

When it Comes to Service, Don't Put on the Ritz: 7 Ways to Improve Your Customers' Experience

By Troy Harrison

In my experience, most customer service training is about “conflict resolution,” when in fact, it should be “conflict avoidance.” Many customer service issues – and the attendant conflicts – don't have to happen. I was reminded of this when I decided to have a snack.

I love Ritz crackers. Well, at least I used to. For the past few years, I've noticed that far too many Ritz crackers turn into crumbs as soon as you open the package. I threw away a new box yesterday because I opened all four sleeves, and it was impossible to remove an intact cracker from the package. Although I've seen this a lot, and I decided to do a little research. My research, quickly, found that thousands of other people had posted about the same thing.

On their Facebook page, there is a thread that is six years, and over a thousand comments, old, of people reporting the same issue. Here's the funny part. Someone at Ritz took the time to respond to every post. They said (paraphrasing; not all responses were identical in words but they were in sentiment):

“We're sorry this happened to you. Please send us a private message with the batch number and the store where you bought the crackers so we can investigate.” Thousands of times, thousands of comments, and this was the response – essentially, pretending that it's an isolated problem with just a few affected boxes, when in reality this is pretty much a systemic problem.

What's happening is that someone at RJR Nabisco has decided that they have two options: First, they can figure out why this is happening now and didn't before and fix the problem, or they can train some entry-level employee to type out rote responses every time someone claims, knowing people will continue to buy the crackers because of the brand. They have chosen option number two.

This syndrome isn't just confined to big corporations, either. I see small and medium sized companies doing the same thing every day. Don't do that. If you have a recurring problem, here are the steps you need to take:

1. **Be honest.** Is this a real problem? In other words, is what the customers are experiencing a genuine problem with the product or service, or an isolated incident? If it's happening consistently and repeatedly, it's not an isolated incident. It's like the person who has been married seven times – at some point, you have to admit that it's not them; it's you.
2. **Embrace transparency.** You must realize that, whatever the problem is, it's going to get out. That's one of the ways that social media has changed the world. The old saying used to be, “If you do something good for someone, they'll tell one person. If you do something bad TO someone, they'll tell ten people.” Now, either way, they have the capability to tell the entire world. Ritz is responding to those customer complaints as if they were communicating one-on-one. You have to recognize that not only will the PROBLEM get out – how you HANDLE the problem will get out.
3. **Investigate.** Why is the problem actually happening? Is it traceable to a human error (most are), a product or raw material error, a process error, or a customer error? Nearly every ‘service’ issue is traceable to one of those things.

4. **Fix it.** Human errors or customer errors are fairly easily fixable by training and setting expectations; processes can be rewritten, and product or raw material errors can be addressed – but first, you have to know what they are.
5. **Individualize your communication.** One of the aspects of this that really upset customers on the Ritz page was that, not only was Ritz pretending that these were isolated instances (hundreds of times over), they were giving the same rote response and not responding to individualized queries. When customers ask questions, answer THEIR question – not everyone else's – and respect THEIR situation. Yes, you might be communicating with the entire world (see #2 above), but you're still dealing with THEIR problem.
6. **Set customer expectations.** Too often, customers are blamed for expecting "too much" of a product or service, when in fact, it was the seller who set that expectation in the first place. I once worked in an industry as a sales manager where our service manager said, "It's your salespeople's jobs to sell fantasy; my job is to sell reality." In other words, my team was supposed to paint an unrealistic picture of what the result would be, get a contract signed, and then turn them over to service, who would reset their expectations. Not surprisingly, customers weren't delighted with this approach, and I left that industry not long after that conversation. If your sales or marketing is painting an unrealistic picture, you need to fix THAT – false expectations will damage your business far more than losing a few deals because someone else is "selling a fantasy."
7. **Make it right.** Find a way to make the customer "whole" again. This can be done any number of ways, but the worst way is to give them more of a flawed product. I'm thinking of the airlines who, upon delaying you for hours and messing up your plans, give you a voucher for more flying. Or Ritz, who offered to send a replacement box of crackers.

If you know you have a problem, you need to either fix it or acknowledge the problem BEFORE the customer buys, so they can make an educated decision about whether or not to buy.

In the case of my beloved Ritz crackers, all I want is something I can put cheese or peanut butter on. After reading that thread on Facebook (and throwing away many, many bad crackers over the last couple of years), I've decided to switch to a different cracker that holds together. Will I go back? Probably not. If you have a problem, don't acknowledge or fix it, and your customer finds out, they probably won't, either.

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