

Managing Customer Perceptions of Time

***A no-cost technique to keep your
customers happy***

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Summary

Time is measurable – there are 60 minutes in an hour and 24 hours in a day. However, our perception of time varies. Sometimes time seems to drag, while at other times it goes quickly.

We can keep our customers happy by managing their perceptions of how long it will take to get things done. If you are a customer, time will start to drag if your service provider is late on delivering on the promise. Time will drag more and more the longer the delay.

The simple and low cost way of making time fly in your customer's eyes is to keep them informed of progress. This is a simple, but often forgotten solution!

In this article, I am going to share with a simple, no-cost technique to create happier customers. This technique applies to business-to-business, retail and on-line relationships.

Now that I have your attention, I am going to ask you a simple question: *Is it possible for a customer service person to be nice to the customer, to do everything that can be done to help the customer, including solving the customer's problem...and for the customer to still be dis-satisfied?* The short answer is "yes!"

**Speed is the
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Let's look at the world that we live in. In the age of the internet and instant gratification, speed is the new currency of success. Customers want things done quickly. In fact, taking a leaf from Brian Tracy's teachings, you will increase your "service IQ" if you are able to do things quickly. Your customers will think that you are a smart supplier or service provider if you can do things with speed. And if you cannot do things as quickly as you or your customers would like, you can still maintain a high service IQ score by managing customer perceptions of time. Let me explain.

I was sitting at a customer help desk of a bank branch in KL. In front of me was a very pleasant customer service representative. I wanted to open a new account. He was very friendly. We went through the forms and he explained what I had to do. So far, so good. He asked for my passport, and then got up from behind his desk and disappeared somewhere into back-of-office. I wasn't sure what he was doing as he hadn't explained it to me. This was okay, as he came across as an efficient person. I waited, and waited... After 10 minutes I started to fidget. At 12 minutes I was starting to get edgy. "What is taking him!" I thought to myself. Every minute that passed from that point seemed like 5. Time was really starting to drag, as my focus shifted from "He is nice and efficient" to "Why is he so inefficient?"

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Before I go any further, I would like to take you backstage into the shoes of this customer service executive. This young guy was doing everything right. He may have had to make photocopies and then make a call to head office on my behalf. There might have been a delay getting through to the right person at HQ, so he may have had to wait. He was doing everything perfectly well behind the scenes, just as he had in front of me. So why was I upset with this person, despite him doing the right thing?

The short answer is that he did not manage my perception of time. He did not say to me, *"I have to do some paperwork and then call head office. I should be back in 10 minutes. Sometimes it takes up to around 15 minutes. Are you okay to wait? I can give you the local*

newspaper to read...” Had he done this, do you think that my wait would have seemed as long? I don’t think so.

While the number of seconds in a minute is fixed, *human perceptions of time are not*. For example, every parent shudders when their young or adolescent children utter the dreaded words, “I’m bored!” The children are saying that time is dragging for them and it is not a pleasant experience for them! Or you might recall, when nervously waiting for exam results, that every minute of waiting, every hour, seemed to drag on. Time is fixed, but the perceptions of time are not.

I had an IT service provider who was a really nice guy. When he was in front of me, he was top class. He was technically proficient and got the job done. The only problem was that he did not deliver on time. If he was late for a 3 p.m. meeting at our office, I would give him 30 minutes benefit of the doubt (traffic, of course!) but after 30 minutes, my waiting time as a customer started to drag. And as time dragged on, I became more and more unhappy.

We are doing renovations to an apartment. As a part of this process, we were referred to an interior designer. We met this person at the apartment on a Saturday. She got extra points for devoting part of her Saturday to us. She walked through the apartment with us and seemed to know what she was talking about. She had built my trust during that 45 minute meeting. As we parted company, she said that she would get a quote back to us in 2 weeks. As you might have guessed, 2 weeks turned into 3 weeks, and this eventually turned into a very long 5 weeks. Her “service IQ” had dropped considerably in our eyes.

After mentioning our concern to the person who referred this consultant to us, we received an apologetic phone call, asking us to meet the next Saturday. The only problem is that we are not sure if we can trust the reliability of this interior designer. All she had to do was to keep us informed as to what was happening. The difference between her building our trust and losing our trust was a 60 second phone call!

So, here is the simple, no-cost tip to creating happy customers: make sure that their *perceptions of time* with you flies. You do this by communicating what you have to do and how long it will take. And, if you are in the business to business market or on-line markets, keep them informed on progress – even if everything is progressing to schedule. My sister-in-law recently ordered a book on-line. She got an email within 12 hours, saying that her book had been despatched and that it normally would take 48 hours for

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delivery. She was totally relaxed with this news – and the book arrived on time.

Your mission for the month is to meet with your team to brainstorm ways to give better service by making their perceptions of time fly. You will be surprised at what your time comes up with! Until next edition.

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