

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



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Speaker, Consultant, Author

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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*
- *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*

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A Renewing Experience

Thankfully, the last time I needed to renew my driver's license, I was able to do it via the Web. What a treat, not having to go anywhere or face endless lines. Or endless *line*, as was the case several years earlier. On that occasion, I had to visit the temporary quarters the Motor Vehicle Department was using while new facilities were being built.

The space was one large room with several supporting columns. When I arrived, hordes of people were milling about. But as I looked more closely, I saw that this wasn't random chaotic milling; these people were standing in line — the only line, as it turned out, and one that snaked back and forth around the columns. Near the entrance was a sign that sort of said this was the line for renewals.

I say "sort of" because the sign was very confusing. Was this one of several lines for renewals? The only line? A line for something else altogether? I wasn't sure. So when I got in line, I asked the fellow ahead of me if this was the line for license renewals. He said he sure hoped so, since that's what he was there for. Then someone got in line behind me and asked me the same thing.

Message muddling

Now, you have to picture this because it was priceless: Each successive person who joined the line asked the person just ahead if this was the line for renewals. Despite the fact that there was no other line to stand in, none of us found the sign clear enough to feel confident we were in the right line!

One sign was clear, however: It said, "Don't stand in this line unless you have brought your renewal form with you." Where was the sign? Posted on a column you couldn't see until you'd inched ever so slowly forward, and were finally, *finally*, close to the renewal counter!

Fortunately, I had brought my form with me. And happily, I passed the eye test and was certified for four more years of Driving in Boston Traffic. But the experience made me think about how often people confuse and frustrate others with information that's well-intended but miserably muddled.

What about you? Can you confidently say that the information you give your customers is clear and unambiguous? What about the guidelines you've prepared to help them use your products or services? Do you ever provide procedures and instructions that are so confusing that customers are likely to miss or misunderstand key points? And if that happens, do you then accuse them of not paying attention?

Hopefully, you'll never put your customers in that situation. Sometimes, clearly telling people where to go is the nicest thing you can do.

SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS

Managing Your SLAs


Service level agreements are often referred to as living documents. This description seems fitting for a process designed to help providers and customers manage expectations, improve communication, and build a strong relationship.


Too often, though, “living document” is simply a catch phrase used to sell the SLA concept to those who are unfamiliar with it. Even the most successfully created SLA is not a living document if it’s not managed. If an SLA is to truly be a living document, it *must* be managed.

Living document, defined

Some of the most important tasks involved in managing an SLA are the following:

1. **Tracking key performance indicators.** Service tracking focuses on the collection and analysis of service data in order to assess conformance to agreed upon service standards. To be effective, service tracking must incorporate two kinds of measures:


 **Objective, quantitative measures**, which reflect actual service delivery, as it concerns availability, response time, problem acknowledgment, turn-around time, throughput, and the like.


 **Subjective, qualitative measures**, which reflect how customers perceive they’ve been treated, in terms of such attributes as cooperation, attitude, patience and competence. When objective measures indicate service delivery is on target, yet customers are unhappy, the reasons usually revolve around their perception of the service experience.

2. **Conducting regularly scheduled service reviews.** These reviews require both provider and customer participation and are best conducted as face-to-face meetings if possible, or else, as video or telephone conferences. Email is not an appropriate communication mode for periodic reviews. I recommend conducting a formal service review:

 **Monthly** when the SLA is new, service delivery


has fallen below agreed upon service targets, or the service environment has undergone major change


 **Quarterly** when service delivery has been stable for at least three months, the relationship between the provider and customer has been smooth, and the provider and customer are in regular contact

 **Annually** in addition to monthly or quarterly reviews, to conduct an in-depth assessment in light of current business and service needs

3. **Negotiating changes.** Providers sometimes resist creating SLAs because they fear they will be held to terms they may become unable to meet. Customers sometimes resist creating SLAs because they fear being held to service levels that cease to meet their needs. But SLAs accommodate these concerns by permitting changes, ideally no more often than quarterly, as mutually agreed to by the provider and customer. The kinds of conditions that may warrant a consideration of changes include:

 changing business, technology, service or external factors

 significant variations from agreed upon service standards

 unanticipated events with significant impact on service delivery

4. **Maintaining an ongoing dialogue about service effectiveness.** A well-designed SLA effort facilitates a dialogue between provider and customer personnel both as the SLA is being created and once it’s in operation. If created appropriately, the SLA process enables and encourages the provider and customer to collaboratively resolve problems and improve service effectiveness. And that makes the SLA a living document.

My handbook, **How to Establish Service Level Agreements**, and my SLA guides, are in use worldwide. For information on these resources and my SLA training and consulting services, see <http://www.nkarten.com>.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

The Perception of Urgency

My lunch-mate and I were seated quickly. Time passed, yet no one came to take our order. I'm not exactly the most patient person in the world, and normally, I'd have been mumbling and grumbling. But on this occasion, I was willing to wait my turn.

Why? Because I couldn't help but notice that the waitresses were dashing about breathlessly. They never just sauntered. They never moseyed. They never even dillydallied. They hustled and bustled, racing from table to table, into the kitchen, out of the kitchen, yet somehow managing never to spill a drink or drop a tray.

Finally, a waitress came to our table. She apologized for the lengthy delay, and explained that two waitresses had called in sick, so the remaining three were doing the work of five people. She took our order, apologized again, and promised she'd bring our lunch as quickly as she could.

Now, an ultra-cynical sort might contend that these waitresses only *appeared* to be functioning at top speed. "Maybe," this Cynical Sort might claim, "they rushed around while in sight of customers, but once in the kitchen, they twiddled their thumbs, sipped wine, cracked jokes, sauntered, moseyed, and dillydallied — and then darted out of the kitchen with breathlessness aforethought." I doubted it, though. These women didn't look like the tarrying type. They were doing the best they could under trying circumstances.

But they were also doing something else. They were reinforcing the positive impact of the perception of urgency. There's something about seeing people really giving it

their all that makes delays easier to tolerate. So the question arises: How can you communicate urgency to your own customers if your job doesn't lend itself to scurrying from table to table heaving a tray of lunch munchies?

Actually, it's easier than you might think, because communicating urgency is not about setting the speed dial to high. Rather, it's about interacting with customers in a way that says you're truly listening to them. It's about conveying an attitude that says you take their needs seriously. It's about letting them know, through what you say and do, that you haven't flung their problems into the Black Hole.

How do you do this? By keeping customers informed about the status of matters that are important to them. By giving them vital information about outages, delays, malfunctions and crucial changes before they have to ask. By letting them know what they can reasonably expect from you when — and also by letting them know sooner rather than later if the

"what" or "when" has changed.

Your words, tone of voice, and behavior can make a difference in whether customers believe you're treating

their needs with urgency — or with an apathetic, indifferent, go-away-I-have-better-things-to-do attitude. What, when and how you communicate can generate customer satisfaction even when multiple demands, competing priorities, or insufficient resources prevent you from doing all you'd like to.

Alternatively, you could fill a tray with BLTs, hoist the tray on high, and dash breathlessly to and fro.



CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Confessions of a Confused User

I was doing something dumb in using one of my software packages. Modesty prevents me from boring you with the details. In addition, I couldn't seem to get the software to do several of the things it was supposed to do.

I knew I should ask for help, but I couldn't bring myself to admit to anyone that I was having these ridiculous problems. Another reason I couldn't ask for help is that I didn't quite know how to articulate what my problem was. I was sure I was doing everything right, yet strange things were happening. That's about as precise as I could get, and tech support gurus tell me that's not a whole lot to go on. I thought about trying to find an explanation online, but when I'm completely stumped, online explanations might as well be written in linear algebra, because they make about as much sense.

I'm a vendor and I'm not here to help you

Then one day I went to a computer show at which the vendor of this product was offering technical support. Unfortunately, I was leery about this vendor's support because of a negative experience I'd had with this vendor at another computer show. At that time, I was having a quirky problem with another product from this same company. I showed a tech rep an example of my problem. His response was, "Gee, that's strange." He'd never seen it before and couldn't explain it. But he said he'd forward my example to the person in charge of Quirky Problems. "Call him in a few days," he told me. Which I did.

Or at least I tried to. The first few times I called, I was asked to leave a message and he'd call me back. He didn't. When I tried again a week later, I was told, "Oh, he left the company a week ago." I gave up.

Reluctantly, I decided to ask the vendor for help with my newest pesky problem. I explained to the tech rep that I'd been having a silly little problem and described what it was. She quickly set up a simulation on her computer and

asked me a question: After I did A, did I then do B? The question told me she totally misunderstood what I was talking about. Of course I did B. That dumb, I'm not!

If A, then anything but B


Needless to say, therein lay the problem. Because, of course, you weren't supposed to do B. In less time than it takes to pull the plug on a week of work, she solved my problem. Her solution not only explained the complications I'd been experiencing; it also resolved numerous other apparent oddities with this software.

Now, most likely, I'm not alone in having this type of experience. I'm certain that many people have problems they won't admit or can't explain, so they'll never contact their help desk or tech support group. Instead, they'll limp along, doing things in a slow, tedious manner, just managing to bungle their way through.

However, given the right circumstances, they may gain the courage to seek help. My experience suggests that it may be worthwhile at times to offer alternative types of support, such as occasionally dropping by a customer's office and offering to take a look at technical problems anyone is experiencing. Or calling one customer or another to say, "Hi, anything I can help you with?" Or scheduling a visit to one division each month to be on call for two hours for anyone who wants some technical help.

I know how stretched most support groups are, and taking on yet one more chore may be out of the question. My hope is simply to suggest that traditional methods of customer support won't work for some customers, and sometimes alternative methods can improve their productivity — and perhaps your own as well.

In the meantime, send me a message and I'll tell you what my software problem was.

Who am I kidding? No, I won't! 

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