Six Everyday Excuses That Bruise Your Brand

By Jeff Mowatt

Working with organizations for over 25 years to transform customer service culture, I've discovered that some employees – who would describe themselves as *solid performers* – actually have a habit of delivering more excuses than results. Unfortunately, your customers don't buy excuses – literally. The more your team members rationalize poor service, the more they'll cost your organization in trust equity. See if your employees use any of these six common customer service excuses. We'll start with the worst offenders:

1. "It's against policy"

Customer service policies must make *obvious* sense to customers. If not, overly restrictive and outdated rules practically *invite* customers to argue with employees or rant about your brand in social media. Set your policies around what's best for your brand and best for customer loyalty. Don't let lawyers establish your customer service policies. If you must have an unpopular policy, ensure that your employees understand it, can get behind it and can easily explain it to customers. More importantly, train and empower frontline employees to overrule policies when common sense dictates.

2. "Our shipping people messed-up"

Customers have zero patience for service providers who blame foul-ups on someone else; be it on co-workers in another department, or external suppliers/contractors who are part of your supply chain. Blaming others makes customers assume that they'll get the proverbial run-around and intensifies their aggravation, making a bad situation worse. So take the opposite approach – accept responsibility. Say, "Looks like *we* messed-up. I'm sorry about that." Most customers realize it wasn't actually *you* who made the error. And they'll respect the fact that you are nonetheless stepping-up to own it.

3. "We're swamped this time of year"

This excuse is similar to the recorded *on-hold* phone message you hear from call centers: "Due to high call volumes…" Essentially this excuse tells customers that the organization has experienced this problem repeatedly, but (since they don't really care that much about customer experience) hasn't bothered to do anything to fix it. That's better left unsaid. Best to simply thank the customer for their patience, and get on with what you *can* do for them.

4. "I'm not authorized to do that"

In my customer service seminars we talk about employee *status*, and how it's a mistake to put a customer at a higher or lower status than the service provider. Instead, you want employees to be viewed by customers as their *trusted advisors*. So when you need to ask higher-ups for input, explain to the customer that you want to look into this further to see what *you* can come up with. Then discretely discuss the matter with your supervisor. When afterwards you report back to the customer, tell them, "Here's what *I* came up with." That makes customers feel like they're dealing with an equal; not wasting their time.

5. "I assumed you wanted…"

Customers want service providers to help them make decisions. And in the case where customers view you as their *trusted advisor,* they even want you to make decisions on their behalf. But that only works when the service provider has discussed the customer's needs and overall objectives. We earn the right to make assumptions *after* talking with the customer and gaining their respect. Paraphrase your understanding of their needs with the words like "*sounds like*". *For example*, "Sounds like you'd like to…" *After* you've done that, customers will be much more comfortable and confident with your assumptions.

6. "Sorry, I'm new here"

Actually, in this case customers will accept this excuse, which is why I put it last. Customers can be wonderfully compassionate when a newbie, who realizes something is taking longer than it should, apologizes for the delay and explains the situation. Tip: rather than saying *bear with me* (which sounds like an order), instead say *I appreciate your patience*. For example, "Sorry for the delay, this is my first week here. I appreciate your patience with me." Now the customer feels like a hero for being nice.

Bottom line – in every organization things will occasionally go wrong that put customer relationships at risk. The key to preserving the customer connection is ensuring frontline employees are trained to recover trust. As for managers, revisit your policies to ensure they don't force employees to automatically say no to customers when instead they should be looking for ways to say yes. After all, if *you* don't satisfy that customer, your competitor will. Then you'll have in bigger problems where excuses won't matter.

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When it comes to customer service strategies, Jeff didn't just read the book – he wrote it! He's the author of the best-selling business books, ***Becoming a Service Icon in 90 Minutes a Month*** and ***Influence with Ease***. He is a Hall of Fame motivational speaker and has produced several training tools. His Influence with Ease® column has been syndicated and featured in over 200 business and on-line publications.