



ETHICAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

Good for Business!

by Gary Hardaway

a few weeks ago I accidentally damaged the screen on my laptop. A creeping green blob took over the bottom left corner, obscuring most of the start menu. Opening programs and files became quite a guessing game.

Despite the inconvenience, I managed to keep using the machine for some weeks, but, the inky green blob did not slumber nor sleep. Almost imperceptibly it spread toward new horizons. Fear of a potential green-out prompted me to search for a solution.

Shopping around for a new screen, I learned, to my horror, it would set me back about \$500, plus installation. A frugal (OK, cheap) columnist does not take such news lightly. It became necessary to call the manufacturer. After navigating the usual voice-mail maze, I arrived in spare parts department. The courteous young man who fielded my inquiry consulted his computerized list of stock on hand and informed me that I could purchase a new display screen for \$1,099.

I expressed mild surprise that the price had more than doubled in the

last few weeks, very much like gas. (Had OPEC gained control of the laptop monitor market? Being dignified, I didn't actually say that). I mentioned to the "customer server" that I had expected something in the \$500 range and would have to look elsewhere.

Well, that seemed to trigger an epiphany of sorts in the spare parts department. The computer there had, in fact, come up with not one but two suitable replacement options. Only the \$1,099 model was in stock. And how much was the other part, the one not in stock? Surprise: \$489.

The Price for Immediacy

I pondered this new information with appropriate objectivity. Which part seemed like the better purchase? The rather inexpensive part, or the egre-

giously overpriced part that cost more than a totally new computer? Sober analysis suggested the first option.

However, the company does not permit a customer to order an out-of-stock item. The system will REJECT such orders. So much for the notion that customer service should always be looking out for your best interests. You need your replacement part right now. You surely wouldn't let a few hundred dollars stand in the way of instant "service," right?

Caveat Emptor

Since time began, unsavory merchants have devised sneaky tricks of weaseling more money out of unsuspecting customers. The game depends on providing wrong information (lying) or withholding important information (inadequate disclosure). Despite the age-old warning "caveat emptor"—"let the buyer beware"—all buyers have to trust some sellers to some extent.

In a face-to-face marketplace, scam artists soon lose trust—and their business. Words of warning spread. But in a faceless, global market, massive

enterprises have the average shopper at a huge disadvantage. They possess baffling technological information. They can devise complex policies that prey on the trusting, the inexperienced, and the uninformed.

At the Seller's Mercy

Competition helps bring in better prices, when profitable. But, even so, getting access to all relevant data—price, quality and supply sources—takes increasing skill. Even buyers who “beware” may not find all they need to know about the product and purchase. Many find the process so discouraging, they throw themselves on the mercy of the seller.

In contrast to this predatory behavior, a morally uplifting approach starts with the customer. The customer needs—and deserves—to deal with somebody worthy of trust. Somebody who looks out for his or her welfare.

Somebody who immediately says, “We stock two screens for your machine. One is in stock and costs \$1,099. The other is priced at \$489,

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but is not in stock. Which do you prefer?” When the frugal client wants the cheaper model, the company responds, “I’ll place that order right now, and we’ll send it as soon as we get the product in.”

Good ethics makes good business sense, as well. According to an ancient text, “A kind man benefits himself, but a cruel man brings trouble on

himself” (Proverbs 11:17). A kind business attracts more customers, eager to be served by people of integrity. A predatory business may eventually run out of victims. ❖

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