

# May I Help You, Please

By Barry Prokop, PMP  
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In today's economy where every customer is so precious, why do some companies feel that it is their duty to drive customers away with poor customer service? I deal with companies that drive away customers not because their products are bad but because customers get turned off by poor customer



service. Back in the day, I used to come home and complain to my wife and vent about what crummy customer service a particular company provided. I also used to always hear that each bad customer service experience is told to forty other people. Well, back in the day I did my part complaining. Some companies are certainly wishing for the good ol' days.

forty people ratios.

Gone is the one bad experience to

I am not even sure how these ratios are now calculated. The Internet has changed the dynamic on this forever. One YouTube video on a poor customer service experience at last count (as of March 16, 2009) received over 371,325 views. It was posted over **two** years ago. I wonder if that one video affected that company in anyway. You bet it did. Social networks, like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are forums for people to express their thoughts on any subject, even poor customer service - at anytime and in near real time to anyone that will listen. If you aren't satisfied with just expressing your opinion individually, try Blogging. This way you can get a bunch of like-minded people together who feel that they have been wronged by a company. And if you are Really miffed at the way that you have been treated, hey, you can start your own website. Ones like <http://www.customerdisservice.net/> or <http://www.crankycustomer.com/> exist for the sole purpose of people sharing their customer service experiences. Of course, people are more likely to express their negative experiences than the positive ones.

My wife and I were out at dinner at a place called Robinson's Tavern down in Spotsylvania Virginia. It is a family owned restaurant and we were at the tail end of the dinner crowd on a Wednesday evening. It was the first time that we had eaten there and we were pleasantly surprised by the service and great food. After we paid the bill, we

**“Our Customer Service Agents are our greatest resource. I not only believe it, I want to live it”, states FPMI's Contact Center Manager, Cathy Christa.**

asked to see the owner. A little time passed and one of the managers came up and asked if she could help us. I asked if she was the Owner and she indicated that the owner was in the back and was just finishing up a meal because the cook staff was short handed. I could see her brace herself as I started to speak. I then proceeded to tell her what a wonderful time we had. I described the meal, the service and the general atmosphere and assured her that we would tell our friends about the experience. She walked away a little dazed.

I believe that we, as a society, are quickly evolving to group-think.

*Want to buy a new telephone?*

Send out an email or Twitter everyone and get their opinion (or give yours) on what you should buy and where you should buy it. Better yet, "Google it" and see what you find and what people have to say about it.

We don't make individual decisions anymore, we make group influenced decisions.

With these types of dynamics in place, I am mystified why companies are not taking customer service more seriously. This is the company's voice to the customer – the money spending customer that we are talking about. I wish that other customer service operations took customer service as seriously as FPML. Why? Because at FPML, great customer service IS our service. We don't sell software, appliances, cars, or trips to romantic get-a-ways. Our value is our customer service team that we put on projects.

### **The Product -**

In Henry Ford's 1923 autobiography "Henry Ford - My life and work" he quotes himself as saying "Any customer can have a car painted any colour he wants so long as it is black." In today's world, many companies make products and provide services. There are very few that are so unique that they do not have competitors. Gone are the days when unique products are in production for very long before competition crops up. Once product uniqueness falls away, the race is on to add features and functions that differentiate it from its emerging competitors. So when it comes down to a product, is there anything so unique that it can sell over the long term just on the strength of the product? No? What about the company?



### The Company -

MSN Money asked Zogby International to conduct an online national survey in which 7,724 randomly chosen respondents rated customer service at 140 companies from 14 industries. The poll was conducted in late March 2008. The worst offenders were AOL, Comcast, Sprint Nextel, Abercrombie & Fitch, Qwest, Capital One, Bank of America, Time Warner Cable, HSBC Finance, Cox Communications and the best were Marriott, Sheraton, Amazon.com, Hilton, Trader Joe's, Google, Hampton Inn, Nordstrom, Whole Foods Market, Holiday Inn. I see a lot of people nodding their heads. This, of course, was taken before the bottom fell out of the financial markets in late 2008. But as more companies face plummeting sales, lay-offs and sinking employee morale - customers will demand more! More attention, better service, quicker response, and greater value for their money. Companies that have always understand this importance on customer service will be reluctant to cut these services because they understand the consequences. In fact, they will look for ways to further leverage their customers. Companies that have never understood it will continue to reduce these services and will alienate customers further. I would love to find companies out there that do a serious reality check and reinvent themselves into a customer service oriented company. This is exactly the right time to do that and succeed. However, company cultures are very difficult to change, so don't expect a major shift here. So taking the Company itself, is one company that different than another? No? OK, how about the people?

I know that I simplified everything above and that there are companies that stand out and there are products that stand out but they seem to be the exception rather than the rule. And if you really think about why they stand out, it isn't so much the company or the product but the people that you interact with. When you come right down it, there are very few people in an organization that you interact. Think about the big companies that you buy products and services. You probably only interact with one to three people in that company. And if you got all of your questions answered correctly the first time, you may only talk to one person. So all of the engineers, marketing, manufacturing, executives, managers, IT, and human resource people that make up the fabric of the company are all invisible to you.

If the Products and Companies aren't the real drivers here in terms of customer happiness, who is left?

### The Manager -

I believe that great customer service starts with the Manager. If the manager is not excited about providing great customer service then neither will their people. In talking to Ms. Cathy Christa, FPMI's Contact Center Manager who consistently gets rave reviews from her customers, she agrees that the manager sets the tone. "At the start of any project, my team gets together and we sit down and talk about the job requirements and what our customer's expectations are. I ensure that everyone understands the organization that they are supporting and how our

job impacts that organization. During these sessions we get a lot of questions and suggestions on how to improve the process and some of the best ideas on how to better serve the customer come from these sessions. It is designed to be a very collaborative process. It energizes our staff by having them participate in the early project stages and ensures that everyone takes ownership for its success. After everyone is comfortable that they understand the expectations and responsibilities, we can open the doors for business.

As the manager, I believe that my main goal is to understand the whole job both strategically and operationally. I don't believe in sitting in an office and letting the agents 'slug it out' in the trenches. I am always out with the agents, coaching, mentoring or listening for potential future problems."

Working in the customer service area is an ever changing environment where one day, everything is going great and then the next day, you are faced with challenges at every turn. Cathy states, "We are constantly changing and adapting to meet new situations. A manager has to be able to work with their agents to allow them to succeed. If they are faced with difficult customers, coach them how to deal with these difficult situations. If they encounter unknown

questions, train them how to get to the right answers. The more we make the customer happy with our services; the better the business opportunity. The better the business opportunity, the more we grow as a company. The more we grow as a company, the more personal growth potential. They understand this and work toward it."

When asked about her management style, Cathy indicated that, "As the leader, I take 100% of the blame and 10% of the credit. I understand that while I am the leader and

manager, my agents are the reason that we are successful. To ensure our success, I want every agent to enjoy their job so we have a pretty light environment. I do spend a lot of time on communication, education and making their job rewarding. I am a big reward person. I always catch our agents doing something right and publicly acknowledge it. In addition, I get a lot of positive feedback from our customers because of the great job that they do. These comments are great reinforcements and I immediately share them with the staff." Cathy has infused her professionalism and enthusiasm into her job and into her agent staff. Clearly, managers like Cathy make a huge impact on the customer service success within a company.



## The People -

The Zogby International survey also tried to get a sense of what went into survey respondents' answers and they asked what characteristic of customer service was most important to them. Knowledgeable and a readily available staff, combined to capture 69% of the responses

When thinking about a company's customer service, which one of the following features is most important to you?

Feature	Rating
Knowledgeable staff	35%
Readily available staff	34%
Flexible policies for return/exchange of merchandise	13%
Friendly staff	12%

As Cathy stated earlier, “my agents are the reason that we are successful.” Knowledgeable and accessible agents are clearly what are winning the hearts and minds of the customer.

All in all, I believe that it is a tie between the People and the Manager that ensure a successful customer support experience. One can not be successful without the success of the other. But if I had to pick one it would be the Manager. Why? Because finding and retaining a manager that is passionate about customer service will grow a business faster than any other. With customers having so many choices out in the market, do you really want to be one that is turning them away?

About the Author:

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Mr. Prokop joined FPMI as a Director in May 2006. He has 25 years of experience in managing business development, human capital, training, and technology initiatives in the federal and state government marketplace as well as the commercial sector. At FPMI, he assesses market opportunities, partnership arrangements, and contract acquisition/expansion activities and leverages the company's diverse capabilities into new client relationships and performance engagements. He previously served as Assistant Vice President and Director, Federal Government Practice Accounts with Aon Consulting. He also served as Director for several workforce management and human capital software companies and spent 13 years in human capital/technology positions within the Fairfax County School System. He is a published author, training seminar specialist, and holds a B.S. in Business Administration from West Virginia University and is a certified Project Management Professional.