

# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



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KARTEN  
*Speaker, Consultant, Author*

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## The Risk of Embellishment

A frequently touted claim is that when customers have positive experiences, they tell 3 other people and when they have negative experiences, they tell 11 others. But some people claim it's 5 if positive and 10 if negative — or 4 and 14. My guess is that some speaker once convincingly spouted a pair of numbers to a receptive audience and the idea took hold even if the exact numbers didn't. But if the numbers vary in the retelling, no matter, because the larger point is made: If you deliver services, negative customer experiences can damage your reputation far beyond the customers immediately affected.

But an even bigger problem than how many people hear about a negative experience is the nature of the experience they hear. When people relate a situation that angered or displeased them, they tend to embellish. They add details. They focus on fine points. They stress certain parts of the story out of proportion to the role these parts played in the actual incident. And that makes the experience sound even worse.

### CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

And you'll never believe what happened next!

Not only do people embellish, but the amount and intensity of embellishment often grow with each retelling. For example, during a morning break in my Managing Customer Expectations seminar, Julia, a project manager in the group, told me about an upsetting experience she'd had as a customer. During subsequent breaks, I heard three people ask her about the incident, and each time she described it, she incorporated some new wrinkles. Each repetition of the story became more dramatic and more negative. Each time Julia related her experience, she became a more aggrieved customer. Woe to the company whose misdeeds she was describing.

Furthermore, observe carefully, and you'll see that when people describe negative incidents, they don't just embellish, they perform: They take center stage and display a certain pained demeanor and a "you'll never believe this" tone of voice.

To make matters worse, if the circumstances of the saga are striking enough, people who hear it repeat it to their own audiences. In doing so, they add their own embellishments and tweaks and negative twists. And as damaging as word-of-mouth can be, word-of-Internet is exponentially worse.

The benefit of embellishment

To make embellishment work in your favor, do two things: First, strive to create compellingly positive experiences for your customers, mindful that they'll eagerly tell others. Second, when the negative stuff happens — and it will — try mightily to turn it into a positive outcome for the customer. People love to relate negative experiences that have been transformed into happy endings. And when that happens, embellishment isn't a risk at all; it's a benefit — and you're the beneficiary.

## LISTENING

## What Most People Need

One of my favorite sources of wisdom is greeting cards. Check out a few and you'll see what I mean. For example, one card that I came across said, "What most people really need . . . (and on the inside) is a good listening to." So true, and what a powerful message simply stated. This card led me to speculate that, in this can't-you-see-I'm-busy world, people rarely take the time to really listen to each other.

Still, I suspect that most people would insist that they *do* listen to each other. But what many people view as listening is no more than mere hearing. And hearing — that is, being fortunate enough to have functioning ears — is only part of the listening process. People who want to convey that they are truly listening respond in a way that communicates that they really did hear.

An example of non-listening

Consider this interaction that I overheard at the gym between two women on adjacent cross-trainers:

Person A: I caught my finger in the car door last week. Ouch, did that hurt!

Person B: My car didn't start this morning.

Did Person B (let's call her Ms. Car-Stuck) hear what Person A (Ms. Finger-Ouch) said? Probably, since her response was car-related. But was she *listening*? Hardly.

A true listener in this interaction would have referenced Ms. Finger-Ouch's painful plight by saying something like: "How awful! Are you OK?" or "That must have been excruciating!" or even "My goodness, what a stupid thing to do!" — though this last response, despite indicating listening, would not have earned many empathy points.

Abruptly changing the subject is a strong sign of *not* listening, yet it's just what people often do, voicing an unrelated response so quickly as to dismiss what was just said. By commenting on her car's not starting, Ms. Car-Stuck probably ensured that she too wouldn't be listened to because Ms. Finger-Ouch was still pondering her pain.

That's nothing, I . . .

Another sign of non-listening is a response that sounds like an attempt to one-up the other person. There's no question that people who respond this way have heard what the other person said, but their response sounds like an attempt to discount, belittle, dismiss or ignore the other person's statement and to redirect attention to themselves. For example:

Person C: I found a great bargain on shoes.

Person D: That's nothing. I found a laptop for half-price.

Or

Person E: We had to outrun a hungry-looking bear. Boyoboy, was that terrifying!

Person F: You think that's something? I almost hit a moose on Route 50.

Or

Person G: Wow, I was able to do 10 push-ups!

Person H: Well, it'll really count when you can do 50.

In responding as they did, Persons D, F and H displayed three serious listening flaws: First, they didn't acknowledge what the speaker said. Second, their responses lacked empathy, that wonderful quality that conveys caring. And third, their responses instead focused on something in their own world that was purportedly bigger, braver, or more important than what the speaker had just described.

Most of the time, when people respond as Persons D, F and H did, they are simply giving voice to thoughts that popped into their head. And there's nothing wrong with such thought-popping. But before voicing such thoughts, people who want to convey that they're listening would focus attention on the speaker.

For example, Person D could have commented on the great shoe bargain — or on how pleased Person C was to have found the bargain — before redirecting the interaction to himself.

Person F could have asked about the bear-ish experience and then offered an I-really-heard-you transition, such as "Your experience reminds me of one of my own . . ."

And Person H could have simply said "Congratulations! That's great!" which, of course, is what Person G wanted to hear.

I hear you!

If you want to be respected as a good listener, make sure you give the speaker your full attention. And signal that you're really listening by responding in a way that focuses on the speaker, stays on the topic, and invites the speaker to say more. Remember, what most people really need is a good listening to — and who better than you to model how to do it?



## PRODUCTIVITY

## Wake Me in Time to Go Home

Cats have known it all along. Naps are good. They're good for cats and, it turns out, they're good for people too. Grownup people. I doubt that napping will enable us to leap into the air and land gracefully on a cluttered mantelpiece without knocking over a single item (like our cat Pooky, who departed this earth after 22 years of graceful mantel-leaping). But there's growing evidence that sleeping on the job will boost your energy level, or at least prevent its decline. In fact, napping has become the subject of considerable scientific research.

In particular, research studies suggest that napping is a preprogrammed part of our circadian rhythms. These are built-in rhythms that have high and low points. Would you be surprised to learn that one of the low points occurs between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m.? That means that if your alertness drops during the afternoon, it may have less to do with your lunchtime food choices than your natural bodily rhythm.

Now, you *could* deal with this energy plunge simply by doing no serious work in the afternoon. Some people are already adept at following this strategy. However, taking afternoons "off" might not serve you well over the long term, so you'll be pleased to know that it reportedly takes a mere 15-minute nap to recover your alertness. If staggered work hours were able to catch on, why not flex-napping? And if your workday is filled with stress (and whose isn't these days?), what better way to reduce that stress than to take a brief time-out? You can set your computer alarm clock to wake you up.

This is an easy topic to joke about, but the serious side is that it contradicts the philosophy prevalent in many

companies that if you're not working-working-working nonstop, you're a lazy good-for-nothing. Passing the point of diminishing returns is of no concern to the management in such companies, even though it takes longer to accomplish almost everything when you're drowsy — to say nothing of the errors that result, and the time it takes to rectify them when (if!) you find them.

Aside from the impact on productivity, and the dangers posed by sleepiness in certain lines of work, fatigue can have lethal consequences outside of work. According to estimates

by transportation safety experts, as many as 1.2 million driving accidents each year in the U.S. — about 20 percent of the total — are related to driver fatigue. Although investigators may not know whether sleepiness contributed to a given accident, and they may not record the fact even if they do know, this statistic would be ominous at even half the size.

Now, surely, napping isn't the only way to regain your optimal level of functioning. Periodic stretching can help. So can a mid-afternoon walk around your floor or around the block. And so can brief time-outs in which you do something else, such as working on a crossword puzzle,

reading a magazine, or (dare I say it?) playing a computer game.

But clearly, there's a case to be made that closing your door (if you're lucky enough to have one) and spending 15 minutes in dreamland will enable you to do more — and to do it better, faster, more accurately, and more safely — than if you force yourself to just keep plodding along. Sure has me convinced. zzzzzzzz 



## INTERPRETATIONS

## Avoiding an FFFP Frame of Mind

When things you planned go awry, it's easy to slip into a Fault-Finding, Finger-Pointing (FFFP) frame of mind. After all, if everyone else did what they were supposed to, the situation you're now facing wouldn't have happened. But before concluding that someone somewhere is to blame, it might pay to ask: Could there be a perfectly reasonable explanation for this situation — one, in fact, that would cause me to see this situation in a positive light?

I'm reminded of a near-FFFP experience I had at a hotel at which I was presenting a multi-day workshop. Breakfast was provided for class members from 7:00 to 8:30 in a meeting room on the lower level of the hotel. The catering department had instructions to bring the remaining coffee and other beverages to our first-floor meeting room in time for our 8:30 start time each day.

During past offerings of this workshop, the catering department had been punctual in its service. But on this particular day, the third day of the class, 8:30 came and went and no coffee. Class members started asking when it would arrive. It's on its way, I assured them.

I brake for coffee

I began the session. Fifteen minutes later, still no coffee. The I-need-my-caffeine-and-I-need-it-NOW contingent was becoming restless; if the coffee didn't arrive soon, I'd lose their attention.

As I started debriefing the previous day's simulation, I realized that I was slipping into an FFFP frame of mind. Clearly, something had gone wrong, but what? Staff absences? An elevator stuck between floors? The kitchen burning down? Or had they simply forgotten us?

But even as these thoughts raced through my mind, I knew this reaction was unfair. The catering staff had always been thoughtful, attentive, and cheerful, and they deserved better. Still, the last thing I would have imagined was an explanation that was not only the furthest thing from being

the catering staff's fault, but that actually highlighted their superb service orientation. Can you guess?

Moments later, I heard a knock at the door. Ted, the head catering honcho, poked his head into the room tentatively, and with his usual smile, announced that he had our coffee. And then he explained his delayed delivery. He said he didn't want to remove the coffee service from our breakfast room while two members of our group were still in the room eating breakfast.

Huh? What two people? Everyone was present in the classroom.

Table for two

And then I realized what had happened. Two people — maybe hotel guests, maybe not — decided to help themselves to the rest of our breakfast goodies. Maybe they knew the food wasn't intended for them but figured, "Why not?" — especially since no one stopped them. Maybe they thought the hotel generously provided a nutritious breakfast for its guests. Maybe . . . well, who knows?

The important point was that the delinquent coffee delivery wasn't a service snafu at all. With typical thoughtfulness, Ted had allowed people he assumed were class members to finish their breakfasts rather than snatching the coffee away in order to deliver it to the classroom. And he had graciously allowed them to take their time, even though it delayed his clean-up of the room. For me, this was an aha-and-a-half: a twist in the story's ending that turned my encroaching FFFP mindset into an appreciation of caring service.

I later told Ted that that we'd appreciate having our caffeine fix in the classroom promptly at 8:30 and that anyone in the breakfast room after 8:30 is an interloper. I now use this experience as a reminder that sometimes, when it looks like someone is at fault (someone *else*, that is), there can actually be a reasonable explanation, and even an uplifting one. It helps me keep that pesky FFFP frame of mind in check. 

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