

SHUT YOUR MOUTH! WORDS AND PHRASES TO AVOID IN A CUSTOMER- FOCUSED SERVICE ENVIRONMENT

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Last year, I was on the last flight of the day to Washington, D.C. on one of my least favorite airlines. It was summer, and thunderstorms roared across the East Coast. While in flight, the plane was diverted to another city that was NOT my destination. As we walked off the plane at midnight, the cheery announcement over the PA system was, “Welcome to X! We’re not responsible for anything due to the weather, and we’re sorry for the inconvenience.” As a seasoned flyer, I knew that the airline was not responsible for paying for a hotel, BUT they could have offered some assistance and a little sympathy.

What really got me, though, was the characterization of being dumped in a strange city at midnight as an “inconvenience.” This was NOT an inconvenience—it was a disaster, especially since I had meetings in Washington the next afternoon that would go better if I had some sleep, was lucid and in a fresh, clean suit. But that was not to be...

It got me thinking about what was said and how it was delivered. We’re all customers. We’ve all been driven nuts by absolutely insensitive things service staff say. But after getting angry in our private lives, we still allow or sometimes even mandate very similar things in our service management roles. I discussed this recently with Crystal Collier—and, as a result of that conversation, we came up with a list of our least favorite phrases. We recommend that you observe your staff (and yourself); if you hear these phrases being used, stop them! These words and phrases absolutely detract from your organization’s customer focus and, undoubtedly, your customer satisfaction.

Words and Phrases to Erase from Your Staff’s Vocabulary

“Inconvenience” A 10-minute delay on an airline flight or a two-minute wait in a coffee shop line is an inconvenience. A cancelled flight or missed appointment when you took off a half-day of work to meet a technician at your house is a lot more than an inconvenience.

“Not a problem” This is jargon that is often meant as “my pleasure.” However, it comes across as a casual, “I’m happy to tolerate you.” Columnist Kathleen Parker also noted this as a flash phrase. In a December 25, 2012, *Washington Post* column, she said, “When someone expresses gratitude for that gesture, it is customary to acknowledge that you were happy to extend the pleasure with, ‘you’re welcome,’ not that it wasn’t too bad for you.”

“It’s our policy” This phrase basically conveys, “it is convenient for us to do X, whether it is convenient for you or not.” It also makes the customer feel like a cog in a wheel instead of an important part of the company. Using this phrase is failing to view the situation from the customer’s perspective and conveys that service is dispensed to further the company’s self-interest.

“That could not have happened” This one is a quote from a representative of a Washington D.C. power company recently during a multiday power outage when an erroneous call was made saying that our power had been restored when it had not. Calling the customer a liar is not a useful way to gain agreement on next steps from the customer—or to create totally satisfied customers.

“May I put you on hold for just a moment?” This phrase is better than saying “please hold”—click. But, usually “for just a moment” is not “just a moment.” Be honest and set expectations appropriately: If it is going to be three minutes or even five, say so. If the caller is the fourth in queue, it is better to lower expectations and tell the customer that it is going to be several minutes. Then they can run to the bathroom or turn down the soup on the stove rather than hanging on the phone.

“Our options have recently changed” For veteran users, they may not have, so think about exactly at whom the message is aimed. Further, we hear this so frequently, we no longer believe it to be true. Call center executives usually tell us that the phrase is used to get customers to listen to the choices so that they will be more accurate. First, you need to determine if the change is worth it when it disrupts learned patterns among heavy users. Secondly, what percentage of customers actually push “0” and don’t listen?

“You can get faster service online by going to our website www.ABC.com” We see several

problems here. First, the customer chose to call you, so is it realistic to tell her to hang up and spend more time getting online? Assuming that most of your callers are veteran customers, they probably already have been to your website and have determined that this is something that could not be self-serviced. Reminding them to go online implies that they are lazy or stupid—either surely will make them angry. Also, why say *www*? That phrase was relevant 10 years ago, but not now. Finally, customers know about self-service; you are not educating them by telling them about the many services are available online.

A much better approach practiced by companies like Hewlett-Packard is to answer the question on the phone and then ask if you can show the customer how to self-service online. A significant minority will say yes, and you can educate them on how many items they can self-service online. The head of worldwide service at HP found that every two minutes invested in such education saved 10 minutes of subsequent calls from that customer—a 500% ROI.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Although we agree with the premise of asking if other questions or issues exist to help achieve first-call resolution, this phrase can be particularly frustrating if the CSR was unable to satisfy the customer’s need during the call. You must give CSRs the flexibility of deciding when to use the phrase and when it will be a flash word.

One pushback you may get from your staff is that some customers do lie and many more do cause their own problems. In *Strategic Customer Service*, I point out that customers DO cause 30% of their own problems and the customer is not always right. We and our clients have found that only 2% to 4% of customers are actually lying or actively gaming the system. Why run the 96% of honest customers through the gauntlet to catch the 4%?

For the 30% who have made a mistake, they believe they are correct, are uninformed or simply never read the directions. Before you indict the customer for not reading, think about whether you read your homeowners insurance policy, the directions for the last electronic item you bought or the last set of terms and conditions you agreed to on the web. When we have asked this question of an audience of about 100, we have never had more than two hands go up. (Crystal admits to never reading any of these things!) The real answer is that we’re all busy and it is not the customer’s responsibility to be right. However, it is your staff’s responsibility to provide caring assistance, regardless of who originally caused the problem.

Phrases You Should Encourage Your Staff to Use

“Thank you for taking the time to bring this to our attention.” This diffuses any defensiveness on the part of either the customer or the staff member. In fact, it makes the customer feel important and heard.

“I’m going to do everything I can to get this resolved for you today. I will do my best to take care of you today.” This is a commitment to act as an advocate for the customer, not just do the standard procedures.

“I’m sorry this happened/that you weren’t told; I’ll feed this into our quality process.” This tells the customer that their effort will have impact beyond just this one event and may improve the overall system.

“I’m sorry that you were told that, but that information is not correct.” This acknowledges that the customer was told something that was wrong, but also says that it is not correct. Customers will never be very satisfied with that reply, but it is a factual statement and allows you to take ownership for the mistake. Further, you should prepare your staff for the next logical question, which is: “Why was I told that if it is wrong?” Again, an acknowledgement that an unacceptable process or problem exists that will be reported to the quality improvement team helps the customer feel empowered.

“While I can’t do exactly what you’ve requested, I can give you some options. They are...” If the customer is very emotional, you can often bring them back to the rational side of their brain by telling them what you can do.

Even if the customer made the mistake, in addition to trying to recover, the response should be, “I’m sorry that was difficult to understand. I’ll let management know that this is confusing.”

“I’m so sorry this has happened to you. I’d be really upset if it happened to me.” This is for

when you can't really fix what has happened (e.g., the flight has been cancelled, the critical item is out of stock and can't be found, etc.). If you can't do anything else, you can give empathy and listen to the customer vent without interrupting and asking if there is anything else you can help them with.

HOW YOU SAY IT IS ALSO CRITICAL!

Proper voice tone is always critical. A mismatch between the words and tone undercut any good derived from choosing the right words. Think about how angry you were the last time someone said, "I'm so sorry for this inconvenience" while sounding disengaged and bored out of her mind.

Areas Where There Is Debate About How to Give Bad News

"No!" It is OK to say no because customers are sometimes incorrect or unreasonable. If you are saying no, you must provide options and alternatives along with a clear, believable explanation as to why what they wanted is not feasible or fair. For instance, if the airline pilot says there is a one-hour delay due to a mechanical problem (generic), people feel that is unreasonable. On the other hand, if the pilot explains that the delay is due to de-icing or a mechanical issue with the engine (specific), people tend to be more understanding.

Another flash phrase is **"I can't."** It is another way of saying no. But again, in some cases the answer will have to be no. Consultant Michael Hess suggests using the phrase, "I'm limited in my ability to do what you ask, but I can propose three alternatives."

Our recommendation is that when you must say no, provide a clear, believable explanation and alternative options all while using proper voice tone and empathy. An explanation is often more important than money and will replace it and even achieve higher satisfaction. For example, in an automobile situation, we observed that providing a clear definition and explanation as to how the warranty has been fully honored and fulfilled followed by an offer to split the costs can result in a positive experience for the customer. For instance, "you pay parts, we pay labor" leads to higher satisfaction than paying for everything with no explanation. We have seen exactly the same outcome with health insurance claims: denied with good explanation results in higher loyalty than a fully paid claim with poor explanation.

Handling Volatile Complaints

There are five requirements for both successfully handling volatile complaints as well as avoiding angering a customer with a routine request:

- Respectful phrasing
- Empathy
- Voice tone
- Useful options
- Clear, believable, honest explanation

When these are all used, the customer will not necessarily be completely satisfied but they will be at least mollified and not so angry as to escalate or blow up. Ensure that you are monitoring for these words and phrases and coaching your team to replace these detractors from your customer focus! 🗣️

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