The Age of Rage:
How Companies Can Protect Their Brands + Help Their Employees
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It is Spring 2017 and videos of customer service disasters are being re-played by every media outlet. Irate humans, some rational and some hysterical, a few incredulous and a few bloodied, reside on both the “wronged consumer” side of the conflict and the “harried employee” side of the conflict. Buyers and suppliers are at war.

Airlines have taken the biggest hits in the media but we won’t focus there. Air travel has its own set of rules and challenges. Suffice to say that airlines promise consumers little beyond this: If the plane actually departs, and you are on it, you are extremely likely to arrive alive, eventually. If that is not good enough, flying is probably not for you. We will circle back to this topic later.

Manufacturers, banks, restaurants, professional services, hospitals, retailers, makers of computer hardware, software and applications…everybody who provides a product or service needs to be ready for this decade’s style of customer.

The New Normal.

Today’s customers demand more than just value for their money (with every online business in the world to compare prices), convenience that meets their time constraints (shopping, shipping and receiving available 24/7) and reparation when something goes wrong (credits, discounts, refunds, free offers from almost every industry). They have that. Best price, quickest turn-around and generosity are the new normal.

At this great height of customer service excellence, we see people still dissatisfied when something goes wrong and is not fixed to their satisfaction immediately.

Their reactions sound more emotional than ever because what is missing is the satisfaction of consumers’ emotional needs. Specifically, today’s consumer is fighting for two emotional needs - Power + Relevance.

At every stage of the buying, using, returning, crediting, buying again cycle, we are seeing customers demand to make their own rules and to be appreciated for doing so.

Power + Relevance.

Power is the emotional need to feel in control of the relationship. If your firm has policies about how customers must dress, speak, or spend, then it is time to revisit those rules. Consumers have made it clear they do not wish to be bullied by businesses they support with their hard-earned dollars. Just because you make a rule, doesn’t mean today’s consumer will obey.

Relevance is the emotional need to feel valued or important in the moment. If your company has approved scripts that ask for an account number before letting the customer explain the purpose of the call, you may want to reconsider that approach.
Today's consumers want to know that you know their stories, their issues, and their situations. Unique or not, most customers expect to be heard, understood and helped as though they are the most important patrons in the world. Dismissing what is important to any customer may have dire consequences.

Authoritarian policies or tactics take away a customer’s power or make them feel irrelevant. Below are 5 examples:

1. No Phones Allowed.

They don’t care why you insist they shut off the phone. If someone has a pregnant wife about to go into labor, the phone is staying on. You may ask folks to set the phone to silent for the benefit of others. But tell most people today to turn off their phones and you have already provoked at least half of them. The next thing that makes them feel bullied or disempowered could be met with an outburst.

2. No Substitutions.

If the daily specials include luscious sugar snap peas and the customer wants those peas as a side dish to a $50 entrée typically served with cauliflower, the peas should be graciously provided. If the chef refuses to make that change, do not be surprised when your customer uses an expletive to describe the chef.

3. We Don’t Accept Expired Coupons.

If the expiration date on a coupon was Thursday and today is Friday, but someone is buying the items you wanted to sell, the coupon should be welcomed. Your explanations about how marketing tracks the dates and how offers change weekly actually do more harm than good. The customer is trying to do business with you and you’re telling him he is doing it wrong. He may not go away quietly.


Consider someone who has dropped off your “high value customer” program this year. Picture a recently laid-off parent taking the family on a trip that was planned before they went broke. In the 6 months she has been job hunting, her status has dropped and now the free breakfasts they were expecting are going to cost $100 a day. Last year’s perks should not be taken away without at least 3 months’ notice and a chance to request an extension. The purpose of the program was never to reward past behavior. It was meant to influence future behavior. Your customer knows this even if your staff does not. A front desk confrontation between a harried parent and a surprised desk clerk will be on video and on YouTube for the kids’ friends and the whole world to see.

5. The Transfer.

After receiving her name and 3 other pieces of personal information, your agent determines that another department has to help this customer. Agent 1 performs a transfer and Agent 2 requests identity information, again. The customer sighs heavily and complains that your company has the worst service in the world. Agent 2 responds with “I do apologize, but if you want me to help you, I need to get your account information.” The time has come to replace “transfer” buttons with “con-ference” buttons. If Agent 1 had conferenced-in Agent 2, introduced the caller, and explained the situation, the customer would not have felt the need to insult your company. Further, when a customer insults your company, and the comment is not acknowledged as a cry for help, you have created a potential escalation, unwittingly.
Now is the time to review all of the policies you force your front line to implement or defend. Look at them from the point of view of your customer who wants to love your brand and feel helped by your staff. Get rid of as many rules as you can and empower your staff to say, “I am so sorry you are feeling upset with us. What can I do to make this right for you?” Then let them do it.

**First Responder Skills for Customer Service**

If we agree that businesses and customers are at war, then we are in the trickiest type of war. We don’t want to eliminate “the enemy”. We want to tame it, take it home, keep it as a pet and spend many happy years together.

Maybe that is over-reaching. At minimum, we just want to keep our employees from being eaten whole on video and posted as examples of corporate failure.

**Front Line Staff needs 6 things:**

1. **The ability to recognize a situation that could become dangerous, not wait for an explosion.** On the phone, in an email or face-to-face, there are cues about a customer’s state of mind. Your staff should stop dismissing those cues and start to realize they are the subtle smoke that indicates a fire has started. Provide a list of “trigger remarks” that reveal hostility. Hand out face and body-language diagrams that show expressions of resentment, disappointment, fear, worry or anger. Convince staff they are not creating a problem if they prod a still-calm customer to reveal his underlying angst. They are bravely saving your brand.

2. **Connecting skills that include word choices, tone of voice, and body-language that prove they are the hero in the current situation, not the villain.** Help staff replace dismissive behaviors with credible empathy. Stop saying, “I do apologize” or “What is your concern?” Show emotion using emotional words such as “I am so sorry,” or “I would have been furious!” Promise to take care of the person without the inane, old-school idea that “Let me figure this out and find a way to help you,” is somehow too much to promise.

3. **To resist rushing to offer solutions without fully disarming, understanding, and proving they are capable allies.** As anger takes hold, reason is replaced by adrenaline. Teach staff to reassure and ask questions to draw out the anger and the details of the complaint. Disarming may take seconds or it may take a while. But there is no point to offering solutions until your customer can think and act rationally. Reps have to let angry customers vent and get their feelings out. Unpleasant language, insulting descriptions of your product, emotional explanations of the impact of your colleague’s stupidity must be met with grace and resilience by your front line team. Often, the customer realizes she is being a jerk, apologizes and expresses respect for your team member’s patience. Sometimes, the customer exhausts himself and moves the conversation forward by asking, “So what are you going to do about it?” Now, you can offer some resolutions.

4. **Authority to say “yes”, give generously, provide immediate useful resolutions, or to contact resources who can meet an unusual customer demand.** During my 27 years of consulting, I have seen many companies empower front line staff to give more cash, credit, and perks to customers without having to ask for permission. It has never been a mistake. Agents are cautious and loyal so budgets do not suddenly go out of control. In many cases, they must be coached to give away more. Consider this question as you decide what your agents should be allowed to give away, “If the situation is escalated to a supervisor, what is the supervisor likely to do?” Making today’s volatile customer ask for a supervisor can provoke an outburst that drains your resources and makes everyone look bad.
5. **Practice controlling their own reactions, so they maintain the steady, poised, first responder demeanor.** If your staff is required to tell folks “no”, they need to be prepared for people who refuse to accept “no”. See item 3. Give them time to practice with at least 10 real-world case study situations.

6. **Confidence that their company wants them to meet customer demands instead of trying to make customers comply.** As you look at your current training or culture, you may find tactics that send the wrong message. Permission to hang up on a customer because he is using vulgar language may be the most rampant example. I am not suggesting you tell your staff they need to suffer through being threatened or personally humiliated. Instead, I recommend they learn to say, “I can hear how upset you are with me. May I please ask you to wait a moment while I connect you with a Manager?” Foul language, unwillingness to accept “no”, threats to cancel or leave, or challenges to the application of your policies are the most common examples of customer behavior that can ruin your team member’s day or your brand’s image. Make sure your staff knows you see them as capable of handling this new normal.

I promised to re-visit the situation airlines find themselves in today. The fight for consumer power + relevance is obvious with every new air travel story.

The unique challenge of air travel involves 150+ souls trying to use the same service during a pre-published time frame. Passengers physically take up different amounts of space in the airplane, we are traveling for different purposes, we speak different languages, we have illnesses and habits that annoy or anger other passengers, etc. Yet, we must all be corralled and cooperating by a certain time for safety and scheduling purposes.

The needs of an individual traveler could not be less relevant. Being an airline passenger makes us as powerless as a person is ever going to be unless he or she is kidnapped, held for ransom, or a prisoner of war.

The only changes airlines can make (to address the fact that consumers will demand many things that are impossible to grant) involve teaching staff how to handle what is surely coming at them.

Calm, professional, kind, empathic, skilled first responders look good on video and so will your brand.

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**About the author**

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