

Should the Customer Always be Right?

Collaboration for Customer Satisfaction

PeopleThink Guest Article

Everyone is in the business of sales. Whether we work as a contractor, vendor, retailer, or in human relations, at one time or another we have been told that "the customer is always right." However, when considering the new economy, is this statement still true? Should it continue to be our mantra in customer relations?

Having come from a family of lumberyard storeowners, including my grandfather, father, and husband, I have never taken the idea of customer satisfaction lightly; it meant survival. Many people in business still feel that pain, they not only want to be successful, they also need to survive. However, nothing is as black and white as "I am the 'seller' and 'the customer is always right.'" Furthermore, red flags go off when a submissive relationship is a mandate for success.

Relationships without boundaries rarely spell success

One favorite customer service story about boundaries is from a friend of mine who works for a small retail company. He was manning the front desk with a coworker who was working diligently at providing customer satisfaction.

Unfortunately, at least to the customer, the colleague was failing miserably. As a heated interaction ensued, the CEO of the small company stopped in for a visit. He paused for a moment, listened to the exchange, and then did something that

"The greatest change in corporate culture—and the way business is being conducted—may be the accelerated growth of relationships based on partnership."

- Peter Drucker

surprised the company along with the customer; he quietly escorted the customer out of the store. As he did so, he explained that he did not allow his employees to be treated poorly by anyone, not by the rest of his staff, nor by his customers. Ten years later, the scene was repeated within the small company, only this time, my friend, now manager of the store, delivered the same news to another customer that was rudely demanding customer service while insulting the associate.

At first glance one might think this was admirable for the merchant and deserving for the customer. While it certainly is, one can't help but wonder if there couldn't be a way where both sides feel successful. Is it realistic to expect or even want a win/ win for both patron and seller? The lesson here is one of not only overall respect, but also the need for a more powerful solution.

Early "survival" needs provide a clue

For the answer, let's look at brain research and human survival in earlier times. According to Dr. John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*, to survive, early humans needed to collaborate. To contend with the large beasts of the land, early humans figured out that teamwork and cooperation were the answers to continued existence. In studying the Pilgrims' first few years in America, we find that the celebration of Thanksgiving was due to their friendship with Squanto, who taught them how to live in the new world; survival was due to forming a positive relationship on both sides.

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Partnering and collaboration are keys to success

Partnering is the answer not only for survival, but also for flourishing in the future. Dr. Medina states, "We learned to cooperate, which means creating a shared goal that takes into account your allies' interests as well as your own. Of course, in order to understand your allies' interests, you must be able to understand others' motivations, including their reward and punishment systems. You need to know where their *itch* is." He further explains that the "relationship" between two people is key.

Simply stated, collaboration, the act of working together, is needed for success. Furthermore, we need to have a relationship, which Encarta Dictionary defines as *connection, behavior or feelings toward somebody else, and friendship*. How do we do that? Let me suggest the following.

Four steps to sharpen collaborative and relationship skills:

1. **Check your mindset** - Are your customers "prey" to be captured, or people with needs? Are you competing with team members or collaborating with them to provide success for your customer?
2. **Listen, Listen, Listen** - Did I say listen? We are used to hearing about the importance of building relationships. So we take clients out to lunch, dinner, golfing, sporting events and whatever else we can think of to "build the relationship." What we forget is that these events provide opportunities to LISTEN, not opportunities to give our "sales pitch." Most of the time, we pretend to listen when we are simply reloading our own thoughts to shoot into the next opening.
3. **Be Mission Minded** - Are you clear about the mission? And mission doesn't mean the sales target for next quarter. What is your *customers'* mission? Have you asked? What would you be doing differently if your mission were as simple as enabling your client to become a superstar?
4. **Take care of yourself** - Are you in a positive mental space that is enabling you to be a creative problem-solver with your client? Is this about you or about the client? Can it be about both? If the answer is yes, then you are entering the productive state of collaboration.

Collaboration plus relationship equals success. Are you a vendor or a partner? Are your clients your adversaries or your friends? As Dr. Medina declares, do you know your clients' *itch*? Do you know their interests, motivations, and passions? By collaborating with our customers, now our friends, together we offer this world something spectacular.

About the author: *Jane Schuette is president and managing owner of Jane Schuette and Associates. A professional educator and coach, Jane partners with PeopleThink to help individuals, teams and leaders achieve personal and organizational success.*
