



THE CUSTOMER IS SOMETIMES ALWAYS RIGHT?

In short, yes... uhm well, no... maybe sometimes? O.k., so you might have gathered by now that there is no “short” answer. Anybody who truly believes that the customer is always right hasn't really given this policy much thought.

When was the last time someone came into your business, or called on the phone, or better yet emailed you with a throbbing case of the nasties? Our business is located just outside of the city with a bus stop in front. We also own several niche market web sites. Do you suppose we get our share of interesting characters?

Somehow, this philosophy/policy of, “The customer is always right” has been branded into the consumer's psyche and repeatedly shoved in the face of business owners, managers, and employees. Having worked in Law Enforcement for several years, we're taught by our instructors and leaders to consider “the spirit of the law” versus “the letter of the law.” These considerations dictate whether or not the cop is going to give you a ticket for going 5 miles over the speed limit. If we're to follow the “letter of the law,” we're going to go by the book each and every time without exception. It's the “spirit” that allows us discretion to listen to a creative story of how your lover caught you with your spouse again and “thank God you're here to protect me, Officer... and that's why I was speeding. I was trying to get away!”

Shouldn't we, as business owners and managers, have that same option of discretion when a less than reasonable customer approaches chanting that misguided mantra? Now, of course, this is not to say that we should not recognize our positions as “authority figures” and practice a higher degree of professionalism, diplomacy, and tact. All of which are vital to your business. Professionalism is the difference between giving the appearance of genuine concern, and wrapping your knuckles on someone's forehead to see if anybody's home. Diplomacy is being able to give your customer the perception that you owe them, and have provided them with, an apology by stating something to the affect of, “I'm sorry you feel that our policy has inconvenienced you.” instead of actually apologizing and admitting fault for something that your company is righteous in maintaining. Tact is being able to tell your customer that it appears that your (policy, sign, product, etc.) was simply misunderstood without having to tell him/her that they're a complete moron.

Now, I'm also not condoning never admitting fault or accepting responsibility for genuine wrongs and doing everything within your ability to correct them. And there are schools of thought that strictly forbid admitting fault. Their mantra? “Better to ask forgiveness than permission.” However, by the very nature of such an absolute statement such as, “The customer is always right,” provides people, who for no other reason but a sense of entitlement, a free pass to come into your business with the expectation that they're going to be able to conduct themselves however they wish. This includes treating you and/or your employees with utter disrespect and rudeness. As a result, our employee attrition rate is relatively low because we allow them the discretion of practicing professionalism, diplomacy, and tact. Fortunately, most of our clientele allow us the opportunity to provide them with genuine friendly service and resolve any issues with a mutually beneficial outcome. Unfortunately, every once in a while, you come across a customer, who no matter what extraordinary efforts you deploy to appease, is simply unreasonable. With that, you must then make an executive decision and these are just a few questions that should be considered in rapid-fire succession almost immediately. Is this customer worth keeping? How adversely will kicking him in the pants affect my business? Am I able to resolve this issue with little impact on my business or bank account? Am I going to diminish my employee's sense of empowerment and/or sense of dignity by overturning their reasonable decision? I'm sure there are other considerations that you're likely to make, but these are the very minimum.

Incidentally, the person responsible for us having to endure the phrase, “The customer is always right.” was a gentleman by the name of H Gordon Selfridge. Mr. Selfridge was the founder of Selfridge's Department Stores widely known across the United Kingdom. Perhaps Mr. Selfridge was stuck in the “letter of the law,” as he died insane and bankrupt. Food for thought.

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