

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



N A M I


K A R T E N

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Specializing in helping organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Deliver superior service
- Improve communications
- Build trusting, supportive relationships

Author of:

- *Managing Expectations*
- *Establishing Service Level Agreements*
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Two Rights Make a Wrong

When I ask people how to get somewhere, I hate it when they rattle off a bunch of directions followed by, “It’s easy, you can’t miss it.” When they say, “You can’t miss it,” I know I’ll miss it. See, I lack directional genes. I compensate by leaving extra time to get where I’m going. But I’m not incapable of following directions that are clear, complete, correct, and easy to follow. When your customers have difficulty following your instructions and directions, it could be that you’ve unintentionally provided information that’s unclear, incomplete, incorrect, or difficult for them to follow.

COMMUNICATION

The problem is that people often give directions from the perspective of someone who already knows the way. That was the case when I was given directions to an evening meeting I was scheduled to speak at. I was instructed to bear left at the fork in the road. Even though it was dark out, I found the fork and turned left. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the intended fork — which, as I later discovered, was a half-mile further down the road. Meanwhile, I thought I was going right. That is, I was going left, but thought it was correct to do so. I stopped twice for directions. Both times, I was told, “It’s easy, you can’t miss it.” I missed it.

I finally made it, with entire minutes to spare and a profound distrust of well-intentioned direction givers.

How to tell people where to go

Ideally, directions describe two things: how to reach a certain point or accomplish a certain task, and how to know that you’re heading in the right direction. For example, if you instruct someone to turn right after passing the Low Carb Donut Emporium, the person has no way of knowing if the Emporium is one mile away or 15. It might be more helpful to say: “Go straight on Main Street for 2.4 miles. When you see the Low Carb Donut Emporium on your right, turn right at the next traffic light onto Third Street. If you come to a railroad crossing, you missed the turn by two blocks.”

It may not be necessary to provide street names, distances *and* landmarks, but people take in information in different ways, so these several kinds of details (plus a map for the visually-oriented) can help those who are unfamiliar with the route — or are directionally-challenged — to reach their destination.

Coping with wrong-turn-itis

Is the information you give your customers clear, complete, correct, and easy to follow? For me, the situation is simple: Whenever someone tells me, “It’s easy, you can’t miss it,” I add plenty of extra time to my trip. 

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

No News is (Not Always) Good News

Beware: The absence of bad news does not necessarily mean the news is good. For example, consider my client, Tom, a VP who had called me in to help his group establish service level agreements with his customers. Service delivery, Tom reluctantly admitted, had not been terrific. There'd been snags, slips and snafus. Customer complaints — lots of them — had become the norm. "But we've made some changes, and in the last few months we've had fewer complaints," he told me. "Things are definitely on the upswing."

Wishful thinking aforethought

Tom wanted to believe that things were getting better, and who could blame him? No one likes to be bombarded with complaints. And sometimes fewer complaints do indeed mean that service is improving and customer dissatisfaction is diminishing.

But not so in Tom's case. When I talked to several of his customers about their service experience, it was clear that happy was not exactly the right word to describe them. Distraught might have been closer to the truth. What customers saw wasn't the small amount that had been fixed, but the vast amount that was still broken. They would have taken their business elsewhere if they could have, but at the time, they couldn't.

So why were customers complaining less? Well, put yourself in their place. You're dissatisfied with the service you've been getting from one of your providers. You'd like to switch to another provider, but for now, you can't. So you do the next best thing: you complain and you vent and you grouse and you gripe. You write and you call and you email. And what do you get in return? Nothing. No change at all, and certainly no improvement. It's as if no one is even listening. So, with Frustration as your middle name, you grit your teeth and make do.

As one of Tom's customers put it, echoing the view of several others, "After a while, there's no point complaining any more. It doesn't do us any good, because nothing changes. So we just tolerate the down time and delays, and make the best of it." Learning about the state of distress that his customers were in was a waker-upper for Tom, and just in time; otherwise, he might very well have interpreted

a complete cessation of complaints as signifying deliriously happy customers.

When the absence of complaints equals bye-bye Complaints are a critical indicator of the state of customer satisfaction. That being the case, an increase over time in the number, type, intensity or urgency of complaints bears examination, and sooner rather than later. And so does a decrease, as Tom discovered.

But what about the opposite situation: Is it possible that an absence of reported problems by *happy* customers can also signify bad news? Absolutely, as Felicia, a director, learned to her dismay. Felicia headed a group that functioned as a profit center and delivered services to the company's internal divisions. One of the divisions had been particularly pleased with her group's service delivery. Or so it seemed until one day Jeff, the manager, informed Felicia that he was taking the division's business to an outside provider. "They were a great customer," Felicia told me. "We'd worked with them for a long time and had a great relationship. This news was a real shock." So what happened?

Felicia's service team had made the serious mistake of taking this valued customer for granted. Though her staff had at one time maintained regular contact with this customer, they had let their attentiveness lapse. They hadn't stayed in touch, as had been their habit, and they'd stopped checking in periodically to see if anything needed attention. No need, they mistakenly concluded, since everything was going well, and Jeff would surely let them know if there were any problems. Or would he?

Apparently not. When Jeff concluded that he needed to lower costs, he contacted other providers to evaluate their pricing options. No longer being treated as special by Felicia's group, he never asked them what they might offer. So Felicia's team never had the opportunity to compete for the business they already had. The first her team knew of the customer's concerns was when Jeff announced that he was switching to another provider.

News-worthiness

Beware the absence of bad news. What it signifies may be other than you think. 

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."



MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Speed Traps

At the end of a conference I attended, buses lined up to take conference-goers to the airport. Eager to allow enough time for long lines at the airport, I raced to the first bus, leaping over luggage and zigzagging around people less frantic than I to depart. I handed over my luggage to be stowed in the baggage compartment, hopped on the bus, and began to mentally pace.

Time passed, but the bus didn't depart. I quickly realized that I should have taken a cab, but my suitcase was buried under heaps of luggage and I had no choice but to remain where I was.

Managing my expectations

When the bus driver got on, I asked him whether we'd make it to the airport within an hour. "Unlikely," he said. "The chances are very, very small. You might as well forget it." I became anxious; I really didn't want to miss my flight.

As we departed, the bus driver announced that he knew how eager we all were to make our flights, and he'd get us to the airport as quickly as possible. Fifteen minutes into the trip, he declared that we were entering a speed trap, and he was taking a really big chance, but he knew we were in a rush, so he'd risk it.

Twenty minutes later, we reached the airport with time to spare. Time to linger over goodbyes to friends and still mosey through security and to the departure gate. I was enormously grateful and gave the driver a big tip. Make that a very big tip. It wasn't till later that I realized the bus driver's clever strategy: He had skillfully (some might say deviously) managed my expectations.

After all, he had told me before we even left that we wouldn't make it within an hour. So if I had gotten off the bus and taken a cab, he'd have been rid of one potentially pesky passenger. On the other hand, if I stayed on the bus and we arrived late, well, he had warned me. I couldn't claim I'd been misled. Most important for both of us, we arrived with time to spare. And he knew we would. I'm pretty sure

of that. He earned himself a big tip from this grateful passenger and probably several others.

In lowering my expectations, the bus driver had protected himself against the unlikely possibility that something would prevent him from making good time. Such as having to creep turtle-style through that (alleged) speed trap. Yet, I suspect he was familiar enough with this route to know that when (not if) we arrived sooner than he'd led us to believe, he'd be tipped accordingly for his on-time delivery.

Here's a tip for you

Unlike this bus driver, many eager-to-please people make overly optimistic commitments to their customers. Is it any surprise that when these people hit their own particular speed traps and have to adjust their commitments, their customers become upset? After all, from the customer's perspective, a promise was made, but not honored. Sometimes, it's better to minimize the expectations you create.

Of course, if you find yourself exceeding expectations, you can be justifiably pleased. But just be aware that you could actually be setting the stage for customer dissatisfaction. This reaction reflects the reality of what I've dubbed the Expectations Norm: Expectations quickly adjust to match an increased level of service, and if service then drops from this new high, customer satisfaction quickly plummets. Customers will experience a decline in service from that high level as much worse than when that lower level of service was the norm.

So, if I ever run into this bus driver again under similar circumstances, I will expect on-time delivery (of me to the airport). I'll tell him it's necessary if I'm to remain a satisfied customer. That'll be a tip he can count on.

My book, **Managing Expectations: Working with People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!** offers policies and practices for managing customer expectations. For details, see www.nkarten.com/book2.html.



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