

[Online] Customer Service

Two stories for illustration and then some tips.



Story # 1.

We wanted to pay a large online company just £70 by credit card but kept getting this message:

**“IMPORTANT!
An error occurred. To continue,
please see below for further
instructions. The address data are
not valid. Please check your data.”**

Clearly we were doing something wrong, but it was not obvious what and the message didn't really help. Cue customer service call. We were told that the company: "...might have an issue with the address fields. Please try again later."

So we did. Same result.

Cue online support email and response!

"Thank you for your email.
I would like to confirm that a new debit has been arranged. The outstanding amount on your account will be debited within the next 2-3 days.
If you have any further questions do not hesitate to contact us."

Excellent!

Except, the next day:

"Unfortunately, according to our records, your account shows an outstanding balance. To solve this issue quickly, please either check or update your credit card details in the Control Panel....."

Cue 11 more emails and 7 further phone calls.

The phone calls were painful with people who could hardly speak English.

One call ended up in their US billing department – which gave the agent there a laugh - though not us.

On another, the phone was put down on us because the person making the call was out of the office but had a text to call their billing supervisor. He was told



that the account number was required to transfer the call – naturally he could not remember it and asked why the account number was required to make a call transfer when he had been asked to call the billing supervisor. That got him cut off.

Eventually we got to the bottom of it, we had filled in two fields incorrectly – see here and see why. **So, yes, our fault, but guess what – they won't get the renewal.**

Story # 2.

We wanted to pay an online company £14 by a major online payment provider having received:



"The payment for your subscription to X failed because of a problem with your credit card. X has been notified of this failed payment.

We will try to make payment again on Mar 30, 2008.

Please change the funding source for this Subscription by clicking this link and following the steps below....."

Now the issue here was simple – we don't use a credit card but a bank account as the source of payment. There was no reason it should fail there was plenty of credit on the account.

Anyway in the spirit of goodwill we decided to go to the site and check the details. They were correct but, maybe changing to a credit card would work. Except we were not 'allowed' to do this by their system.

Auto-responder reply to the email:

"Thank you for contacting Customer Service.

In an effort to assist you as quickly and efficiently as possible, please direct all customer service inquires through our website. Click on the hyperlink below to go to the website. To ask a question that is specific to your account, you must log in to your account. If you indicate the type of question you have with as much detail as you can, we will be able to provide you with the best customer service possible."



Oh well, back to the website and send a "ticket". Though the site actually says:

"Help by Email - Our Customer Service team is specially trained to address all account inquiries. Send us an email and we will reply promptly. Contact Customer Service."

an email is not sent but a form served up!

No response.

Send another "ticket".

No response.

Email received:

"Your subscription to X has been cancelled because your credit card was refused. You will not be invoiced for this Subscription again."

Cue phone calls x3. Automated menu systems that just get more automated menus that just get more automated menus that....

Called supplier and made other arrangements, cancelled payment provider account.

So what should you do to make sure you provide good customer service?

Firstly, remember that is Customer Service you are after NOT 'Online' Customer Service – online is only a part of good Customer Service.

And, actually, some of it is law and the rest of it is common sense.

So **ON** your website.

Companies Act 2006

If you are a UK limited company this act requires you to publish in legible characters

- o your company name
- o your company registration number
- o place of registration
- o registered office address
- o the name of the organisation with which the customer is contracting, if this is different from the trading name



- o the VAT number even if the website is not being used for e-commerce transactions
- o membership details of any trade or professional association, including any registration number

In addition to this:



- o Prices on the website must be clear and unambiguous and state whether they are inclusive of tax and delivery costs.
- o If the company is an investment company, the fact that it is such a company must be stated.
- o If the company is a limited company exempt from the obligation to use the word "limited" in its name, the fact that it is a limited company must be stated

It all sounds a bit legal, but actually it's good marketing practice. Why would you not want customers to know these things about you?

We recommend that they are published in the footer on every page and that a phone number and email are BOLDLY available on every page too. Customers trust companies that are open and honest – show that you are open and honest in the simplest way possible: tell them "where you live".

Detailed product / service pages

Accurate and detailed information, including easily available pricing information, on product / service pages can avoid the need for customers to call or email. Provide detailed information of delivery costs and times, as well as general information about the product on offer. I just hate it when I have to press the buy button before they will tell me the price and it puts me off and means they lose trust, so if there is an alternative at a similar price that was upfront, I shop there.

Provide comprehensive FAQs

This can help customers quickly find the answers to their queries about shipping, returns policies etc. A searchable FAQs section that covers every conceivable question will enable customers to get answers more quickly and take the pressure off customer service staff.

However, a website is only a channel and what you want are happy, high spending, loyal, repeat purchasing customers.

That means you have to get it all right and that means offline as well. So:

Get the best possible people

There is no way that the customer service quality can exceed the quality of the people who provide it. Think you can get the very best by paying the lowest wage, giving the fewest benefits, doing the least training? Oh yeah? Companies don't help customers... people do.



Be good managers

The way you treat your people will be the way they treat your customers. They are not "human resources, they are people!"

Staff take their cue from management. Are you polite to them? Do you listen to them? Do you try to accommodate their requests? Show me poor customer service and I'll show you poor management.

Be flexible

If a customer requests something special, do everything you can to say yes. The fact that a customer cared enough to ask is all you need to know. It may be an exception from your customer service policy but try to do it. Remember you are just making one exception for one customer not making a new policy, though, who knows it may be such a good idea that you adopt it.

Make sure your returns policy as simple and flexible as possible – after all Marks & Spencer and John Lewis have made themselves on it. By allowing customers to return product bought online to a store, for example, you avoid unnecessary hassle and give customers more confidence to buy.

Look at this response we received from [Xcalibre](#) the other day:

"This is possible however will require a lot of changes from this end. It will be quite a lengthy procedure. If you wish us to continue with this and move it to a new account please can you confirm this and I will pass this onto the dedicated department to deal with."

Now that is service!

Understand when and how to use email / 'tickets' and when not to

Customers may have a query that isn't covered by the information available on the site and some customers will dislike having to call customer service departments, so provide them with an email alternative.

Acknowledge the receipt of a customer email and personalise email responses to reassure them that someone is doing something.

Ensure a speedy resolution. Some surveys have found customers waiting 2 - 3 days before their emails are answered. This is not good enough. Not answering emails quickly enough will also increase pressure on the phone. Set and monitor a turnaround target that works hand in hand with your quality expectations and explain it upfront to customers to set their expectations. Use "exaggerated

courtesy" because they can't see or hear you so your words must do. Remove or reword phrases that could be considered rude, such as: "As I said on the phone..." (which really means: "As I said on the phone stupid!"). Read emails at least three times before hitting the send button.

Use the phone for service and make it clear that it's available

The cost of telephone customer service is estimated to be between 20 and 40 times more expensive than a web self-service, but self service does not always work!

So employ enough staff to have a human answer the phone within 60 seconds. It is possible; managers who say it isn't almost certainly haven't properly worked out the cost benefits.

If you absolutely insist on a menu system keep it down to 3 clear and unambiguous choices – period.

Ensure customer service staff always give a full name (they always insist on the customer's full details). Give the customer a resolution number so details can be found quickly on a follow-up call, as it raises the blood pressure when you have to repeat things. **But**, don't insist on the customer having to use the account or resolution number; be able to search on name, postcode etc. Make it convenient for customers and staff.

Finally, give staff the ability to take decisions or tell them to refer it immediately someone who can. There is real frustration when supervisors and managers are not available and it generally leads to an escalation – attack, defence, counter-attack, = war. Not a good customer service policy.

Answer the question!

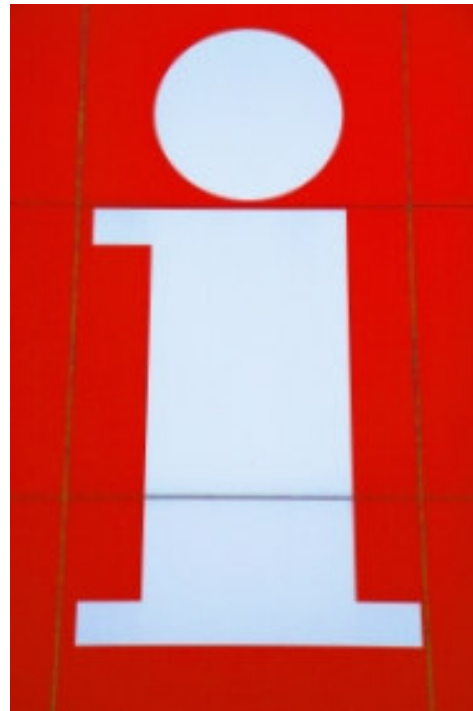
Please! Just answer the question I asked. Don't give standard replies when customers are not asking standard questions!

An email or telephone answer that doesn't address your concerns but just gives canned responses or makes you feel like a nuisance ... or a dummy really upsets anyone.

Handle complaints as if they are a sales opportunity

Remember your best publicity comes from complainants who are now happy. Get it right and you are in clover.

If a call or letter shows dissatisfaction ensure it is dealt by someone more senior - at every single stage. It's bad enough to complain. It's worse to rack up an 0870 bill.





Mistakes are bound to happen, but it is important to deal with them well and exceed customers' expectations. Give customers the benefit of the doubt. Proving why "he's wrong and you're right" isn't worth it. You will never win an argument like that with a customer, they will just change supplier as soon as they can and badmouth you to at least 20 people.

Ask customers what they want! Often their request will be more reasonable than whatever it was you were going to do to make it right. And it will be the solution they want, not the solution you think they want!

Acknowledge their pain and make it right! Making it right usually means getting what they expected in the first place. Don't substitute "bribing" the customer for genuinely caring about their pain. You can't buy their loyalty, but you can earn it. However, if you have really messed up by, say, failing to deliver an item, then apologise for the error and offer the item discounted or free of charge.

Be sympathetic - expecting customers to read and understand all the small print is unreasonable.

Resell

End on a high note for the customer. They'll remember your last words best. In other words, don't end by saying, "And I'm really sorry you didn't receive your widget when promised." Instead say: "Julia, your thingummybob is on my desk right now. I'll be packaging it right after this call and I will take it to the post office myself."

Now stop! Leave customers with the good taste of resolution in their mouths.