

10 Things Customer-Service Reps Won't Tell You

A little light reading while you're on hold.

By JEN WIECZNER

January 2012

<http://www.smartmoney.com/spend/technology/10-things-customer-service-reps-wont-say-1326819855640/>



1. "You can't always get what you want."

After an Apple store employee failed to help Amy Levine find an accessory for her old iPod, the indignant New Yorker dashed off a letter describing the poor customer service to the late Steve Jobs, then the company's CEO. To her surprise, Apple gave her a free new iPod and Mac laptop. But in the world of customer service, happy endings like Levine's are hard to come by: Only 21 percent of those who complain end up satisfied, according to a recent study by Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business. Another study, by consulting firm Accenture, found customer satisfaction with service is down across the board, from the amount of time it takes to resolve a problem to the politeness of reps. That's because customer service is often designed as "a kind of firewall against the customer," says Emily Yellin, author of *Your Call Is (Not That) Important to Us*. "Customers and customer-service reps are at odds."

2. "It pays to be polite -- unless you're talking to a computer."

According to a recent American Express survey, more than half of Americans say they've lost their temper talking to customer service. But it's often to little effect, since reps are well trained to manage irate callers. What's more, "if you become seriously abusive, they have permission to hang up on you," says John Goodman, vice chairman of TARP Worldwide, a customer-service consultancy. Some firms even blacklist serious offenders. The rules of engagement change, however, when a customer is speaking to a machine -- yelling might actually help, since some automated systems detect shouting and cursing. Virtual yelling also seems to get results: After the website *ComcastMustDie.com* campaigned against Comcast, calling it a "vast, greedy, blundering, tone-deaf corporate colossus," the company responded to complaints on the site and says it "refocused" its customer service on communicating with consumers online.

3. "We open the velvet rope for big spenders..."

When Target launched a line by Missoni last year, frenzied shoppers waited in epic lines. Meanwhile, Jessica Alba had her manager put in a call to Target to place her order. When it comes to customer service, VIPs often get special treatment: Firms from Verizon to Bank of America have "executive" customer-relations offices. (Verizon says it has teams to handle "frustrated" customers who e-mail non-customer-service employees; Bank of America says its Executive Customer Relations office "is not for any particular group of customers" but responds to "high-level complaints that are escalated.") Linda Dickerhoof Sperling, a marketing professional, says that her former employer, a tech firm, had three customer-service departments and top-tier customers got a veritable "bat phone." "The VIP care team agents have a higher skill set. They're not entry-level," she says.

4. "...but you can slip in the side door if you know how."

While VIP customers often get the best response, regular joes can sometimes score star treatment. Sites like GetHuman.com post hard-to-find phone numbers of executive customer-service offices. "It might not be the right person to talk to, but a lot of times the people in the executive office will make the issue a priority," says Adam Goldkamp of GetHuman. One problem: Some firms, such as Priceline, have essentially changed the locks, deactivating e-mail addresses and phone numbers for executive offices after they've been publicized. (Priceline says it periodically changes the number for its top-level customer-service team when "unreferred calls" get out of hand.) Customer-service consultants advise firms to treat customers who reach the CEO the same as if they'd called the main number, because meeting their demands for free swag sets a bad precedent and demoralizes reps on the front lines.

5. "If you really want us to sweat, start tweeting."

Still on hold? Tweeting about your problem can sometimes get faster results. That's because companies often put their best reps online, and broadcasting a bad experience to the Twitterverse motivates them to appease the customer before the story goes viral. FedEx, for one, says it recruits "exceptional" agents for its social-media team. Josh March, CEO of Conversocial, a start-up that makes social-media customer-service software, recommends that firms resolve problems in less than an hour. Although Conversocial found that large U.S. retailers ignore 65 percent of customer complaints on Facebook and Twitter, March says such complaints can pack a punch. "It only takes one issue that other people are angry about" to spark a frenzy, he says.

6. "It's okay if you're unhappy, as long as we're able to keep the chat short."

Companies often look first to customer-service departments to make cuts during tough times. In fact, the number of reps fell 9 percent in the U.S., to 2 million workers, from 2008 to 2010. Fear of layoffs only adds anxiety to a high-pressure job, where performance often is assessed based on rigid metrics like average call time and meeting the requirement to say a customer's name three times. The incentives for service in stores can also be skewed, since employees can suppress complaint rates by 30 percent simply by avoiding eye contact with customers. "If you're thinking about those things, it's very difficult to truly listen and respond to what customers are asking for," says Scott Broetzmann, CEO of Customer Care Measurement and Consulting. Former customer-service rep Rachael Pracht says the maximum time for the 100 to 200 calls she handled a day was supposed to be three minutes at a pharmaceutical company and five to seven minutes at a telephone company. Anything over the five-minute mark and "you just start freaking out," she says.

7. "Speaking with a manager isn't a right; it's a privilege."

Asking for the manager has become many callers' go-to strategy for customer service: According to a survey by American Express, 74 percent of angry consumers demand to speak with a supervisor. Customers want to talk to someone authorized to fix their problem, but that's a challenge for firms with a limited number of managers. To cope, customer-service departments are urging reps to solve problems and resist transferring callers. But companies are also getting trickier. When AT&T customers "thought they were talking to the manager," Pracht (a former AT&T employee) says, it was often just another rep "who had gotten a 50-cent raise and not that much extra training." (AT&T says it makes "every effort" to grant customers' wishes to speak with a supervisor.) In the end, it helps to ask politely, since the rep is probably reluctant to put you through to a manager. Says Goodman: "It's almost an admission of weakness."

8. "There's a thin line between helping out and getting swindled."

As people became more frugal in the economic downturn, they also got tougher on customer service. Companies say they're handling far more complaints these days, "where in the past, people would have just not bothered," Goodman says. But in some cases, the complaints aren't legit; they're moneymaking schemes using customer support to snag refunds and freebies. How prevalent is this? Says Goodman, "1 or 2 percent of consumers are either crazy or they're gaming the system." Consequently, companies are monitoring complaints, flagging those who have an unusual number of problems and even testing returned electronics to see whether the customer caused the problem (if so, a note goes in their file). As a rep, Pracht often had customers who lied or made big demands; one guy refused to hang up because she wouldn't take \$350 off his bill. "I felt like I was trying to talk someone off a bridge," she says.

9. "How many reps does it take to handle a problem?"

More than you think."

According to a recent study by Arizona State, it takes more than four calls to customer service, on average, to resolve a complaint, and at some companies, it's even higher. Why? Harried reps are "incentivized to make those calls brief and refer someone to somebody else," says Mary Jo Bitner, a marketing professor at Arizona State. Also, firms may have different departments for different kinds of complaints, which the rep you're talking to may or may not know about. Bank of America, for one, has roughly 20 customer-service phone numbers, which it says allow reps to "quickly route the customer to the service associate best equipped to answer their specific questions."

10. "The machines are winning."

Call a toll-free customer-service number and a computer often picks up: In fact, 79 of the top 100 online retailers use automated systems, according to StellaService, a customer-service ratings firm. But inability to speak to a human is among consumers' top complaints. "Everyone hates these things," says Walter Rolandi, a consultant who specializes in "interactive voice response." Canned mantras like "We're sorry, but we're experiencing unusually heavy call volumes" and having to repeat the same info to both a robot and a rep are particularly irksome, experts say. For firms, IVR systems stanch the ongoing flow of customers. But they also mean that calls that go through to human agents are often the toughest, says Rob Duncan, chief operating officer of call-center firm Alpine Access. Online companies like Facebook don't even have customer-service lines. While Facebook posts a help guide on its site, it says "any phone number that is publicly available is inundated" to the point of making it not worth calling.

Scott M. Broetzmann

President & CEO

Customer Care Measurement & Consulting



Customer Care Measurement & Consulting helps Fortune 500 companies from every industry get a better ROI for their investments in the customer experience.

Learn more about CCMC by visiting www.customercaremc.com

(Image Source: <http://fineartamerica.com/>)