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A few years ago, we managed a very stressful move (what move isn't!) from Denver (our home together for almost 30 years, and Suzanne's home for virtually her entire life) to Sun City AZ.

During this process we had to work directly or indirectly with multiple realtors, moving companies, banks, title companies, attorneys, utility companies, internet providers, cleaning services, labor providers, HOAs, and more. The differences in the quality of customer service among all these different entities were glaringly obvious. Some were absolutely stellar, and made inherently difficult processes as trouble free as they could possibly be. Others were the devil in disguise, and one in particular abysmal experience resulted in Suzanne throwing toilet paper rolls around an almost empty house in frustration.

We realized we could learn from – and share with you - the good and bad examples of customer service we experienced during this stressful time. So this articles series is our thoughts about how to improve your customer service, make clients appreciate you, without violating your personal and professional boundaries and creating more stress for yourself.

Timely Responses Set the Stage

On a busy day, who knows how many phone calls you might have to return! Ten? Twenty? More? As you get to the end of your list you may be sick of giving the same spiel or dealing with the same questions. (We'd recommend you sign up for one of our most popular webinar courses "How To Manage Your Phone Time")

But your clients – the person on the other end of the phone – doesn't care how many other people you've talked to. They only care about your call to THEM! It may be tempting to let returning inquiry calls slide a day or two when you are stressed out or worn out. We understand. We've done that.

But there are some real disadvantages to you and your business for doing so. The first is the longer someone has to wait to hear back from you, the greater the chances they will find another service provider.

Second, if there is a delay in your initial response time, a potential client will think that's just how you operate. They may be concerned they'll always be a longer delay than they want when they need to ask you a question or follow-up with you.

There were times during our recent move when we really needed to get a service scheduled with someone NOW, THAT DAY. This was because there were more things that needed to get lined up, but we couldn't get those other pieces in place until that initial service was scheduled. In some cases, we were willing to pay a bit more for someone who could provide what we needed sooner rather than later. As stressed as we were, waiting to hear back from people was extremely frustrating.

On the other side of the coin, we know there are only so many hours in the day. And we are all only human! In some cases it may just not be possible to get back with people the same day, much less within a couple of hours.

One common strategy is to let people know from the outset, with your voicemail message or information on your website, that it may be one or two business days before you can get back to them. At least that sets realistic expectations for people, but it may not meet their needs. If you're a one-person show with more business than you can handle, maybe it's time to consider taking on a partner or outsourcing some of your administrative tasks.

It was obvious some of the providers we contacted during our move were answering their inquiry calls on the move, while in between clients. They'd sometimes say they'd call us back with pricing, etc. when they got back to the office. But at least it felt good to us that we'd actually talked to a live person rather than leaving a voice or email and left wondering who knows when we would hear back.

In our opinion from the customer side, there's a lot of good will benefit to that approach. And we recognize from the provider side that it also adds stress to your day.

Another possibility is to investigate online scheduling software or an online calendar. That way someone can choose their appointment time and you can call later to do whatever information gathering you do prior to meeting with people. We recognize that may not be a good fit for everyone, because there are so many variables involved including travel time, type of case, etc. But even if it works for some of your cases, that's an improvement.

Another option is to try to have some resources immediately available to people on your website to satisfy that "instant gratification" desire or need people have to get some sort of information RIGHT NOW, that we also experienced during our move. Those resources could range from what to expect from an appointment, what times you might have available (that would need to be updated daily), what they can do (or not do) in the meantime while they are waiting to hear from you, or even just a reassuring statement that most behavior problems are resolvable. You might even have a list of what you consider to be "behavioral emergencies" (if there are such things!) that might take priority in your scheduling

But the bottom line is that getting back to people quickly, in one form or another, is a big customer service priority. And all of us – ourselves included – probably have room for improvement.

Our next topic - The Three "Cs": Clear, Contracts, Confirm.

The Three “Cs”: Clear, Contracts, Confirm

This month’s Biscuit series is about how our recent experiences moving made us aware how important good customer service is, and gave us some ideas on what all of us can do to improve the experiences for our own customers.

Let’s talk about the importance of what we are calling the three Cs - Being Clear, Having a Contract, and Confirming Everything! The Cs are somewhat related to each other, but let’s focus on Being Clear first.

As we mentioned in the last Biscuit, you never know what all your clients are juggling in their lives. And we all know that when our stress levels and emotions are high, our ability to digest and remember important information is impaired – sometimes significantly! Clients may be upset because their dog bit someone, they now have an HOA complaint about their dog’s barking, they are looking at significant dollars to repair damage to their house or possessions from their dog’s destructiveness, or who knows what!

Therefore, it’s always important for you to be crystal clear about the details of the services you are providing. Explain EXACTLY what people are getting for their money - how much of your time, how many appointments, if you will answer questions via email, what written materials they will get, etc.

And you really must put this in writing and email to your client before the first appointment AND require an email acceptance response. We may be preaching to the choir here, but based on the number of laments about contract disputes and refund requests we’ve seen in dog training groups online, it seems not everyone is. In our field especially, we’d suggest including a statement about refunds, and that fees are for services rendered, not for results obtained. Our contract for legal consulting for example reads in part “Payment to me for the services I provide is not dependent upon my findings, or on the outcome of any legal action,….”

Don’t be squeamish about spelling out your terms. By being clear up front with you contracts and agreements you are actually making it easier for your clients. They have something in writing they can refer back to and not have to wonder if it’s OK to contact you, or if they are going to be charged extra or not. And of course it protects you if someone accuses you of not providing the service they paid for or if they want refunds.

We must have referred back to our paperwork dozens of time to see when our deadline was for changing the service date without a fee, when our credit card would actually be charged, the last date we could cancel without penalty and more. That kind of documentation was invaluable to us.

And that brings us to the last of our three Cs – confirm. Or maybe better reconfirm. We had several experiences where if we had not done that, there would have been serious consequences. We took it upon ourselves to reconfirm EVERY appointment or service we had scheduled. Not just once, but twice or more. We really appreciated the providers who took the initiative to do that themselves – send a simple text (our preference) or email reconfirming when they would be out. We’ve personally not used automated texting to reconfirm appointments, but we’re betting there’s an app for that!!

Those who went above and beyond would send text reminders that were not just confirming the appointment but also reminding us what we had to do that was related to it. "Don't forget to move your car from the driveway" for example. You might text with "don't forget to have your dog on leash" or "don't forget I need both you and your husband to be present for the appointment" or whatever else your "must do" requirements are.

Again, don't be afraid you are intruding – we would MUCH rather have received reminders we didn't necessarily need, then NOT get one that would have avoided a mix-up. It's almost impossible to have too many reminders and confirmations.

In the third article we'll discuss a variety of issues that come from one important consideration – you never know what your clients are juggling in their lives.

You Never Know What Your Clients Are Juggling So Remember To LISTEN

The essence of the topic for this Biscuit is we never really know what people are dealing with in their personal lives that influences the relative importance of your service to them. The service you provide may be more important in someone's life than you realize. Perhaps a relationship hinges on getting a pet's behavior to change. We just had a call from a previous client who said her dog's new out of control greeting behavior is causing a great deal of tension in the family. So all of a sudden we aren't just helping to train a dog, we are helping to change, and hopefully improve, the family's relationships and quality of life.

As service providers, we've all dealt with hundreds if not thousands of clients or customers. But for customers, this may be the FIRST time they've had to engage the services of a behavior professional. They don't know what to expect. And even though someone may be our 10,000th client, there is still something unique about that person and their pet, what their story is, and what they need from us.

What was extremely annoying to us during the move was when service providers would start into their "spiel" or prepared script before we had even finished telling them what our needs were. On a couple of occasions, we had to raise our voices, and repeat STOP STOP, NO NO THAT'S NOT WHAT WE NEED to get people out of "automatic mode" and LISTEN to what we needed first.

We know how annoying and frustrating it can be to listen to similar stories during inquiry calls over and over again. While we can't let clients ramble on for half an hour, we also have to find polite, respectful ways to let them know we are listening. We also must be careful not to make too many assumptions too soon about what their needs are.

Here are a couple of ideas about how to do that. Once someone has given you enough information during a phone call for you to get a general idea of the problem and what they want (classes, in-home visit, etc.), but the person is rambling on, you could say "Let me stop you there for a moment if I could--- " and then get the conversation back on track. Another option could be to say "Excuse me, but let me interrupt you for a second" --- and then say what you need to say.

Rather than having a phone call be the first point of contact, another option is to ask potential customers to complete an online form that triggers a call back from you. Your voice mail message could direct them to that page on your website. Having that information in hand before you call may circumvent some of the irrelevant information sharing.

We found it quite reassuring when service providers would summarize what we had told them we needed BEFORE telling us what they could do for us. For example: "So we are talking about delivering a 26 foot truck to your address on Thursday July 12th with a pickup the next Monday. Is that correct?" Then we could breathe a sigh of relief – YES! You understand what we need! Now we felt OK about talking prices and charges.

Adapting that to what we all do, in whatever way that fits, let your clients know that you understand what their pet's problem is and what service they are looking for before you start telling them what you do and what you charge. Granted, you may need to change their mind about both those things (their pet doesn't have a "dominance problem" and they don't need a board and train!) BUT you've let them know you understand their view of their needs as a starting point.

So the two take home messages from this Biscuit are first, don't under estimate the importance your service may have in someone's life and second avoid making too many assumptions about what your clients need until you have LISTENED to them.

Last, we talk about the value of being flexible and adaptable.

Always Be Ready With Plan B – Be Flexible!

This is the last Biscuit in our series on how our experiences moving can help you improve your customer service. The topic this week is about flexibility and having a back-up plan. Just the fact that you are receiving this Biscuit, which normally comes out on Tuesday, on Wednesday instead, illustrates the importance of having a Plan B and being flexible.

Throughout our move, we think the most flexible service provider we dealt with was the U-Pack It moving company. While our loading date remained relatively stable, we must have changed the unload date and delivery location at least 5 times. Not a problem they said, at least up until the last 36 hours when changes would have been much more difficult. The least flexible entities we dealt with were those involved with the actual real estate transactions.

Flexibility at times during this move was crucial to our sanity and to be able to make certain parts of the move actually come off. On the other side of the coin, we know, as service providers, sometimes clients' requests to do things differently than normal can make us want to scream in frustration. It's easy for either party to turn these "can't you do this" requests into a power struggle from which no good will come.

Sometimes these requests make us feel as though clients are trying to take advantage of us. We think we are more likely to interpret their requests that way when we ourselves are stressed and feel overloaded. Rather than immediately digging in our heels, getting exasperated, and refusing a client's request to do something different than normal, try to remember to take a step back.

When we were on the receiving end, we were so grateful to those companies who said "yeah, I think we can do that" instead of "No, we can't" before even hearing us out.

Of course being flexible doesn't mean breaking reasonable personal and professional boundaries we've each set for ourselves and our businesses. But it might mean bending those boundaries just a bit to accommodate our clients' needs and wishes. We know that we will all need someone to be flexible and accommodating for us one day.

As we discussed this series, we asked each other – what allows some businesses to be so flexible and others not? One of the answers is that flexibility can be built into a business's work model, its policies and procedures and the outlook of its employees. The moving company was accustomed to dealing with multiple changes – they happen to them everyday, all the time. They had the systems and processes in place to accommodate those changes. Real estate service providers are bound by laws and regulations that limited their ability to change certain things or provide us with any "wiggle room" in some circumstances.

So what can we do in our training and behavior businesses to make being flexible easier? One is our attitude. We can't become so entrenched in "dogma" or doing things the way we've always done them that we lose sight of the fact that nothing stays the same in life. Another is to avoid loading ourselves up with so much to do that we lose any capability to adjust to the changing needs of our clients. Related to that is having adequate support both personally and professionally. When you are the one doing everything with little ability to delegate and no back up, it's much harder to be flexible. And last is trying to be proactive and anticipate what could go wrong ahead of time. Suzanne got real good at anticipating worst case situations after experiencing them a couple of times. Learning how to plan for them actually prevented a couple of them from happening. All of those skills can be applied to our own businesses.

We hope our lessons learned during our move have given you food for thought and some ideas about how to improve your customer service. We've certainly learned from these experiences!