



The Customer Is Not Always Right But Should Always Be First

by David and Lorrie Goldsmith

How long have we confused putting the customer first with the twisted concept that the customer is always right? The customer is NOT always right. In fact, some customers are so wrong they should be banned from using your products and services. What's up with the overweight family that's suing fast food restaurants for serving up fat-laden, hydrogenated meals? Are they right? What about the patient who says he's got heartburn when he's actually having a heart attack? Should his doctor put health needs first or agree that the patient is always right? The two views are vastly different and leading with the former yields higher payoffs for both the buyer and the seller.

Run your business (or department) with the customer's needs and wants as your primary focus. Putting the customer first goes beyond the creation of products and services. When you develop systems and structures with the aim of servicing customers, you have fewer mistakes, complaints, and returns. You build customer satisfaction from first to last contact by building a customer-centered business.

Want to offer superior customer service? Here are some tips:

1. On my honor... Be honest. If your company erred, admit it, make amends, and move on. If your customer erred and you can still help, do so. But don't play this ridiculous customer-is-always-right game.
2. Stock the toolbox. Equip your employees to service customers well. Train them, give them equipment and support, and develop systems that ensure quality customer service. These elements empower employees. Hal Rosenbluth, in the older version of the book, *The Customer Comes Second*, says that when you take care of your employees, the customer is automatically serviced.

3. Loosen the reigns. Bad customers threaten to drain your resources, mental and physical. After exhausting alternative solutions, bad customers will never be happy. In extreme cases, it should be okay for an employee

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to suggest that the customer take his business elsewhere. Sometimes it just doesn't work out, and a divorce is a necessity.

4. Decide when it's worth the fight and when to let it go. Sometimes good customers do bad things. Home Depot employees report a high incidence of air-conditioner returns come autumn when summer's heat waves are over. Wal-Mart's return policy is to pretty much accept anything without question. Volume is the name of the game, and bickering over a \$19 blender isn't worth the time and aggravation.
5. Seek solutions. When you convey that your intention is to find the

best solution for the customer, you don't need to falsely butter them up with the "customer's-always-right" routine. In fact, when they're shown to be wrong in a positive way, you teach them how to get what they want, and you strengthen the relationship. Solve their problems and you've built loyalty.

On the flip side, good customers understand they might not know all the answers and are looking for solutions. Good firms give the best solution to the issues facing customers, and take responsibility when things go wrong anyway. Case in point, we test drove a Suburban from a local dealership and agreed to purchase the vehicle if certain mechanical problems were corrected prior to the signing. We drove it home, yet the SUV had a sound emanating from below the front passenger's floorboard that sounded like air escaping with a continual thump. When the car was in neutral, the sound disappeared, ruling out the engine. Wanting a solution, we suggested that a portion of the

exhaust assembly was dysfunctional, but our service-shop contact told us he knew better and replaced the actual muffler. Not only did the sound still exist, it became so loud that passengers could not carry on a conversation. Over eight months, the car was in the shop seven times to solve the problem with no success. A mechanic insisted that "all 99 GM Suburbans have this sound because their exhaust systems are so long." Funny, when driving in our friends' car, exact same make, model, and year, the sound did not exist. Finally, after a battle, the dealership's new service manager (should be "take-em-for-a-ride manager") admitted that the problem was what we had originally concluded—

a portion of the exhaust assembly had rusted—it could be fixed, but he would charge us for the repair because this was a NEW problem. They quoted us \$75 to repair and said they would not help us on the price. Mmm, a \$40,000-vehicle sale, and they wouldn't take responsibility for a \$75 part that should have been replaced prior to the sale. The customer wanted solutions not hassles. Whether the customer was right or not, this certainly was not a customer-focused operation, and the seller will lose future sales as a result of the poor service. (Not all customers are right all of the time, but when they are, don't penalize them.)

Most likely the reason the phrase, "The customer is always right," came about was that some frustrated owner or manager could not get it through to the employees that customer service had to be the number one priority. Of course, had the manager implemented a system and training tactics to facilitate extraordinary customer service, the butchered phrase might not exist at all. Instituting policies that grow over time to fit different scenarios gives employees structure and flexibility at the same time, enabling them to make good choices for the company and the customer.

If you want to build a reputation of superior customer care, be sure to build every inch of your business with the customer as your top priority. When you do this, it won't matter who is right and wrong. What will matter is that you'll have happy employees, because they'll have the tools, knowledge, and authority to service customers well. You'll have happy customers because they'll get what they need, want, and/or expect: the right products, the right price, the right service, with minimal errors or inconvenience. And you'll have happier financial stakeholders because your firm is more likely to profit from reducing waste and being in a good position to gain and maintain sales volume.

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