self-help” and “community support” is growing. This trend is driven not only by upset customers but the manufactures themselves who are trying to find ways to be responsive but not spend any money to do it.

In the “parallel customer universe” on-line do-it-yourself solutions utilizing resources such as Google, You Tube and community forums are driven by thousands, if not millions, of upset customers who have abandoned traditional customer service venues to create their own.

The real question is what is your time worth? How much time does it cost you to find solutions? Why should you have to in the first place? “Self-help” sounds good, but who has the time to sit at a computer all day looking for solutions to problems that should not be there in the first place?

A recent industry survey shows that over 70 percent of buyers decide on a product to purchase prior to contacting the seller through online reviews, forums and social media. Indeed, customers today are significantly more educated of what they want and are by far less tolerant of poor service and failure rates.

Minimizing costs versus optimizing costs sounds good in a business class, but in the real world what does that mean when things don’t work? Is it unreasonable to expect new products to work out of the box? Is it unreasonable to expect manufacturers to support their products without blaming the customer and wasting their time in the process? Is it unreasonable to expect companies to be able to service their products and services quickly and efficiently even on a weekend?

It is amusing to think that somehow taking care of the customer is becoming a new business model. And, who knows, perhaps with some luck, someday defective products and poor service may not be our fault.