

The Customer Is Always Right (?)

Those of you who have heard the expression, "The customer is always right," please take this opportunity to stand up and scream.

Now, doesn't that feel better? Of course it does.

You've probably suspected for a long time that the customer isn't always right. But, like the rest of us, you believed that having this thought meant that something was wrong with you. Relax. You are neither inadequate nor insensitive. The fact is the customer is *not* always right.

To go a little further, customers can be half right, they can be a third right, or they may be completely wrong. At times customers imagine, twist, fabricate, create, exaggerate, misremember, misunderstand, blackmail, harass, nag, cajole, manipulate, threaten... you get the idea. They are not always right, whatever else may be happening.

This allows us to understand why CEO's and owners turn pale and clutch their chests when they hear the term, "customer service." This "the-customer-is-always-right" attitude comes close to being a blank check policy where customers get anything and everything they want. And some of them can want a lot. There is no end to what a small percentage of customers can request, no limit on their determination and rationalization in deciding what they have coming. Believing what they were told, "The customer is always right", they become angry when confronted by anything less than complete satisfaction of their sometimes outlandish expectations.

We've been victimized on both sides of our transactions by this concept: those of us who provide service and the frustrated customers trying to obtain these things they believe they should have.

To confuse things further, it does happen that on occasion (more often than any of us care to admit) we fall short of what we should deliver in terms of both product and service. It can be difficult to separate the legitimate claims from the excessive ones, especially in the infamous "gray areas" where there are no precedents or established policies.

Start Over

Let's start over with a new *old saying* "The customer is always *the customer*." If you treat him fairly, he'll always be *your* customer, and that, after all, is the point.

We are not talking about excellence, although excellent service is a worthy goal. Neither are we discussing legal issues, although service situations can certainly lead to legal battles. Nor are we talking about business ethics, although many customer service matters come down to a question of ethics.

We're focusing on how to say "no" in those cases when the customer is not right, not reasonable, not fair, and not honest. This refers to a small but vital portion of those customers with whom you deal. Small because there actually are not that many folks who are unreasonable, irrational, or dishonest, although there are days when it seems that's all you deal with! Vital because unless you maximize your control of this group, you stand a good chance of either spending too much money attempting to satisfy them or victimizing your company's reputation.

If the customer is not always right, and those of us who deal with customers should not always expect to give the customers everything they request, how do we determine *when* to say "no"? Once that decision is made, *how* do we say "no" in such a way as to leave customers feeling they

were treated fairly, with respect and honesty, even though they did not receive the service, repair, replacement, or refund they requested?

Nearly every customer service issue comes down to a question of *yes* or *no*. Because of the volatile emotions involved, and our own tendency to become defensive, the process of saying *no* seems to be the more difficult part of the process.

Is 'No' the Right Answer?

Saying *no* begins by deciding that *no* is the appropriate answer. Most of the claims that arise are legitimate and deserve immediate attention. If you feel your primary responsibility is to do as little as possible, quit new home warranty and customer service and try another line of work. Your company, your customers, and you will all be better off.

There must be limits, however. You should have (or develop if you don't already have them) written guidelines on what your company will and will not repair, replace, refund, adjust, and so on. Using such guidelines as a framework, you can see where any particular work request fits: plumbing, electrical, floor covering, and so on. Next decide if the request falls within the responsibility of your company, your trade contractors, or your customer.

Research Original Sources

In coming to a conclusion be certain you take time to find and consider all the facts. While this sounds obvious, it is not always done. Warranty managers often end up either giving too much away or feeling angry and humiliated when customers go over their heads and get decisions reversed. By collecting all the facts, using all available sources, both can usually avoided.

You may need to supplement the homeowner's version of the problem with information from a wide variety of sources: personal inspection; conversation with a trade, superintendent, or salesperson; checking the contract file, reviewing the warranty file for previous correspondence on the same item; and company/industry standards or building codes. If structural damage is involved, an inspection by an engineer may be appropriate. There is certainly no shortage of sources of information!

Commit to a Response Time Frame

Anytime you are not one hundred percent certain of the answer, assure the customer that you will pursue the request and get an answer in a specified amount of time--generally three days is the maximum for most items, although some circumstances may demand more time.

Make a definite commitment and stick to it. Call back on time even if you do not have the final answer. Let your customer know that you are still working on it. Being ignored only compounds the customer's frustration and adds even more energy to his anger.

Some folks will object to being told that you are going to investigate their request. "I'm telling you what's wrong and that should be good enough. Let's just get it taken care of or I'll call my attorney." Or words to that effect— you've probably heard them.

Anticipate that you will occasionally be confronted with this or similar comments and be prepared to respond. Imagine for a moment that you are the homeowner, you have a problem, and you are trying to get this big, rich, greedy, cold-hearted, uncaring, selfish builder to fix it. Now here comes this lazy, stupid, complacent, apathetic warranty person with this, "Yeah, well, we'll look into it" attitude. Would you become a little frustrated?

What could this warranty person say to you to make it easier to accept something less than immediate action? What choice of words and just as important, what tone of voice would create trust and avoid making you feel you were being given the "runaround"?

A voluntary and definitive commitment on when an answer can be expected goes a long way to keeping the customer feeling comfortable. Be absolutely positive to call on time, even if you do not have an answer yet.

Apply Empathy

If we work from the assumption that the customer truly believes he understands the problem in his home, has duly reported it to you, and now feels he deserves a lightning fast repair--it becomes easier to have the patience to discuss the issue.

Customers who fully deserve to be told "no" are frequently sincerely convinced that they deserve to be told "yes." Occasionally an individual will think, "Well, it can't hurt to ask. The worst they can do is say no." Even then, somehow in the process of asking, all doubt evaporates; the customer convinces himself by the act of asking that he definitely does deserve a positive response.

The typical warranty office is a fairly hectic place, time is valuable, and the pressure to get things done never ceases. In smaller companies where one person is responsible for warranty service along with several other duties, the problem is the same. Because of time constraints, the pressure to get this call over with and get to the next one can result in a tendency to curtness and abruptness. These have no place in customer service work. Patience and diplomacy have.

The words "I see your point of view", "I can appreciate your opinion," or the ever popular, "I hear where your coming from" can all help--but only if they are said with conviction and sincerity. Here's where a well-developed ability to put yourself in the other person's position for a moment becomes useful. Remember that this customer believes he's right, take the time to hear him out, listen carefully to his point of view. Keep an open mind until all the facts are available for review.

Prompt & Fearless

Let's assume that after collecting and sifting through all relevant data you decide the requested repair is not your company's responsibility; it is now time to tell the customer, "no".

Putting off the inevitable only makes it worse. Get the "no" back to the customer as soon as possible. Why give a customer two reasons to be angry? "I waited five weeks for a response from you people and now you have the nerve to tell me you're not going to do anything?"

Avoid setting yourself up for this. Ask yourself if, at this very moment, there are any "no's" waiting to be said, hiding in the bottom drawer of your desk, lurking in the back of your appointment book, or generally fermenting around your desk. If so, dig them out immediately and promise yourself to get them handled today. While timing is important when you provide repairs for homeowners, it is even more important when you do not provide them.

In Person, Followed by Documentation

As a general rule, respond to the customer in person or at least by phone, making a phone log record of the call. Following that, the final step is a written confirmation to the customer in the form of a letter (copy to the warranty file). "This letter will *confirm* our February 15 conversation regarding your dining room chandelier..."

Making sure these decisions and conversations are documented saves confusion later, for yourself and employees who follow in your footsteps. Good documentation can also provide valuable legal protection for your company. Further, when the customer has your response in writing, he is less likely to repeat the same request a month later.

Courteous & Helpful

None of this should be interpreted as a license to be sharp-tongued with a customer. (Admittedly there is a justified temptation in some cases...). Your call or letter should be clear and businesslike. That does not mean discourteous or rude.

When possible, soften the "no" with information and assistance on how the customer can secure the desired repair himself. A couple of sentences explaining the reasons for the decision combined with suggestions on whom to call, what to use, or how to proceed will foster the customer's feeling that you are interested in helping even if you won't perform the work.

The Reality Is....

There will be customers you will be unable to please, customers who will remain angry no matter what you say, no matter how calm, reasonable, and attentive you are. Your goal is to minimize the number of customers who view you (and your company) in a negative manner. You can almost completely eliminate any customer saying, "And on top of it the warranty manager acted like he could not have cared less. You should have heard him..."

As world leaders have learned, you cannot control people's behavior or opinions. However, you can minimize negative effects by remembering that it is your job to enforce reasonable limits, fairly and consistently.

Warranty work is not a power struggle, neither is it a popularity contest. Your objective is to spend your company's money and effort on those items that deserve attention and defend against other items without offending the customer. Written guidelines can supply support for consistency; common sense should kick in when circumstances justify an exception, and a businesslike, courteous attitude will build your self confidence. While customers may not always be right, you can always work in a professional manner as you respond to them.