CUSTOMER SERVICE

“Sorry” Is Not Enough

From the January–February 2018 Issue

It’s the first rule of customer service: When something goes wrong, apologize. In many cases, the apologies continue throughout the interaction as an employee goes the extra mile to convey empathy and concern. But surprising new research shows that approach can backfire: An apology that extends beyond the first seconds of an interaction can *reduce* customer satisfaction. Employees should instead focus on demonstrating how creatively and energetically they are trying to solve the customer’s problem—that, not warmth or empathy, is what drives satisfaction.

DREW LYTLE

Researchers reached these insights via a novel study that allowed them to observe exactly what happens when a customer rep is confronted with an unhappy customer. Although many companies record customer interactions, privacy concerns generally prevent them from sharing the results with researchers. However, a team led by Jagdip Singh, of Case Western Reserve, obtained and analyzed 111 videos filmed at customer service desks at U.S. and UK airports for a reality TV show (the producers had had the customers sign privacy waivers). The clips depict employees dealing with passengers who have lost bags, missed flights, or suffered other indignities of air travel. “For the first time we were able to go beyond surveys or after-the-fact interviews and get direct access to the way these interactions happen in real life,” says Singh.

The researchers coded employees’ words and phrases, evaluating whether the reps were engaged primarily in “relational work” (by being empathetic, apologizing, or trying to forge a personal connection) or in “problem-solving work” (by focusing on finding solutions). They also examined facial expressions to identify when employees were showing “positive affect”—for example, by smiling. The study reached two broad conclusions. Employees who expressed a great deal of empathy or tried to appear bright and cheerful did a poor job of satisfying customers, especially if this relational work extended beyond the first moments of the conversation. And customers cared less about the actual outcome (for example, whether a missing bag was quickly located) than about the process by which the employee tried to offer assistance. “It’s not about the solution—it’s about how you get there,” Singh says.

“Clients Care about Solutions, Not Apologies”

JAMES HORAN

As the chairman and senior managing director of Accenture’s Australia and New Zealand businesses, Bob Easton oversees activities ranging from strategy consulting to business-process outsourcing. All involve interacting with clients under stress. Easton recently spoke with HBR about the limits of empathy in dealing with customers. Edited excerpts follow.

Why does this research interest you?

I've been with Accenture for 20 years, on the front lines delivering services to our largest clients. People think of "frontline service workers" as employees at a call center or an airline desk, but if you talk to customers and solve problems, this research applies to you. I'm a senior executive, and I'm definitely a frontline service worker, so I've been experimenting with the research in my client interactions.

How?

We're all trained to apologize when something goes wrong—and the desire to do so is almost instinctive. Lately, though, I've avoided words like "apologize" and "sorry." Instead, I'll say something like, "I acknowledge the problem, but you probably want us to move immediately into finding options to solve it, so let's start talking about the options." This goes against our instincts, but it's very effective. Clients care less about the apology and more about how quickly and effectively you present options and solutions.

The research shows that satisfaction depends less on the actual solution than on the effort and creativity shown in finding it. Does that surprise you?

It resonates with me. I recently had 21 days of travel in which I took 16 flights. On the next-to-last one, late at night, the airline lost my bag. The customer service person seemed to do nothing to solve the problem, and even though the bag arrived early the next morning—a good outcome—it was frustrating. In another instance of a lost bag, a customer service rep walked with me to various places to look for it. Her effort was obvious. This time the bag showed up much later— a worse outcome—but because the rep had tried really hard to find it and involved me in the process, I was less upset.

Can you retrain workers to behave this way, or do you need a different kind of employee?

Most people can be retrained, but it takes more than that—it also takes data and artificial intelligence. Consider another example, in which your flight is delayed. Imagine that the frontline employee says, "I see that you've been delayed three times on this route before, and on two of those occasions you opted to drive. So I've rented you a car. I've also booked you a seat on the last flight tonight, and I've reserved a room at your usual hotel and booked a seat on the first flight tomorrow. Which option works best for you?" That's creative problem solving, but it can't be done without immediate access to smart systems.

To explain these counterintuitive findings, the researchers point to leadership studies that have found a trade-off between perceptions of warmth and perceptions of competence. They hypothesize that the same phenomenon exists in service recovery: If employees project a lot of warmth, customers perceive them to be less competent. When analyzing the videos, the researchers divided the customer interactions into three phases: *sensing* (in which the employee asks questions to try to understand the issue), *seeking* (in which the employee brainstorms and explores potential solutions), and *settling* (in which the employee works with the customer to choose the solution that will provide the best outcome). In many of the encounters, reps kept apologizing or making small talk throughout all three phases, but their attempts at warmth seemed only to heighten customers' frustration. "Saying 'I'm sorry for this—the same thing happened to my sister' makes the customer feel that the employee is not really paying attention to the problem, and customers see it as a distraction," says Singh. In fact, the research suggests that continuing to apologize after the first seven seconds of such a conversation will most likely backfire.

After those opening seconds, the researchers say, employees should focus on energetically and creatively exploring a range of potential solutions to the problem. This brainstorming phase, more than anything else, is what customers will use to assess the encounter—and the more ingenuity an employee shows, the better.

To more fully understand the results of the video study, the researchers conducted a follow-up lab experiment using 568 people who had flown in the previous two years. Each participant listened to a scripted recording of an airline customer-service interaction involving a lost bag or a missed flight. In every instance the resolution was fairly negative—for example, a distressed passenger was told she would not receive her suitcase before a job interview that afternoon, leaving her with nothing appropriate to wear. The encounters varied according to the precise words and process used by the frontline employee:

Some employees used relational language, while others were more focused on solving the problem. The participants were asked to assign a customer service rating (on a one-to-seven scale) as if they had been the passenger. The results showed that customer satisfaction was highest when the employee had offered a variety of solutions, such as several options for routing a bag to the customer's final destination, even if the outcome wasn't ideal.

This research may lead companies to focus less on the personalities of frontline workers and more on the problem-solving process workers employ. A recent study by researchers at CEB identified seven common personality types of customer reps, finding "Controllers"—outspoken, opinionated reps who are inherently driven to direct customers toward a solution—to be the most effective type (see "Kick-Ass Customer Service," HBR, January–February 2017). But Singh's research suggests that companies may benefit more from teaching employees to find imaginative answers to service problems than from refining their hiring profiles.

Say This, Not That

Participants in a lab experiment listened to an audio simulation of an airline rep helping a passenger whose bag was lost. In one scenario the rep focused on problem solving; in the other the rep emphasized "relational" language. Participants rated the problem-solving rep higher.

PROBLEM-SOLVING REP	"RELATIONAL" REP
AGENT: Hi! How are you doing?	Hi! May I help you?
CUSTOMER: I came on the 6 AM flight from New York via Atlanta, but my checked baggage is not here.	
Let me check this right away. May I have your boarding pass and baggage tag?	I am so sorry and am happy to help. May I have your boarding pass?
Sure.	
I see that there was a weather-related delay. Your baggage did not make the Atlanta flight due to insufficient connection time.	I apologize for the inconvenience. Your baggage did not make the Atlanta flight and is not here. I am so sorry for—
That's unacceptable. I have a job interview at 1 PM, and my baggage has all the materials.	
Let me see what I can do to get it here for you as soon as possible.	I am so sorry for your troubles. I wish I could be more helpful. In your situation—
This is so unfair!	
I understand. Let me see how to get your bag here at the earliest...OK, I have a few options. I can have your bag on the next direct flight, at 2:25 PM, and delivered by 5:30 PM.	I know how you feel. I was in a similar situation once. I understand how stressful it is for you. Your bag would be on the flight arriving at 2:25 PM and delivered to you by 5:30 PM.
That won't work. I need my bag before my 1 PM interview.	
OK. Once the bag arrives, I can expedite delivery for a $25 fee, which I will waive, but you still won't get the bag till 3:30 PM. If that doesn't work I have some other options.	I am sorry that this won't work. Unfortunately, weather-related delays are hard to predict. That is why we advise passengers to not pack their important materials in the checked baggage. I apologize for the inconvenience.
Why can you not get my bag on an earlier flight?	
Yes, an earlier option I have is an Atlanta–Houston connection that will get your bag in Miami by 1:47 PM. If I expedite, you will have it by 2:30 PM.	My sincere apologies for the delay. I wish I could be more helpful. There are no direct flights from Atlanta that arrive in Miami before 2:25 this afternoon.
That does not help. I have my interview at 1 PM. I guess I do not have much choice. The 2:25 PM direct flight will have to do.	
Great. Please complete this claim form with a delivery address.	Great. Please complete this claim form with a delivery address.
OK. Here it is.	
Your baggage will arrive on the 2:25 flight,	Your baggage will arrive on the 2:25 flight,

Not surprisingly, the study has sparked interest among hotel, restaurant, and travel-oriented companies; all operate in logistics-intensive industries where problems are rife and the consequences of a service failure can be significant. Singh says that companies have begun asking for suggestions about words or phrases employees can use to convey that they are energetically trying to solve a customer's problem. But it's impossible to script these encounters, he says—indeed, part of what makes service recovery so difficult is that it requires improvisation, because aspects of every issue are unique. So instead of obsessing over the perfect language to use, employees should learn to dive in. "Just get into the task and generate interesting options for the customer—that makes all the difference," Singh says.

About the Research: "Frontline Problem-Solving Effectiveness: A Dynamic Analysis of Verbal and Nonverbal Cues," by Detelina Marinova, Sunil K. Singh, and Jagdip Singh (Journal of Marketing Research, forthcoming)

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This article is about CUSTOMER SERVICE

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Heather Hansen 2 years ago

This is an especially interesting conversation when it comes to medicine, where it is not always possible to resolve the patient's problem. After 20 years of defending medical malpractice cases, I know that the answer is knowledge and acknowledgement. When providers can acknowledge the patient's problem (active listening helps) and share their knowledge so the patient understands, everyone leaves the interaction more satisfied. I'm sorry your hurting isn't enough. But listening well enough to understand the pain, and then sharing knowledge so patients understand what to do next may be.

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