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Business Strategy | Marketing Communications

July 21, 2004

A View from the Bay

By Tom Marx

CRM: It works!!

I frequently write about 'partnership' in Catalyst. And this issue makes another important point about how being in partnership and staying in collaboration and communication can make a big difference to your bottom line. One important aspect of partnership and collaboration is providing good customer service.

I admit good customer service is something I either take for granted, or worse, assume will take place wherever I go. In fact, it's not until a big breakdown occurs that I actually notice that customer service is missing.

I'm a pretty seasoned traveler and I have experienced the gamut of service – from very good to painfully bad. I've also heard stories about how good customer service saved the day, turning an angry customer into a satisfied customer.

I'm here to tell you it's true.

On a recent United Airlines flight from Albany to San Francisco, my wife and I flew through O'Hare International (one of my not-so-favorite airports – in summer or winter!). We sat on the ground in Albany in a 50-passenger commuter jet for 3 hours (yes, 3 hours), waiting for clearance from ORD.

Occasionally (though not often enough, as the wait seemed like forever), the pilot would announce that we had to wait on the tarmac because when the opportunity came to go, we had to GO. He always added at the end of each announcement that we would be leaving in the next 20-30 minutes. Then, 45 minutes later, he would make the same announcement and say we would leave in the next 20-30 minutes. Get the picture? Polite, but ultimately painfully bad customer service.

By the time we landed at ORD, those who had connecting flights were told that all flights had already left. We were told to go see a customer service agent to rebook a later flight. Then, we proceeded to sit on the tarmac in the ORD "penalty box" for another half hour waiting for a gate. By the time we got off the plane, we were now close to three-and-a-half hours late.

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We finally got into the terminal and were surprised to see that the flight to SFO was still boarding, so we ran from "E" gates to "C" gates.

Just before we arrived, the door to the plane closed. I breathlessly waved my boarding pass at the gate agent. He opened the door, ran down the jet way and ushered us to the last two seats on the plane – in first class!

When we arrived at SFO, we were even more amazed to discover that our luggage had made it onto the plane. It must have been 10 minutes from the time we got off the first flight before the 2nd flight was pushed back from the gate.

The gate agent could have shrugged his shoulders and said the door is closed. The luggage might have gone on the next plane, forcing us to wait in SFO for it to arrive. But none of that happened.

Despite the fact that ORD remains one of the most trying airports to make connections, despite the weather delays that have little to do with the airline itself, the UAL gate agent remained focused on getting us on that plane.

This was an amazing experience of outstanding customer service.

By the time I got off the first plane, I was angry, frustrated, and very tired. The gate agent took in our situation instantly and moved into action. No stopping, no questions, no delays – just a focused effort to serve two customers obviously in distress. Getting us on the plane and making sure we were taken care of took precedence over his other concerns.

Pure partnership and collaboration. He put us first – literally!

I would think that he also felt taken care of at the end of the day. He had two very happy customers, who will likely return for more business, who will probably share with friends and colleagues about how great UAL is, and he was instrumental in demonstrating an important brand value of his company: good customer service.

Very satisfying for all concerned -- and all quite effortless.

Good lesson here.

So, the customer service in your company is good, yes? No? Maybe?

END