

## ***There Is the Cuss in Customer Service!***

### **A True Story**

Last night I left the SOCAP Symposium in Boston on truly a professional high! What a great group of professionals representing great companies. Enthusiasm was running rampant, ideas were being dissected and explored, and the commitment to customer care was obvious in every session and breakout! I felt like breaking into the song from Flash Dance - What a Feeling!

After arriving at the airport and discovering my flight was delayed, I decided to take advantage of the extra time and grab a quick bite to eat. So I queued up to get my burger (no fries) and a soda. There were two customers standing at the counter and a young man directly in front of me in the line. We waited patiently while one woman explained that her order was not correct and asked for it to be fixed. Oops – not a good move. She immediately received major attitude from our hamburger helper. My friend in line turned to me and said, “Don’t you just love good customer service?” I laughed, told him that customer service was of particular interest to me, and waited to see what would happen next. The customer finally got her order fixed and left. Out of earshot of the departing customer (but definitely within the audio level of the ones waiting), the employee mumbled something about that customer and her \*#%damn burger. My young friend turned to me and said, “Well, *there* is the cuss in customer service!”

My post conference bubble was burst. One negative experience and I felt deflated. Although actually cursing at a customer is a rare event, we have all experienced front line customer service that was less than stellar. In fact, let’s be honest. Stellar is rare. Mediocre is more likely! But I’m getting ahead of myself.

As I sat waiting for my flight, I pulled out my conference handouts, notes, and material and started looking over what I learned and heard. And I found myself getting angry. Here were all these great people and great companies trying to do the right thing – at least at a corporate level. And here were their employees sabotaging their efforts on the front line! By now, my flight was further delayed, so I had more time to stew about poor service. I started thinking about all my recent service experiences. The clerk at the convenience store, the ticket man at the movie theatre, the sales lady at the department store. All were mediocre transactions that left me cold.

Okay. So I’m in “the business”. I understand that there are numerous barriers to training and motivating customer service employees in a front line/retail environment. But I ***don’t*** think it’s impossible. And that is what the remainder of this article will explore.

### **G.R.A.C.E. Under Pressure™**

Being in a front line customer contact position can be trying. Customers are in a hurry, lines are long, tempers are short, stock is out, coupons are expired, etc., etc., etc. Add to this mix the possibility of low pay, long hours, and absenteeism and the result is not a

pretty one. Does that mean that customer service **MUST** suffer? Not necessarily. Perhaps all these customer service employees need to remember is that G.R.A.C.E. Under Pressure can make all the difference. G.R.A.C.E. Under Pressure takes only a few seconds and will turn the basic “transaction” I mentioned earlier into a positive “interaction”.

**G** – Greet your customer. A simple “hello”, “good morning”, “good afternoon”, “how are you” will start this interaction off on the right foot.

**R** - Respect your customer. Please don’t make them wait unnecessarily. Don’t finish up that conversation with your fellow employee or phone call while your customer “cools his or her heels”. Give the person in front of you your full attention. Use their name if you know it or it’s obvious. Ask politely for what you need, rather than demand it (may I please have your credit card/drivers license/invoice/etc.). Thank them for their patience if they’ve had to wait. Also, for those nasty customers, please remember that it’s hard to be rude to someone who is being so polite to you!

**A** – Attitude. Bring out your good ‘tude and check the bad. One very simple (yet so very effective) technique is to smile! Attitudes are like colds...they’re contagious. Is yours worth catching?

**C** – Close the transaction on a positive note. Examples are: “Thank you for stopping by”; “Is there anything else you need?” or “Have a great day.” If the customer thanks you, follow immediately by a “you’re welcome” or “my pleasure”.

**E** – Eye Contact. From your greeting through your close, make eye contact with your customer. Don’t stare them down, of course. Simply give them your attention and meet their gaze with your own!

G.R.A.C.E. Under Pressure doesn’t give detail on how deal with anger, emotion, or very unreasonable/demanding customers. It doesn’t go into problem-solving or win-win negotiation. What it **does do** is give front line employees a simple yet easy to remember tool to make what used to be customer transactions (cold) into a customer interaction (warm).

Obviously, in a corporate customer contact unit, representatives may need more techniques to handle escalated contacts. But for those employees on the “firing line”, G.R.A.C.E Under Pressure will work! Now...here’s how to make this work for *your* front line employees:

1. Carefully cut the handout (see below) out of your SOCAP Update newsletter,
2. Make the appropriate number of copies and have them laminated,
3. Distribute to your front line employees, AND (very important!)

4. Send one laminated copy to the manager(s) of your retail, franchise, store, or outlet with a *personal* note from you, your boss, or (even better, your company president) encouraging its use!

Thanks and good luck!

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