

# It Happens.

It seems like everybody who has wires running to my office is out to get me. AT&T got confused, and what was supposed to be a simple project — moving a couple of phone lines — has resulted in off again – on again DSL service, bills that appear to be calculated by a random number generator and — at last count — 27 phone calls from me to various AT&T departments, not counting the ones where the automated system kept me on the line until it decided to cut me off.

Then there's Comcast. After sending me a letter saying that since they were switching to digital and were giving all of their "valued customers" a digital converter if they needed it, they sent me a converter that — after I had hooked it up and tried to activate it — proved to be registered to another account. Comcast's solution to the problem that they created was for me to drive to one of their service centers and swap the box for one registered to my account. I learned that on the fourth phone call, including an interesting one where the automated system transferred me to Houston, Texas.

Both of these companies are huge, and I'm sure that there are people working there who are very smart and very customer conscious. They have a dozen ways of selling to you, and they have the vehicle fleets and manpower to string wire and fiber optic cable to any part of the country that has people. They have bookshelves full of manuals, policies and procedures. But there's one important thing neither company seems to have: a clue about what to do when something runs off the rails.

And that's the lesson that became painfully obvious to me when I was forced to be customer. It's something that we all probably know, but it gets buried under the details of day-to-day business — until we get stuck on the receiving end. The trick is to put the lessons to use before our customer service — or lack of it — costs us a customer.

To avoid that unhappy consequence, there are three truths that we need to acknowledge and three actions we should take. The truths first:

1. Bad things happen to good companies. It happens. Something gets shipped wrong or billed wrong. Things don't show up when they're supposed to. Or the delivery driver nicks the customer's new BMW. In fact, in most transactions there are a hundred different ways things can go wrong, and only one way they can go right. The odds are against maintaining a perfect record.
2. The customer shouldn't be the quarterback on your problem-solving team. If something has gone wrong, the customer has probably already exceeded one of his four budgets (time, effort, energy, and emotion) and every time we involve him, he spends that much more. Sometimes we take a small problem, work real hard, and build it into a large one.
3. Employees tend color inside the lines. Sometimes, way inside. Generally, we can count on the employee to take the action that is most certain not to get the employee in trouble. And sometimes that just makes the problem worse.

Accepting the first of these three truths isn't difficult. Most managers feel like they spend more time putting out fires than making the company go forward. Accepting the second one — that the

customer should not be the quarterback — isn't hard to do intellectually, but too often, our actions say we don't really believe it. And so far as the third one is concerned, some readers are looking at it and asking, "Is that a bad thing?" It is, and you can't offer excellent customer service so long as your employees' first priority is staying out of trouble.

The solution is not that hard to describe, but it will probably create a seismic culture shock when it's implemented. The three steps to the solution are:

1. Convince your employees that the first person to interact with the customer owns the problem. Asking the customer to solve his own problem, even if it's just to call another department, is not acceptable. Obviously, if the delivery driver is buttonholed about a billing problem, he's not going to have the solution, but he can make sure that the problem is delivered to accounting. The golden rule is that the customer never has to explain the problem twice.
2. Empower your employees to deal with the problem within the bounds of their jobs. *Empowerment* is a scary word to some managers, but it shouldn't be. It simply means asking the employee to use his or her own good judgment within certain well-defined bounds and letting them know what they are supposed to do when they are about to cross those bounds.
3. Let everyone in the company know — by both your words and your deeds — that customer satisfaction is a priority in your company, and that those who contribute to it will be valued and rewarded. Beyond that, each person in the company should learn that customer satisfaction is a personal responsibility; simply because that's the way we keep our customers, create opportunities for our own growth, and enjoy job security.

It happens. No doubt about it. But that's not what usually costs you a customer (or gets an article written about you in a magazine). In fact, some companies have become heroes and generated a lot of customer loyalty just because they handled a problem — often one that they had created — so effectively. Most of the time, the customer-killer happens when we compound the original problem by shuttling the customer around from one department to another, explaining rather than helping, and providing solutions that don't solve anything, leaving it to the customer to call back again.

Thirty or more years ago research was published that showed that customers didn't generally leave their suppliers; their suppliers chased them off. Our businesses, our blood pressures, and our employees will fare much better if we quit doing that.