

Greetings,

I hope you enjoy these sample articles from Perceptions & Realities newsletter.

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COMMUNICATION

Splish Splash, I Was Takin' a Bath

When I checked into a hotel recently, I was delighted to find that my accommodations featured a jacuzzi bathtub. With its several nozzles for creating swirling water, this would be a real treat.

Over the jacuzzi timer was a sign that said, "Fill tub before setting." Why, I wondered. As one possessed by a profound sense of "what if?" I turned the timer, curious to see what would happen. The answer: nothing. Odd, I thought, why would they post a meaningless instruction?

I filled the tub part way, covering all but two of the nozzles. I set the timer, noticing that once again nothing happened. Foolish sign, I thought, and settled into the soothingly hot water. Thus ensconced, I pushed the "jacuzzi on" button. Be aware, dear reader, that up till this moment, the rest of the bathroom was dry.

Suddenly, instead of the underwater swirling I was anticipating, water from the nozzles sprayed fiercely in all directions. Quickly, I pulled the shower curtain closed, but the projectile-like jets of water blew aside the shower curtain and drenched the entire bathroom. In the few moments it took me to turn the jacuzzi off, all the towels were soaked, along with my bathrobe, the floor, walls, ceiling, and a swath of carpet in my room.

Ah, I realized (too late, of course), the cryptic sign was intended to prevent just this sort of water-ific situation: Fill the tub, it was warning me, because if you don't, the bathroom


floor will become a training ground for ducklings. But given the sopping wet consequences of ignoring its advice, surely the sign would have been more effective if it had explained the "why" behind the warning: Instead of a lackadaisical "Fill tub before setting," perhaps something like "To avoid damage or flooding, fill tub above nozzles before turning jacuzzi on."

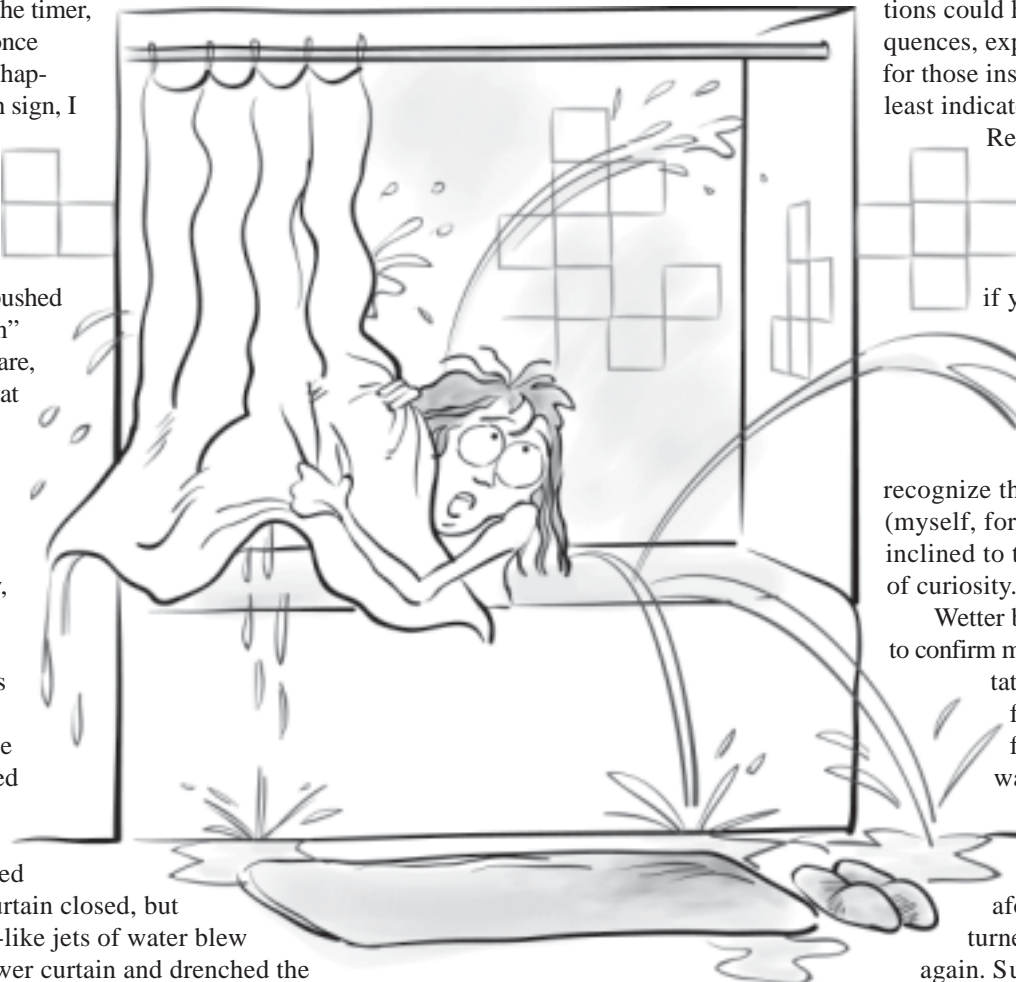
There's a larger lesson here than mere jacuzzi-izing: Don't assume that others will follow your instructions simply because you've provided them. If their failure to follow your instruc-

tions could have dire consequences, explain the reasons for those instructions. Or at least indicate that these are Really Important Instructions and they'd better pay attention. And if you haven't explained the consequences of failing to follow the instructions, recognize that some people (myself, for example) will be inclined to test them, just out of curiosity.

Wetter but wiser, I wanted to confirm my revised interpretation of the sign. I filled the tub further, till the water covered the remaining nozzles, and with trepidation aforethought, I turned the jacuzzi on again. Sure enough, it

behaved flawlessly, creating exactly the sort of underwater turbulence that a well-behaved jacuzzi should. After a pleasant soak, I bailed out the bathroom, returning it to its former state of unsogginess.

Happily, I found that the jacuzzi was a luxurious stress-reliever, even if the stress it relieved was caused by my attempt to use it in the first place. 



MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

No Cheese, Please

In conjunction with a keynote presentation I gave recently, my client generously arranged a room for me on the concierge level of the hotel where the conference was being held.

At 9:30 the evening before my talk, as I was mentally preparing to speak in a ballroom large enough to hold several small cities, I heard a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" I asked. "Room service," came the response. "I didn't order anything from room service," I bellowed in my best go-away-you-knocked-on-the-wrong-door voice. He shouted back, "We have an amenity for you, a gift of the hotel." No thanks, I told him. "It's wine and cheese," he said. "NO THANKS," I said again, speaking in all caps.

Earlier in the evening, wine and cheese would have been delightful. I might even have enjoyed it at 9:30 if I didn't have a speaking engagement the next morning. But at this hour, and given my need to concentrate, I found the interruption distracting and intrusive. Fortunately, after two rounds of No Thanks, the fellow went away.

Not 30 seconds later, the phone rang. "We have an amenity, courtesy of the hotel,"

said Mr. Persistent, who must have been paid based on the number of guests he annoyed while delivering his amenities. "And it won't cost you a thing." Great — I wouldn't be charged for a gift I didn't want. My answer remained the same, if you don't count the increase in decibels, "NOOOO THANKS!!!"

Perhaps this sort of attention was customary on the concierge level of this hotel, and perhaps it had never occurred to the management of the hotel that anyone would turn down their gracious offer. That would have been enough of an issue to justify an article in this newsletter. But . . .

The next day, when I returned to my room to prepare to leave, I found a note from the hotel general manager that said, in part (the comments in brackets are mine):

"I trust that we met or exceeded your every expectation [Well, no, actually you didn't.] and that your stay with us was an enjoyable one. If we did indeed satisfy you, I would be pleased to hear from you through our guest comment card, which is available at the front desk in the lobby. [Enabling you to advertise that 100% of all comment cards report satisfied customers?]

"While our team members are trained and motivated to extend every courtesy and service [except the courtesy of going away when not wanted], I do recognize that occasionally we fail. If, for any reason, we have not succeeded in this regard, I would appreciate it if you would take a brief moment to let me know. I have set up a private voice mailbox for this purpose, which can be reached simply by dialing extension "1192" from your guest room telephone. I have found this type of immediate feedback to be extremely helpful, and I do hope you will use it."

This approach to feedback gathering struck me as an intriguing way to elicit complaints from customers who might otherwise just go away angry. It was a clever way to ensure that grievances

reached someone in a position to rectify the situation. I called extension 1192 and left a detailed, amenity-specific description of my complaint. I assumed the general manager would immediately call me back. When he didn't, I assumed he'd contact me shortly afterwards. Wrong! I never heard back. I have no idea if he received my complaint, listened to it, cared about it, or made any adjustments based on it.

In terms of building customer loyalty, soliciting evidence of dissatisfaction and then not following up with the dissatisfied customer is worse than not requesting the feedback at all. This hotel will not be my first choice next time I'm in that city. But if circumstances dictate that I must stay there, I'll ask to stay on a cheese-free floor.



COMMUNICATION

For a Good Time, Call 333-333-3333

Some people mumble when they speak. OK, so be it. And some people speak too quickly. So be that too. But why is it that so many people mumble and speak too quickly when leaving a phone message? Especially when they want you to return their call.

Take, for example, a message I recently received. The caller wanted to order my SLA handbook and asked that I call him back. But I couldn't decipher his name, even after listening to the message several times. It was as if he began saying his last name while midway through his first name. Somehow, he succeeded in squeezing both names into a single syllable!

Not having his name wouldn't have been a problem, though, if I understood his phone number. But I didn't. He said it too quickly. All I knew for sure is that it had a lot of 3s. I did, however, understand the name of the university he said he was calling from.

What to do? What to do? Aha, I thought. I'll go to the university website, find an employee directory, and search it for phone numbers with lots of 3's. But the website didn't provide a directory. So I followed the links to some of the departments this fellow may have been in, seeking phone numbers with lots of 3's and people whose first and last name, when merged, might sound like this fellow's. But no luck.

I had no choice but to do nothing, probably leading him to think I don't return phone calls.

But the saga continues. About a week later, he called again and once again left a message asking me to call him so he could place an order. His name hadn't changed — still an efficient single syllable. But this time, I understood his phone number. I called. No answer. I tried several more times over the next few days. Still no answer.

I went back to the website, in search of I knew not what, and this time I noticed an email address I could

contact for information. I sent a message saying I was trying to reply to a message from someone whose name I didn't know, but whose phone number was as follows. I asked if it would be possible to determine whose phone number it was and if so, could I please have his name and email address.

The next day I received a reply giving me both.

Amazingly, both his first and last names were familiar names, yet neither was recognizable in his transformation of them into that singular syllable. And as to his phone number, this message explained that phone numbers at the university had changed and he should have given me his new number.

I called him. I found him. He placed an order. Happy ending.


But why do people make it so hard for themselves and, in the process, those they're trying to connect with? The reason, I think, is that most people just don't realize how their messages sound. So a few suggestions:

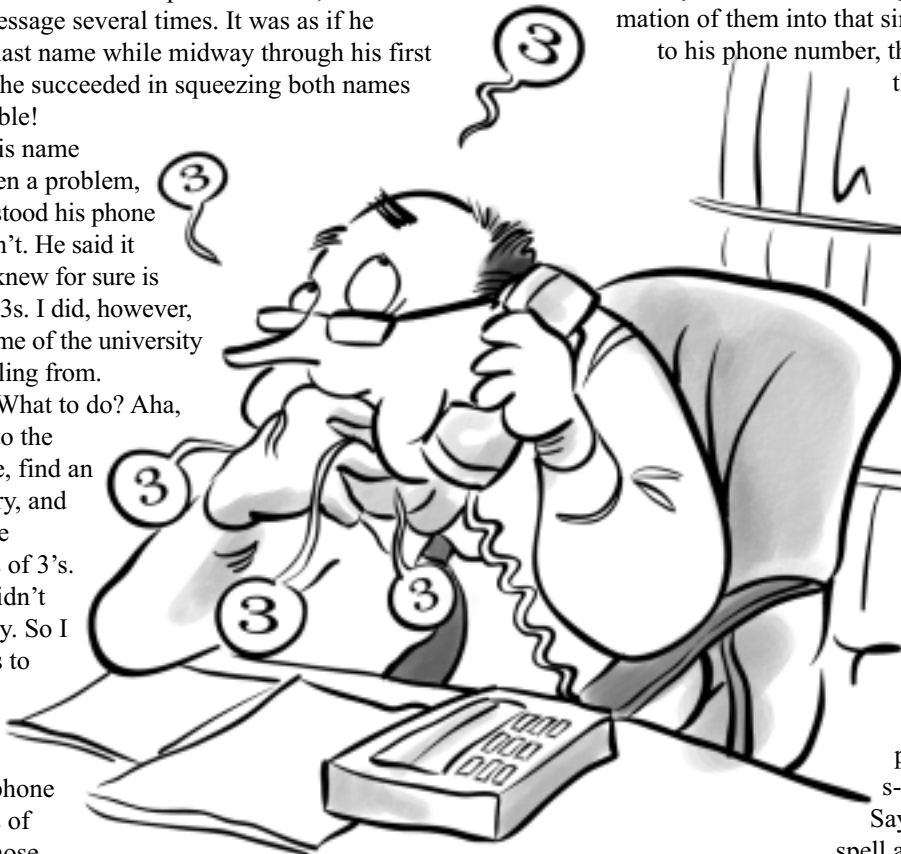
When you leave a phone message, speak s-l-o-w-l-y. Enunciate.

Say your name clearly, and spell at least your last name.

State your phone number as though the person you're calling isn't as smart as you are and can't hear as well as you do. State it so that the person can jot it down without having to replay the message 47 times. Oh, and give the correct phone number.

One other suggestion: Record yourself leaving a typical message that you might leave for someone you wanted to hear from. Listen to it and adjust accordingly. Have someone else listen to it and give you feedback. Adjust accordingly.

I look forward to hearing from you. If I'm out, leave a message. Clearly. Please. 



CUSTOMER REQUIREMENTS

I Want It, I Have It, I Hate It!

The weather seems to have gotten colder as I've gotten older. As a result, the ski jacket that once kept me warm became too skimpy. Sensible people would simply stay indoors, but that lets me out. So I needed a jacket that would protect me when the thermometer suggested I should be indoors, relaxing by the fireplace.

Off I went to the ski shop. It took some searching, but to my delight, I found the Perfect Jacket. It was roomy enough to fit comfortably over the quadruple layers beneath.

It was long enough to keep the nether regions from freezing. Its multitude of pockets would make me a self-sufficient storage system. It zipped up to my nose, ensuring protection from the wind.

And the color was striking. It was orange. Or rather ORANGE. I mean, it was bright! With this jacket, you could have seen me from a mile away on a moonless night. What a find this jacket was.

Until I got home, that is. I tried it on several times, and each time, one more thing annoyed me. Such as that it wasn't just long, it was too long to ski in comfortably. The nose-high zipper would be great in stormy weather but a nuisance on clear sunny days. The jacket was big and roomy and heavily-pocketed, which was good, but with the belt cinched, I looked like a blimp with a belt. And that was bad. When short people wear big, bulky things, they look like big, bulky, short people.

And then there was the color. Iridescent neon orange. My husband pointed out that it would attract dirt. He, being a dirt magnet, would naturally think of this. I knew he was right, and despite my best efforts, it would soon be not just ORANGE, but *filthy* ORANGE.

I began to have unpleasant images. I can ski advanced terrain unless it has strategically situated trees that remind me how much I value my head. But just because I can ski


it doesn't mean I remain vertical the entire time. By the 17th time I tried on the jacket, I could hear the sounds of skiers shouting, "Look, there goes a short, dirty, orange, belted blimp — and a clumsy one at that."

The jacket had to go back. This 24-hour trial period made that clear. But it did something more. It helped me clarify my requirements. I thought I knew what I wanted in a ski jacket, but I was wrong. I'd missed several key features that I wanted the jacket to have, such as a color that wouldn't result in signs saying, "This way to dirty skier."

And I had failed to realize the importance of other features. Until I saw a concrete example of my specifications, I didn't really understand what I wanted.

Similarly, sometimes your customers don't initially know what they want even when they're positive that they do. What my ski jacket experience helped me appreciate is that specifications are really nothing more than a starting point, a first approximation. Sometimes, customers need, in effect, to try on the solution, simulating its intended use so as to see if it satisfactorily addresses their requirements and to make adjustments if any are needed.

I returned my jacket, and after a bout of trying on, I found another jacket, a beautiful, dirt-concealing blue jacket. It lacked several features I'd previously wanted, but I loved it. If I'd evaluated this jacket based on my original requirements, I'd have rejected it. I have now worn this jacket for many a ski season, and I still love it.

I learned from this experience that in the abstract, it's impossible to know which requirements really matter, and of those that do, which are more important than which others. You might want to keep this experience in mind as you help your customers define and refine their own requirements for your products and services. You can help them avoid signs that say, "This way to confused customer." 



COMMUNICATION

Chatterboxes and Cave Dwellers

While on a train ride, I overheard four people engaged in lively chatter. Well, that's not quite correct. Three of them were soft-spoken and reserved. The fourth, a gregarious conversationalist, dominated the interaction. She caught my attention when she said to one of the others: "You have a lot of ideas for such a quiet person."

What a misconception — that a quiet person lacks ideas! Yet, it's an easy mistake to make. After all, if a person has ideas, that person would spout those ideas, right? Well, not necessarily. In fact, one's verbosity in expressing ideas is no clue at all to the quantity of one's ideas. What this woman was experiencing, but didn't realize, was the difference between her own communication style as an extravert and that of her three seat-mates, who were all introverts.

Actually, both introverts and extraverts can talk your head off. And both need quiet time for reflection. But as emphasized by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, introverts and extraverts differ in where they get their energy. The result is a huge difference in communication style. (This spelling of "extravert" is not a typo. In everyday English, it's spelled "extrovert." However, in the context of psychological Type, it is typically spelled "extravert.")

Extraverts get their energy from interaction and tend to be much more animated and expressive than introverts. They enjoy being with people, and can talk with people all day long and still enjoy a group gathering in the evening.

Introverts get their energy internally; much of their communication takes place on the inside, a private place not accessible by others. Thus, they are often less talkative, animated and expressive. And they lose energy from interaction. The very process of talking — or even listening — for an extended period depletes an introvert's energy. As a result, they have a much greater need for

Cave Time to recharge.

Is it any wonder the two types confuse each other? Extraverts think out loud. All that talking is actually the thought process in action. It's not surprising, therefore, that they may appear to be changing their minds in mid-sentence as they work out their ideas and draw conclusions.

Introverts, by contrast, process their thoughts internally and *then* voice them — if indeed they voice them at all. They often prefer time to reflect on a thought before voicing it. As a result, they may take longer to respond than extraverts, but may be more articulate when (if!) they do respond; after all, their utterances have been through several rehearsals already.

Taken to an extreme, introverts look at extraverts and wonder if they'll


ever stop yapping, and extraverts

look at introverts and wonder if there's anyone at home. Yet, these differences are very real, and we will get along better if we try to understand them, respect them, and find ways to laugh about them together.

We can also help others understand our

own style. For example, extraverts can remind their introverted colleagues not to mistake the ideas they are voicing for their final thought on the matter; they are just thinking out loud. Introverts can remind their extraverted buddies that they need a time-out or a break or a week alone in Hawaii.

Perhaps we can all learn how to collaborate in our communication so that we can respect each other's style without sacrificing our own. How wonderful it would be if we could give each other permission to raise concerns about how we are communicating so that we can make adjustments in support of our relationships.

As for me, I've had my say and I'm off to the cave. 



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Yakkety-yak

You can't learn about your customers' needs if *you* do all the talking. Talk too much and you risk alienating the very customers you hope to please.

My doctor exhibited this syndrome when I asked whether Condition A was related to Condition B. As if I'd just pressed the "Chatterbox On" button, she proceeded to describe all medical research conducted on both conditions since Hippocrates was a lad. I was impressed with her knowledge, but not once did she ask the reason for my question. She not only didn't have a clue; she was so busy reciting medical history that she didn't *realize* she didn't have a clue.

The upshot, when she finally reached modern times, was that there was no known connection between the two conditions. And given that fact, I didn't really care about all the rest.

The refrigerator repairman we called in was afflicted with the same condition. This guy was gushing with enthusiasm and eager for me to know as much as *he* knew. Sadly, developing refrigerator expertise has never been one of my life's goals. All I wanted to know was, Will this refrigerator ever keep my ice cream cold again? The answer turned out to be no. Case closed.

And then there are computer techies. When I had a fellow help me configure some new computer equipment, he talked non-stop. This fellow knew all (judging from the word count, at least) and was eager to share every bit of it with me. He didn't even seem to need to breathe; he simply spewed forth. Squeezing in a question was no trivial matter.

These people were eager to share their knowledge. But if you want to generate customer satisfaction and build long-term relationships, you have to determine how much information is the right amount for the customer, and then respect that limit. Asking a pertinent question or two — and then listening carefully to the response — can

help immensely in determining how best to communicate with the customer. In fact, showing an interest by asking questions is an amazingly simple way to exhibit interest in the customer.

For myself as customer, here's what would have worked better with these three talkaholics:

Before educating me in medical history, my doctor might have asked me why I wanted to know about the connection between conditions A and B. By understanding what I was trying to find out, she could have targeted her response to fit my question.

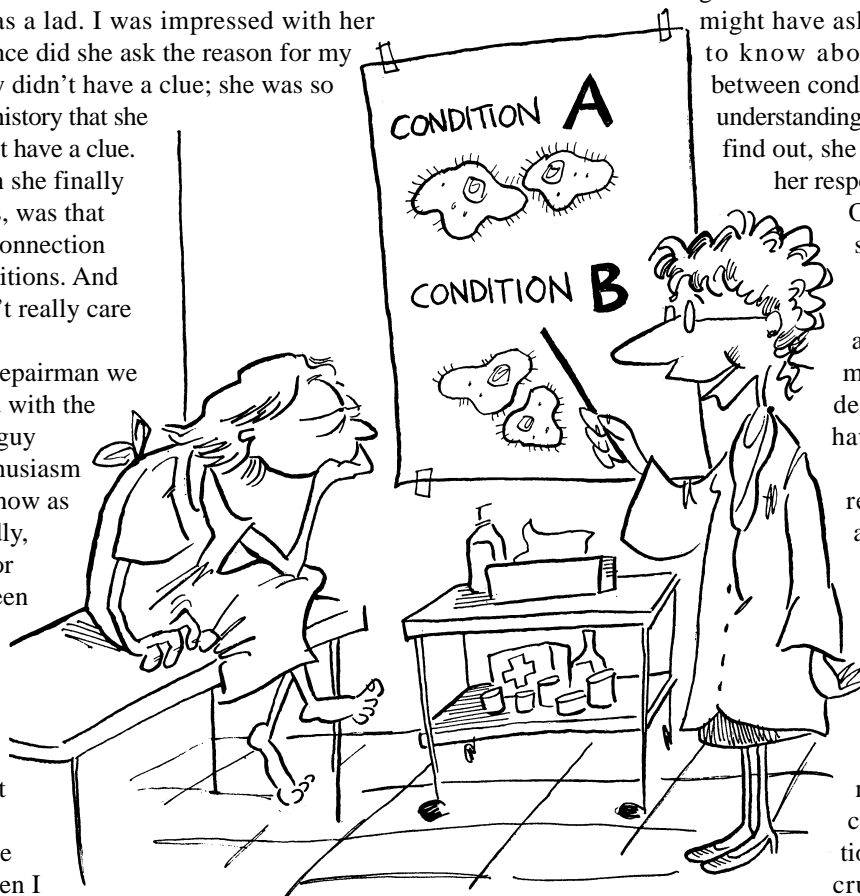
Or she might have simply said, "There's no known relationship. Why do you ask?" Then if I wanted more information (or a decade of data), I could have said so.

The refrigerator repairman might have asked if I wanted to know what he was doing as he dissected our ailing refrigerator. That would have given me the option to encourage or suppress his chattiness. Determining a customer's communication preference can be crucial in generating

repeat business. But this guy, well-meaning though he was, got on my nerves. Hopefully, our new refrigerator will provide 20 years of ice cream-friendly performance.

And the computer techie might have periodically asked any of several questions, such as, Is there anything you want me to explain? Am I giving you the amount of detail you want? And (my favorite), Do you have any questions?

Good customer service requires more than competence at doing the job. It also requires understanding how your customers want to be treated. That's why sometimes it pays to stop yakkety yakking and listen.



MANAGING CHANGE

A Moving Experience

Empathy can help reduce the duration and intensity of the chaos associated with change. This was the realization of a group whose primary responsibility is literally to help their clients implement change.

This group's role as a facilities department is to arrange the relocation of their clients — individuals, teams, departments and entire divisions — from one company location to another. This responsibility entails everything from moving an individual who is transferring to another floor to moving an entire building's worth of people to a new out-of-state campus.

It's not hard to imagine what this experience is like for the people being moved. Think about the last time you moved, whether to another state, another home, another job — or even just to a cubicle on the other side of the floor. All the taking down and putting up, all the packing and unpacking, all the confusion, all the things at the new location that turned out to be better than you imagined (yay!) and all the things that turned out to be worse (drat!). For many people, stress is the dominant theme of such an experience.

So it's not surprising that although many people in this company look forward to a change in location because they will acquire improved digs or a shorter commute, most find the move itself unpleasant at best. Not only have they become attached to their current space — people form strong emotional attachments to their home and work space — but in addition, relocations without incident are rare because of the complexity of accommodating employees' workspace needs.

When I presented a change model to this facilities group as part of a class on managing client expectations,


our focus was on what they might do to minimize their clients' stress and, not incidentally, their own. One of their decisions was to exhibit more empathy for their clients' situation. They felt they could do this by connecting more frequently and effectively with their clients.

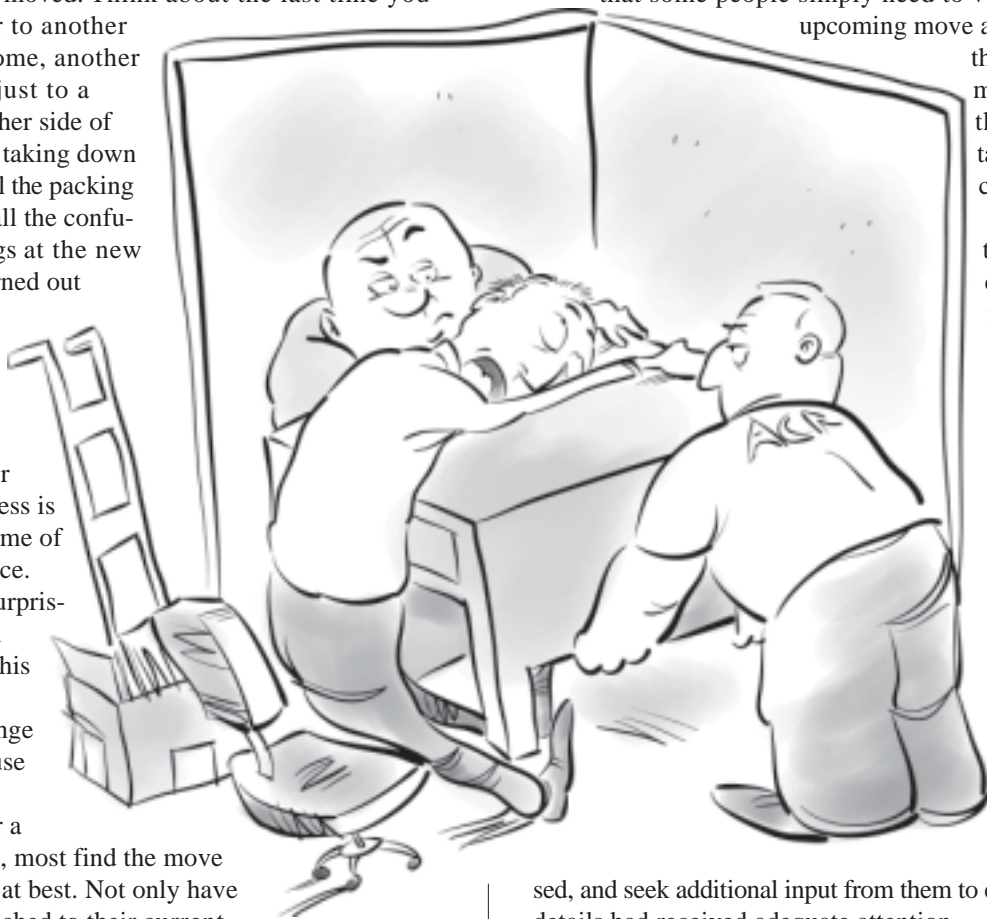
In particular, they agreed to contact people further in advance of a planned move to review important details with them, and then to check in with them periodically as the date of the move approached. They also decided to send out reminders about pertinent particulars that people often forgot in the hubbub, and to give their clients an opportunity to express their concerns about the move. They realized that some people simply need to vent about their

upcoming move and that empathetic listening might be one of the most important things they can do.

That's what they'd do for their clients. As to managing their own stress levels, they resolved to refrain from feeling defensive in response to their clients' complaints about being relocated. Instead, they agreed to do their best to listen without judging, acknowledge the anxieties people expres-

sed, and seek additional input from them to ensure all critical details had received adequate attention.

Clearly, expressing empathy during times of change is not about oohing and aahing, nor is it about coddling people or catering to their every whim. It's about communicating with sincere concern, showing evidence of caring, and listening with the intent to really hear. With empathy as a tool for managing change, you too can help people get moving. 



CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Staffing the Elk Hot Line

You may find it hard to believe, but one of the first things I thought of when I visited an elk refuge was customer support. And in particular, customer hotlines and the patience telephone staff need when they hear the same questions repeatedly.

This story takes us to Wyoming a few ski seasons ago. During a schussing break, my husband and I visited a refuge where elks congregate between summer seasons. (I'm such a city person that I don't even know if you call more than one of them elk or elks.)

The high point of this visit was a tour by horse-drawn sleigh that gave us a close-up view of what elks do in the winter, which is mostly nothing. They just lie around looking bored. Occasionally, they buck horns, just like managers. During the course of this 45-minute ride, people asked the guide lots of questions. What does an elk eat?

How much does it weigh? What do the antlers signify? You know, elk questions.

The guide answered each question enthusiastically, as if he had just heard it for the first time. Afterward, when we were out of the path of beasts that could have decided at any moment that we were lunch, I asked the guide how many of these questions he had heard before. All of them, he said. And how many had he heard frequently? All of them. How did he manage to answer every question with enthusiasm and still retain his sanity? He said he just got used to it; it was part of his job.

So there we were in the middle of an elk refuge, and what struck me was how this fellow's job was similar to a customer support job. Like him, you may hear the same questions over and over. And even though you may have

heard the same question 3,000 times before, you don't hold it against the person who unknowingly becomes the 3,001st (do you?).

But is it satisfying to repeat yourself for a living? (My job? I answer questions about the location of the on-off switch.) Most likely, you excel at responding to frequently asked questions, but do you also aim to minimize the number of times any particular question is asked?

If you really want to minimize repeat questions, then with each question that comes your way, you


must ask yourself, How can I make this the last time I hear this question? (The two most common answers — cutting the phone lines and catching the next flight to Tahiti — may not be permitted in some companies.) Therefore, every question should trigger two actions: First, respond to the question. Second, think about steps to take so that customers have the information they need without

having to contact you. You can spend the time you save doing work that's far more interesting for you and

higher-payoff for your customers.

I can envision a sign posted on the sleigh at the elk refuge. It's labeled, Frequently Asked Questions About Elk, and in bold letters it says:

- What do elks eat? They eat . . .
- What do elks weigh? They average . . .
- What do the antlers signify? They mean . . .

Probably the tour guide wouldn't want this sign in his sleigh. Why? His is not a job that you'd call challenging or energizing. So although he may get bored answering the same questions repeatedly, he probably likes answering them better than the alternative — dead silence. That's a situation you've probably never experienced. 



RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

We All Surf the Web Surreptitiously

At a national conference in Atlanta, I sat down next to a woman I'd never seen before. We started chatting. She said she had spent most of her life in the northeast. I said same for me, whereabouts? She said she was born in Connecticut. Gee, me too, where? New Haven, she said. Really? So was I. Yes, she told me, I was born in New Haven Hospital. So was I!!!

I'd love to report that we were born on the same day, but no, it wasn't even the same year. In fact, it'll be a decade till she's as old as I am, and by then I'll be a decade older. Still, what are the odds that two total strangers have something so life-specific in common?

I believe the odds are high. While immersed in the squabbles and stresses of the typical work day, we sometimes become so focused on our differences that it's hard to believe we're alike in any way at all. But in fact, any two of us, or any three, or even any five or more, have more in common than we might ever imagine.

There's an easy way to demonstrate

this point. Form a group of 4 to 8 people, and in 10 minutes come up with at least 3 non-obvious things you have in common. Saying you're all in the same room or the same city is obvious. It must be non-obvious, and the more unusual or far-fetched, the better.

I've used this activity numerous times in team-building sessions, and the results are often hilarious. The things groups report having in common range from having obstreperous kids, a craving for chocolate, and a fear of flying, to having the same favorite font, disliking furry critters, and knowing that broken cookies have no calories.

One group claimed that the chief thing they had in common was that none of them had the same first name. Another group said that none of them had ever been to the South Pole in August. A third group claimed to be wearing the same color underwear! (I resisted the urge to ask how they knew.) But that's what makes it fun. People abandon

their defenses, and zaniness takes over as they strive (quite noisily, I might add) to discover ways in which they're alike. The very process of being silly together gives them something in common.

But this is not just a trivial exercise. The discovery of similarities helps not only in building new relationships, but also in repairing relationships that have gone awry. For example, I was working with four technical support groups whose responsibilities required them to interact extensively, but whose relationship was plagued by conflict. During a small-group activity in which I placed two of the fiercest adversaries together, I heard one of them say to the other,

"You went to college there? So did I."

How the subject came up, I don't know. But suddenly, and perhaps for the first time, these two individuals saw each other not as adversaries, but as human beings, people who had lives separate



from their work . . . lives not altogether different from their own. They suddenly realized that for all their differences, they also had some things in common.

Did this discovery resolve all the problems between these groups? Of course not. But it was a stepping stone. And by the end of the session, the four groups were not only talking to each other; they had put their heads together to identify their biggest obstacles in working together. And — at their own request — they had developed a list of steps they wanted to take to learn more about each other's work and to help each other. As the session concluded, several of them commented that they wanted to get together more often. This type of relationship reversal is not at all unusual when groups take time to get to know each other better.

What do you have in common with the next stranger you meet? Could be more than you think.



PLANNING

My Strategic Chair

When was the last time you took a break from your frantic pace to perform a strategic review of your service effectiveness? Granted, it's hard to get away from the daily exercise of your hustle muscles. Yet, to successfully conduct a strategic review, you need the right environment. Otherwise, you'll be distracted by that menacing to-do list and you won't be inspired by Grand Ideas.

I recommend going off-site to do big-picture thinking. I'm especially fond of high-altitude strategic review sessions. With my skis strapped on. Gorgeous scenery. Sunny skies. The wind in my hair. Gravity propelling me downhill through pillow-soft snow.

If you can't get away, the next best thing is to create a conducive environment without leaving the office. For some people, a conducive environment means an uninterrupted block of time for reflection. For others, it's having the right people involved so as to maximize idea generation. I know what has helped me. A chair. Really. A chair that helps me think strategically.

I was very fortunate to find it, because you can't always find just the right thing at a yard sale. This chair was a mere \$10, bargained down from \$15 by my husband, Mr.

Never-Pay-The-Posted-Price. It was an unplanned expense, but that was OK, because I already had a column for unplanned expenses in my where-the-money-went spreadsheet. I wouldn't have needed an unplanned expense column if I'd been doing my strategic planning. But I couldn't do effective strategic planning till I had the chair.

This isn't the sort of chair ergonomic gurus recommend for long stretches at a keyboard. No, this was a deep, high-back, swivel-tilt chair. Initially, the swivel-tilt feature left something to be desired, because I could neither swivel nor tilt. The problem wasn't me; it was the floor. It was too far away for me to reach (while seated, that is. I can almost

always reach the floor when standing). And the chair was a bit too deep. But a footstool and assorted cushions enabled me to swivel, tilt and roll around my office, all of which inspire big-picture thinking.

The magical thing about this chair is that when I sit in it, I feel strategic. When I sit in my proper-back-support chair, the one designed for banging the keys, I feel like banging the keys, not doing visionary thinking. But seated in my Strategic Chair, the ideas flow, and my long-range planning actually extends beyond what I'm going to do after lunch. If someone calls when I'm in this mode, I explain that I can't talk now, I'm in the

middle of a strategic planning session. It really impresses people.

Based on my success, I'd strongly urge you to get your own Strategic Chair. Ask around for the

names of yard sale vendors in your area that can offer you

corporate accounts.

Evaluate vendor offerings in terms of functionality, comfort and spinworthiness. Oh, and make sure that you're authorized to approve purchases in the double-digit range.

Whether or not you can create the ideal condi-

tions, make the time to assess your service success and plan for the future. Otherwise, you'll be forever in a reactive mode. Determine what's working well, and take a hard long at what's not and what needs to be done about it. Analyze what you want to change and what you want to keep the same. Contemplate where you want to be 6 months or a year or two from now, and identify what you need to do to get there. Be flexible. For example, I don't especially like the color of my chair. But strategic beggars can't always be strategic choosers. Not a problem, though, since I barely notice the color while swiveling. Wheeeeeee. . .

