



Customers say the Darndest Things...But Why?

By Drs. Jodie Monger and Cherie Keen

As part of our role in customer care, we have been taught to ask customers for their opinions in order to make our service delivery a better experience for them. Customer feedback is a tool to improve service, which can make service a competitive advantage, and is usually a source of invaluable information. But sometimes, as we collect real-time feedback for customers, even Customer Relationship Metrics (Metrics) gets more than we bargained for. After collecting customer data and comments for more than eleven years, Metrics decided to step away from analysis about what customers are saying and consider why.

It is important to understand that in any social behavior, including service interactions, how consumers think about themselves will influence how they behave in a product/service situation. When buying a product or service, people believe it will somehow be a reflection on them, their personality, their social structure and they also make inferences about what other type of people buy the same things. [Therefore, it impacts what they think about the people who sell, as well as service, the goods and services they choose.]

Customers will approach the service interaction with expectations on how the interaction will go and what role they will play in this interaction based on the inference about the company. This will influence the nature of the interaction, even before it occurs. When dealing with customer service via the telephone, consumers have very little to frame the expectation of the company – merely the tone of voice and how a CSR “sounds”. This is why many CSRs are trained to “talk with a smile in their voice” and coaches focus on the greeting and delivery to underscore and maybe uplift the company reputation. Yet, even customers can take this affection a little too far, as these real customer feedback examples show:

- “Thank you for your assistance. I don’t know if you’re married or not but feel free to give me a call sometime. My number is XXX-XXX-XXXX. Goodbye.”
- “You did a superb job. I couldn’t have asked for better help. By the way I have a nephew who’s 31 years old. He’s 6’9”. You ought to think about marrying him since you’re about the right age. Take care. Bye-bye.”
- “My name is Manuel. I want to say that the girl who attended to me is super sweet and super nice. She has an incredible and soft voice. She spoke to me and explained everything to me. She helped me so much and specifically with a very calm voice. I am a homosexual but if she were a man, I would ask her out on a date! She has a precious voice. If she’s the same physically, I would love it.”
- “I talked to you just a few minutes ago, and as I just told you, I was very satisfied with everything you told me, the way you told it, and the time it took to tell, and everything else like that. I gave you a ten. Go home and tell your husband that. Oh, I’m a 77-year-old male, so don’t get excited.”

Since customers are not able to see and have never met the CSRs they interact with, they create a mental image of what this person must be like using expectations and prior experience as a guide. Consumers are motivated to categorize others because it makes their lives simpler and provides a feeling of control. Callers, therefore, will know (or think they know) how to deal with a situation in which they are dealing with people they don’t know because they have categorized it. People will naturally compare others to a

prototype they have in their mind to make the situation easier and manageable. When people call for customer service, they begin with a prototype in mind of what the CSR should be like and how the interaction should go. When a CSR fits the prototype, and even goes beyond what the consumer believes to be the prototype, then Wow Factor feedback is collected:

- “The young man who helped me was most courteous and quite knowledgeable of the ways of the company. In fact, if I ever needed anything for the future I would be tempted to call back and repeatedly call back until I received him. I would even like to have him over for dinner. Maybe even some beer and watch some baseball.”
- “I found him to be intelligent, quick on the up-take, very pleasant, agreeable and had a sense of humor. That’s rare among bankers.”
- “Sharon was outstanding. She deserves some additional compensation. This is not one of her relatives. Thank you.”
- “I was very impressed with the service that I got today over the phone. There is no way we will ever leave you unless somebody really, really screws something up bad.”

This also works the other direction when the CSR does not fit into the prototype in a negative way.

- “Your customer service needs to do customer service. When they can’t help you or refuse to help you, they follow up with the question: What more can they do to help? Well they haven’t done anything to begin with. A bunch of Cretins.”
- “This rep treated me like I was stupid. I didn’t appreciate it. You should always treat a customer like they aren’t stupid, even if they are.”
- “Your reps are the least informed, ill-equipped, and most ignorant people I’ve ever run into. This bank is the perfect advertisement for any other bank.”

We have all suspected that satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction in one life role may be transferred into other life roles, like a CSR taking a bad day out on a customer and a customer taking things out on a CSR. Frustration or dissatisfaction with a product/service may actually be the result of the consumer feeling frustrated in other life roles than the consumer role. Just as CSRs must manage the delivery, so must they detect and manage the issue for the caller – all with the company’s best interest at the forefront.

- “This representative was so rude. People are so unfriendly. She was so rude. I’ve been going through a lot. I went through a car wreck. I’m chemically imbalanced. I’m going through pre-menopause. I’ve had a biopsy too. That’s a lot of stuff to go through without dealing with mean people at this company. I don’t need additional hassles.”
- “Thank you for making my most depressing life a little bit better with the service that you have given me.”
- “The representative was very courteous and kind. I appreciate her. The only problem I’ve ever had is that our former banker has an affair with my husband. We divorced and now they’re married. So, in that area I’m not satisfied with the services the bank has provided.”

Customers also expect to be treated in a manner consistent with their expected role as the customer in the interaction. Research has shown that consumers evaluate service institutions and personnel positively when the personnel treat them as individuals who have specific needs to be met by the service interaction. As consumers, we have a set of expectations for others’ behavior and we prefer that they behave in a manner consistent with those expectations. And if they do not perform consistently with these expectations, customers will also let you know.

- “The representative was very efficient and this is true to your company’s form. Every time that

- I have called customer service I have gotten excellent service and today was no different.”
- “It took four phone calls to get a pink slip. I’ve paid the car off, I deserve the pink slip. The first call I made said I would get it in 10 days; it’s now been 6 weeks. This phone call said it was mailed yesterday. Somehow I doubt that, but we’ll see. If I don’t get it, I’ll call you back. I don’t mind. I’m retired. I’ve got nothing to do but call you folks until I get what I want.”
 - “You can return my calls, which you don't do. I've asked to talk to a supervisor a few times. I haven't gotten a supervisor to give me a call so why should you ask me to waste my time on this survey when you won't have a supervisor call me. I think that's pretty rude. You can call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX. I doubt I'll hear from you but it would be really nice if I did and it would make my day and change my perception on how I've been treated.”

Consumers’ own self-perceptions bias their judgments such that consumers often see themselves more positively and their role to be more valuable, important, or influential than is actually the case. They will see themselves as being the best and most important customer to your business and view the service from that vantage point. The self-serving bias allows people to take responsibility for their successes, but to usually blame others for their failures. Therefore, if a customer buys an expensive car, it is seen as a success, but if the car does not work, no matter what they did to influence it, it will be due to other’s actions (the mechanic didn’t help, the car was a lemon, etc.). This can also work from the CSR’s perspective when they blame the customer for their problems instead of blaming the dealers or manufacturers. This is an important concept in service interactions because research has shown that blaming others for product dissatisfaction permits one to direct anger outward, toward the firm, rather than to oneself.

- “You should stop charging such insane fees. You’re just horrible. I’ll own one of your banks one day and I’ll fire everybody and I’ll just turn it into a parking lot.”
- “I just got a foreclosure notice and I have receipts in my hands of payments I’ve made. I will go to a lawyer to ratify this. The bank has destroyed my credit. I will now help to destroy your reputation.”
- “The service was terrific. The reason I rated 1 for the “Will you recommend the company” question is because I don’t recommend companies. That’s something for each person to find out for themselves. What’s great for one person might not be for another. Just like religion and politics.”
- “Train your personnel to repair simple problems with the vehicle instead of trying to make excuses as to why the vehicle acts poorly.”
- “The service sucks. The fees suck. I’ll be calling every day with the spare time I have to make back my service fees. I’ll also be putting a series of \$1 deposits into the ATMs to use up the materials and space within the machine. That’ll probably interfere with the customers that will be waiting in line behind me as I make the deposits.”

And then sometimes, there is just no behavioral explanation for what a consumer says.

- “I just spoke with you and you helped me with my problem. I would like to thank you. You did a very nice job. If you were a stripper I would have left you a tip.”
- “The lady was polite, knowledgeable, quick, pleasant to deal with, and they should put her picture on some of the money.”
- “I find it a pleasure and an honor to do business with the credit card. As far as the bank goes, I wouldn’t urinate on any of them to put them out if they were on fire. Thank you.”
- “The managers that installed this telephone system where you have to listen to endless recordings and not get a live person should have to sit with a hot iron to his feet until some live person answers the phone. I'm sick of you.”

Why be concerned with the research behind customer comments? Well, it has to do with an increase in customer satisfaction, loyalty and creating a positive word of mouth. If you can better understand your customers, you can create a better environment for the service interaction. You can also educate your representatives and use this information as a training opportunity so that CSRs garner a better understanding of why consumers sometimes say the things they do. After all, customers do say the darndest things sometimes.

Dr. Jodie Monger, is the President of Customer Relationship Metrics, (www.Metrics.net) and a pioneer in customer satisfaction research for the contact center industry. Prior to creating Metrics she was the founding Associate Director of Purdue University's Center for Customer-Driven Quality. Her expertise is working with organizations to help capture and analyze the Voice of their Customer.



Dr. Cherie Keen is the Vice President of Research and Client Services for Customer Relationship Metrics. Prior to joining Metrics she was the Director of Research at SOCAP International (previously the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business), an International membership organization for customer care executives.



****For more information or to schedule an interview with Drs. Monger and Keen please contact Jim Rembach at 336-288-8226 or info@Metrics.net**