

HURTS NEED HEARING

“We love being heard, because being heard is a big part of being loved.”

- TONY MAYO

I was near the desk at my health club the other day when I overheard a woman ask the attendant if anyone had found a book she had forgotten earlier. The attendant said she had seen it by the exercise bikes, but now it was gone. The member said, “If you had brought the book to ‘Lost & Found’ I would have it now.”

The attendant explained, “I thought if I left it there you would find it when you came back.”

“Isn’t it the policy of the club to place property in this bin behind the desk?” the member insisted.

“It was only out for a minute. I would have moved it if you didn’t come for it soon.”

“But someone stole it, so now I have to go all the way back to the bookstore, make a special trip, and pay another \$22.00 just to read the last five pages of the book, all because you didn’t do what you’re supposed to do.” The member’s voice was louder and more excited now, as was the attendant’s as she replied.

*How do I know what I think
until I hear what I say?*
- OLD IRISH PROVERB

“Sometimes people walk away to get a drink or a towel. They don’t want us to hide everything away immediately.”

“This club has policies and procedures. If you people would just follow them, my CD player wouldn’t have been stolen last week either. Nothing is safe around here and you don’t even care.” This last bit was said loudly as the customer walked away, perhaps never to return. The attendant turned and spoke to the other employee at the desk as both shrugged and nodded. I did not hear what they said, but I assume it was a mutual assurance that the customer is not always right.

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You may agree with the attendant, maybe you sympathize with the customer. Either way, there is a better way for business people to receive complaints. Today, I offer a simple and powerful -- though counter-intuitive -- method of handling complaints.

You have probably heard the statistic that customers tell ten times as many people about a bad experience as about a good experience. One reason for this is that people who have been hurt want to be heard: "Misery loves company." "I need to get this off my chest." "I just want you to know (fill in the blank.)"

Approach all complaints with this assumption: "Hurts Need Hearing." It can be very uncomfortable to listen to someone complain about you, your company, or your product. The natural human reaction is to prove to the customer that you are right. The catch is, as much as you want to be right about what happened, so does the complainer want to be right. Being right may be the most powerful human desire. I warn you, as a salesperson or manager, that if you strive to be right you will do it by making customers and co-workers wrong. Soon, you will find yourself with few of either. What to do? Give them the gift of being right! It costs you nothing. If you must, be right about the incident after the customer is gone or, even better, be right about what a great listener you are.

Actively draw out the entire complaint. Ask questions. Let them repeat themselves. Request details, explore the collateral damage. Respect their feelings. Agree with their right to complain even if you do not agree with the details of the complaint. Let them vent. These complaints are going to come out somewhere. The only question is, "Will you help them complain to you or force them to complain to your other customers?"

When the member says, "If you had brought the book to 'Lost & Found' I would have it now."

Say, "You're right. I should have done that." [Bandaaid.gif \(4463 bytes\)](#)

For most complaints, that will be the end of it. Really. I've seen it done. Try it.

What about the case where you cannot concede the facts or the complainer is more persistent? It might go like this.

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When the member says, “If you had brought the book to ‘Lost & Found’ I would have it now.”

Say, “Yes, you would. I wish I had picked it up right away.”

“But you didn’t, so now my book is gone.”

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry that happened.”

“Now, I have to go all the way back to the bookstore, make a special trip, and pay another \$22.00 just to read the last five pages of the book, all because you didn’t do what you’re supposed to do.”

“That sounds upsetting.”

“It’s not so much upsetting as ... well, it’s frustrating. I had a CD player stolen just last week.”

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, well it’s not your fault. I’m just not used to working out here. I put things down and wander off like I’m at home.”

“Lots of people do, but usually their things are still right where they left them when they come back. That’s why I don’t put everything in ‘Lost & Found’ right away. You may not believe this, but I’ve gotten complaints from people because I collected their things when they were only getting a drink.”

“I believe it. You never know what people are going to go off about. Sorry I got mad at you. I should be angry at the creep who swiped my stuff!”

“No problem. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Nope. You’ve been great. Thanks for listening to me.”

Agree with their feelings, even if you disagree with their demands. Understand that they are upset, even if you wouldn’t be. Listen to how they would have wanted it handled, even if you know why it is not handled that way. See it through their eyes, as they describe it. Walk this mile in their moccasins and you can be friends.

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What if the customer has a legitimate complaint, one you are eager to fix? Save the fixing for after the complaining. Quickly repairing the circumstances is not enough, the customer wants to tell his story, too. Conceding without listening is like putting a bandage on a dirty wound; the problem will fester. The hurt still needs hearing.

If you are uncertain about this “Hurts Need Hearing” method, experiment with it in a safe environment: listen to the complaints your family and friends have about you. You want them to feel right, don’t you?