
UNACCEPTABLE!

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Ron Eddings once had a disgruntled customer call his auto parts business from inside the store just to get some service.

After waiting while employees handled phone inquiries, the patron finally lost his patience and put in his own call to place an order.

Fortunately, the client was a regular and no permanent damage was done, but his actions left an impression on Eddings, who owns Eddings Bros. Auto Parts and reminds his workers to be considerate even when the store is busy.

"(The customer) got so damn mad that he went down to the end of the counter and called us so he could get service," said Eddings, whose father started the business in 1941 in Hawthorne. Eddings expanded into a second location in Torrance two years ago. "He just reached a point where he figured that the only way he could get waited on was to call."

While the customer's method of handling the situation was motivated more by humor than anger, said Eddings, his frustration points to growing customer dissatisfaction as shown in local and national statistics. The complexity of products, distrust, impersonal service and more avenues to complain, such as the Internet, lead to more complaints and increased "customer rage."

A 2004 study sponsored by the Customer Care Alliance showed that more than half of those surveyed experienced dissatisfaction with products and service in the past year. The industries identified as most problematic are automobile, home improvement, telephone, retailers, electronics and banking with most complaints arising from unsatisfactory quality products and poor service.

"Such surveys are a warning. Angry consumers are not only less likely to buy again in the future, they tell others about their experience and can cost the firm money," said David Stewart, a professor of marketing at USC.

It is a message that Roy Newton, owner of Newton's Locksmith Service in Torrance, relies on solely for the success of his business.

With only business cards and customer referrals for advertising, rising above the competition with individualized attention is both an opportunity and a necessity for Newton, who often hears complaints from clients about other locksmiths who do a poor job. He makes a point to take his time with clients and fully explain the work and recommendations for how to best secure their property.

"Personal service makes a difference," Newton said. "I'm not in a rush. I try to do a good job when I take care of my customers because if I don't, they don't refer me."

Poor service, inadequate resolution when a problem arises and products that are difficult to operate culminate in customer frustration, Stewart said. The time lost while the customer subsequently deals with the problem has the potential to escalate into customer rage.

"Some products make the user feel empowered and in control, while others make one feel silly and dumb," he said. "Both of these factors can contribute to anger or dissatisfaction even if the product actually provides the benefit sought."

Scott Broetzmann, a founding member of the Customer Care Alliance, refers to his own home as an example of

the difference in the use of complicated consumer products now compared with 30 years ago, which is the comparison point for the survey.

Growing up, his home had one television, an eight-track player and a land line telephone. Today, Broetzmann's family owns about 15 electronic devices, including a DVD player, VCR, multiple televisions, a computer, fax machine and multiple land lines and cell phones.

Frustrations arise when an item that is supposed to make life easier doesn't function properly. Broetzmann cites his own problems with a PDA device that were so complicated that neither the people at the hotline nor the employees in the retail store where he purchased the gadget could figure out what was wrong.

Although companies that are good at resolving customer problems can turn an unsatisfactory situation into a positive experience and create an even more loyal customer as a result, Stewart said, the Customer Care Alliance survey shows that business aren't capitalizing on the opportunity.

Almost three-quarters of customers surveyed said they were "very" or "extremely" unhappy -- which the Customer Care Alliance defines as "customer rage" -- with how a business handled their complaint.

Inappropriate uses of technology for customer care such as Web site interactions and automated phone systems, Broetzmann said, are often the source of aggravations.

"All of the service strategies are geared around the concept that customers want to and enjoy serving themselves, so all the money is being spent on that," Broetzmann. "One of the principal messages of the study is while it is true that more money has been spent on customer care ... the payoff for those investments has been minimal because satisfaction has decreased."

Fifty-seven percent of respondents cited time lost as the damage they suffered because of the situation followed by 36 percent who identified monetary loss. None of the top five remedies sought by dissatisfied customers involved monetary compensation. Respondents instead favored having the product fixed, receiving an explanation of why the problem occurred, being assured that the problem won't be repeated, an apology and a chance to vent.

Only 8 percent of dissatisfied customers in the survey filed a complaint with a third party organization. However, the Better Business Bureau of the Southland, which compiles complaint statistics from Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said it has experienced a dramatic increase in its workload.

Complaints rose 12 percent from 2003-04, and business that logged the most grievances included new car dealers, satellite equipment and systems repair services, mortgage services, computer-related retailers and health clubs.

"Service-related industries ... have a lot more direct contact with their customers, and services performed have a greater impact on their everyday life," said Lona Luckett, a Better Business Bureau senior trade practice consultant. "Failure to provide service fosters negative emotions, such as anger, betrayal and mistrust."

The Better Business Bureau also cites Internet and mail order sales as among the types of companies that tend to generate many complaints simply due to the nature of the business. Customers pay in advance for products they haven't seen, and the process of delivery, possible damage in transport and disappointment with the item lends itself to a high potential for dissatisfaction, Luckett said.

The situation is further aggravated when a customer must send an item back, often at his or her own expense, and wait for a refund or exchange.

"I think most people want instant gratification when making a purchase, but that doesn't always happen when a buying decision is made based on a picture, an ad or a commercial," Luckett said. "On the other hand, if you go to a retail store and buy a pair of shoes that hurt your feet, less anger is directed to the shoe store. If you made a poor choice, your negative emotions would be directed back on yourself."

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