



Focus

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Congruent Customer Experiences

or . . . Don't abuse the people your business needs to survive

My original August article was titled *Five Reasons to Hold a Meeting*. However, a confluence of events compels me to write about customers and health care, much in the news lately. The point of this article is to avoid overlooking simple things that undermine all the time, money, and effort invested in trying to delight customers.

As a baseline, let's first consider a simple but infrequent customer purchase: buying a refrigerator. Many retail outlets sell refrigerators in a wide range of styles and prices, but the product delivery is similar. You pay a set price, the product is delivered, and the old refrigerator, if present, is taken away for disposal. All of this is negotiated at the time of purchase.

Imagine, however, a different scenario. You pay for the refrigerator and it is delivered, and the old unit removed, as before. But then, 3 weeks later, you receive a \$178.40 bill, from a company unknown to you, for recovering the refrigerant from the old refrigerator. Soon thereafter, you receive another unexpected \$213.20 bill for "EPA Disposal Compliance Monitoring." Since neither your home, office, nor deer camp is a Superfund site, you are puzzled. Finally, you get a third unwelcome bill (\$25.32) from a waste management business for "Site usage fee - Large appliance."

While that second scenario seems farfetched, replace "refrigerator" with a discretionary medical procedure, like removing an ugly wart from the tip of your nose, and it suddenly becomes believable. Even then, the actual descriptions on many medical bills include such illuminating terms as "EXC H-F-HK-SP B9+MARG 1.1-2." Besides hospitals and surgical clinics, it's hard to envision a business that treats customers in such a manner. Ironically, the physicians and nurses are usually working hard (harder than most service providers, I'd argue) to heal and help patients, and surveys reveal most people are satisfied with their personal physicians. The incongruity is between the service delivery and payment system.

Retaining customers, clients, or patients is more important than ever, so it's useful to look for disconnects between the image a business projects and each phase of the customer encounter. All the effort put into creating a desirable customer experience can be undone by inflexible rules, an indifferent or automated receptionist, and opaque or confusing billing systems. For example, try to imagine an upscale restaurant with crude and dirty restrooms. You probably can't picture such an eatery because no real life example would stay open very long!

If your business depends on repeat business and customer referrals, all aspects of the customer experience should be congruent. In this regard, company managers usually pay attention to the "big stuff" but tend to overlook the little things. The customer, however, sees and evaluates it all, so beware of blind spots as you consider your business.

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