

Shine a Light on the Customer Experience

Enhance the customer experience
by reducing customer uncertainty

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In a nutshell...

- Certainty builds confidence and trust.
- Customers who do not know the process that lies ahead of them can become stressed, annoyed and frustrated.
- Our role as customer service providers is to “shine a light into the dark tunnels of uncertainty” for our customers.
- You will build confidence in your organisation by aiming to building certainty for your customers.

December 2007. I had been commuting between Kuala Lumpur and our hometown of Perth Australia for six months. Our 21 year old daughter had been undergoing treatment for what could have been a life-threatening disease. The good news is that we successfully got through this phase of our lives and Marisa is now living happily in New York. This period, four years ago, had a positive and profound impact on my family.

This story is not about my family's journey over these six months. Rather, it's about our experience as customers of Australian hospitals over that time. In short, our experience was nothing short of world class. There are some very good customer service lessons to be learnt. I would like to share them with you.

Soon after being diagnosed with this illness, Marisa had to undergo a PET scan. This is a full body scan that picks up abnormalities. As you might guess, Marisa was concerned and somewhat stressed about this test as she did not know what to expect. This is what happened...

We arrived at the clinic and were asked to take a seat. After a short period of time, a nurse came up to us and introduced herself by name – Chris. She immediately personalised the encounter by having everyone on a first name basis. Chris was very warm and friendly. She created a feeling of closeness and informality. We felt that Chris really empathised and cared about what Marisa and her family were going through.

Chris took us to a little room with a bed in it before Marisa did her scan. She spent a few minutes with Marisa, making sure that she was comfortable, and then explained what was going to happen. She told Marisa the name of the person who would be doing the PET scan and that he would be on time. The way that Chris explained it, there was nothing to be scared about. The test was quick and it did not cause pain or discomfort. The impact on Marisa was profound. She went from being stressed due to uncertainty to feeling more relaxed as she knew the process that lay ahead.

The nurse took the time to explain the process...with a profound impact on the customer

Certainty helps build confidence and trust

A few days later, we picked up the results from the hospital. Chris was behind the reception counter. I thanked her for the wonderful job that she had done. She, in turn thanked me, and said, "It's my job to help give people confidence." This struck me as a great lesson in customer service. Spending a little bit of time to help people understand the process can have an enormous impact on our perceptions of the customer experience. Certainty helps build confidence and trust.

Not long after meeting Chris, Marisa was scheduled to have a medical procedure done. As you might imagine, this was a time of great uncertainty for us all. The doctor may have explained it, but frankly, we would be forgiven for not remembering a lot of what he told us. A few days before the operation, we received an 8 page booklet from the hospital through the mail. This very simple document explained in lay person's terms what the medical procedure involved. It included pictures that all of us could understand! This knowledge gave us greater confidence as we headed to the hospital for the surgery.

Later on, Marisa had to undergo radiotherapy. It was another scary, new step along the journey. Marisa's first appointment was with May, a very warm French-Mauritian lady. Once again, May introduced herself by name and focused on Marisa. We spent a memorable 15 minutes with May as she took Marisa's details and explained how the process would work. Almost 4 years on, I vividly remember May's warmth as she took time to make sure that Marisa understood what was going to happen, and why. At the end of her brief time with May, Marisa felt more at ease as she had a much clearer picture of what lay ahead of her.

Customers who don't know the process feel like they are in long, dark tunnels, not knowing where to step next...

There is a very good customer service lesson in all of this. In many cases, when customers deal with our organisations, they do not know what the process will be. They feel that they are in a dark tunnel of uncertainty. It gets lonely in dark tunnels as we don't know where to step next and where the end of the tunnel is! Uncertainty can bring stress, even annoyance.

The difference between an annoyed customer and one that felt comfortable was 2-3 minutes of explanation...

One key moment of truth is when your organisation or department gets a new customer

Marisa's experience contrasts sharply with one that I had some time ago when I had to have an EEG (brain scan!) at a hospital. I had fainted the day before and the doctor suggested that I have my head checked out! When I went into the room to have my EEG taken, the nurse did not greet me. She asked me to sit down and then started to rub my forehead vigorously with what seemed to be a mild abrasive. "What are you doing?" I exclaimed, to which she replied, "I'm going to attach some wires to your head, and I'm preparing your head!" "How many?" I asked, to which she replied, "20 plus!"

Now, let's think about my customer experience. I felt uncertain about the procedure when I entered the treatment room. I was in a dark tunnel of uncertainty! Instead of taking 2-3 minutes to shine a light in my tunnel to explain what was going to happen, the nurse got straight to work on my head! This created even more stress. It's clear what the nurse should have done. The difference between an annoyed customer and one that felt comfortable, was 2-3 minutes of explanation. If you think that your staff do not have the time to explain things to customers, then ask what the cost of lost customers is to your business. Ask what the cost of dealing with customer complaints is to your business. Ask what the cost of negative word of mouth is. And then you can ask how the Australian hospitals that Marisa went to managed this, as the hospital system was known to be desperately short of resources. And yet, they gave Marisa a great service experience.

As service providers, we often take for granted "trivial matters" that we deal with every day. But we have to remember that it's the first time for our customers – and that these matters are important to customers. Our role as customer service providers is to shine a light into those tunnels of uncertainty! By taking a little extra time with customers, by developing very simple, jargon-free *information*, or even by developing better signage, we do exactly that. And, in the process, we can have an enormously positive impact on the customer service experience.

One key moment of truth is when your organisation or department gets a new customer. She will form strong impressions of your service within the first 30 days. Once formed, these impressions will be hard to shake off. I recall when I became a customer of a stockbroking company in Australia some years ago – and did not know what was going to happen after I had opened my share trading account. I felt a little frustrated as they did not make it easy for me. This company could have learned a few lessons from our hospital!

Or think about how well your organisation keeps your customers up to date. There may be a complaint and your customer is simmering to start with. This will turn to boiling point if the customer is left in a state of uncertainty by not being kept up to date on progress. Have you ever applied for a bank loan and not been kept up to date on progress? You are left hanging and uncertain because you are “kept in the dark”. And you start to lose faith and confidence in the bank at the same time. I am sure that you have many stories of your own.

What does your organisation do to keep a light shined in front of the customer journey?

Your mission for this month is to look at the customer experience your organisation gives, through your customers’ eyes. Start by putting yourself in the position of a customer who encounters your processes and procedures for the first time. What does your organisation do to keep a light shined in front of the customer journey? Are your customers well informed of the process ahead? Are they kept informed right throughout their journey with you? Are they kept up to date on progress? How can you give even more certainty to your customers?

Dig around a bit. Ask your customers. Ask your front line staff. And if you dig deep enough, you may find some nuggets of information that will be like gold to your organisation. After all, anything that improves the customer experience, makes it easier for them to deal with you, and improves customer loyalty, is as good as gold isn’t it? Food for thought. Until next month.

This is an updated version of an article that was published in Business Today, Malaysia, January 2008.

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