



A few tips on...

EMPATHY
AND YOUR
CUSTOMER
EXPERIENCE

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A cautionary tale...

A couple of years ago, The Sunday Times published a letter from British Airways in response to a complaint from a Mr Rae. A relatively old story, yes. And, as you'll see, a relatively trivial incident – but it serves to demonstrate a very important basic principle, which organisations often ignore when they focus on their customer experience. Let us share the tale.

Mr Rae had purchased business class seats for himself and his wife as a special treat when flying to their son's wedding but were disappointed by a series of menu choices that were unavailable and wines that had run out.

Now, the nature of air travel is such that not every menu choice can be stocked for every customer, but nevertheless Mr Rae seemed to have a legitimate complaint so it was interesting to read BA's response. This is what they said:

So, if I feel that you understand me and my point of view, I am much more likely to give you my business in the future.

This is validated by the annual 'BrandZ' study conducted by IBM and Ogilvy which found

Companies ...successful in creating both functional and emotional bonding had higher retention ratios (84% vs 30%) and cross-sell ratios (82% vs 16%) compared with those that did not

Let's examine the letter a little more closely:

"More than three-quarters of our Club World customers..."

Our interpretation: you are clearly in the winging minority Mr Rae.

"...customers say they are either extremely or very satisfied..."

According to our own research it is only those customers who award 'top box' scores and are extremely satisfied who have any propensity to be loyal or refer you to others. Anything less doesn't cut it. So the figure you should focus on BA, is what percentage of your customers are extremely satisfied?

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More than three-quarters of our Club World customers say they are either extremely or very satisfied with the meal services onboard. We can only apologise for the fact that, on this occasion, the food didn't match the expectations of the customer

Now this seems to be a fairly typical response, it offers an apology of sorts and an answer that seeks credibility through facts, but it falls apart at a fundamental human level; it fails to demonstrate any kind of empathy for Mr Rae or his situation. And this matters. Research by Harding and Yorke found that financial returns increase by 16.4% for every point that empathy improves as perceived by the customer.



EMPATHY AND YOUR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

“We can only apologise...”

Not true BA. You could offer to compensate Mr Rae in some way or at the very least offer him an upgrade on his next trip. As a minimum, a heartfelt apology would go a long way towards improving the situation.

“...the food didn't match the expectations...”

Well, to be more accurate, the food didn't match the choices provided in your own menu BA. You created Mr Rae's expectation so you have to live with failing to meet it.

“...of the customer.”

'The customer'; not 'you' or 'Mr Rae' but some anonymous third person.

I don't know how many thousands of people read this letter in the Sunday Times but my guess is that, like me, they empathised with Mr and Mrs Rae and wondered at the mealy mouthed reply.

The fact is that when a customer is dissatisfied enough to write a letter of complaint, first and foremost what they want is EMPATHY not an explanation. That may come later, but first you have to deal with the feelings and then you can deal with the facts.

The point is that you cannot design your customer experience to accommodate every eventuality. Things will go wrong, touch-points will fail, people will screw-up. When this happens you need your people to fall back on your purpose, your brand values and your promise to figure out what they can do to make the experience right.

Let's hope that BA's newly re-discovered motto of 'To Fly To Serve' avoids this kind of response in the future.

Which brings us on to another very famous illustration of 'feelings first; facts second'



EMPATHY AND YOUR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Feelings first: facts second

Organisations ignore this lesson at their peril as United Airlines found to their cost when they refused to acknowledge the legitimate complaint from a passenger called Dave Carroll. If you are one of the few people on the planet who hasn't heard of Dave or his story let me give you the short version.

Dave happens to be a musician and whilst travelling on United with his band observed the baggage handlers throwing his guitar around. Sure enough, when he arrived at his destination he found that it was broken. Despite many calls and letters to United, Dave found that he was unable to get anyone to listen to his complaint.

So what did he do? He recorded a song about his complaint which was posted on youtube.com. In excess of TEN MILLION people have now listened to Dave's story. Of course, United quickly tried to make amends but we can all recognise the difference between true empathy and damage limitation can't we?

So, what is the learning in all of this?

When a customer complains and it seems to be genuine you have a choice; you can either act like a lawyer and try to limit any liability or you can act like a human being and ask "How would I feel if I were that person and how can we make it better?" We suggest that the latter is more likely to build value for your brand.

