I hate speaking to your call centre!

By Chantel Botha , issued by BrandLove

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How many times have you said this or heard someone say it? In this post I would like to explore the reasons why these interactions are so dreaded.

What is happening for the customer who calls?

Once a person fights his way through the voice prompts, he expects the interaction to be poor. He builds up these limiting assumptions as the effort increases and the other channels such as online communication and email fail him, and then he reverts to calling.

So what are some of these limiting assumptions we hold about our interaction with the call centre?

- The agent will most likely not solve my problem, either because he doesn't want to, is not empowered to or doesn't understand my problem.
- He will sound hurried and uninterested in speaking to me.
- He is doing that job because he cannot find anything else to do.
- This is going to take long and will require effort.
- He will not listen to me properly and I will have to explain myself again.

What is happening for the agent who takes the call?

Let's for a moment go to the other side. For the call centre agent some of the limiting assumptions might be:

- I am going to speak to yet another customer about the same problem over and over again today.
- All I ever deal with are problems and negative emotions.
- All day long I am treated as if I made these mistakes personally.
- I am treated as if I never do anything right.

This is but one aspect of their limiting assumptions.

How the agent's environment is helping or hampering him

From a management perspective, the environment has been designed with tools and systems to assist with productivity, but what it is really doing is the following:

- The scripts are there to create consistency, but in reality they are removing any mindfulness and creating a disconnection with customers. They dampen any enthusiasm for the product or the brand and instead require focus on compliance rather than create understanding with the customer.
- The security questions are there for the protection of customer information, but the way in which they are phrased has a distinct forensic feel to it. As a result of time pressure they are also fired at the customer with military precision.
- The measurements like average handling time (AHT), intended to guide the length of calls, create a feeling of anxiety and hurriedness in the agent.
- The call-holding indicator, intended to ensure agents manage call times and are aware of how many customers need to be served, hurries the conversation along.
- The multiple system screens required for information, disconnect the agent in that moment of look-up, when the customer is finally getting to the crux of his problem. At that moment the agent is not really paying attention and misses an opportunity to empathise.
- The strict adherence to being online, with break times only allowed at certain times, ensures customers can be served in a timely manner, but it requires suspending any human needs until a more convenient time according to the schedule.
- The environment without mobile devices, internet connections and email (in some instances) requires being disconnected and isolated from the world in order to be intimate and available to customers.

The productivity and efficiency processes implemented with good intention lead to disconnection, distraction and disinterest.

How people remember these experiences

According to Daniel Kanneman, our remembering self would focus on the peak and the end of an interaction. Let's explore what people remember and how they are left feeling after these interactions.

For the customer:

- They wasted my time and did not solve my problem. I am unimportant and just a number to them.
- They solved my problem, but I could hear the agent was really unenthusiastic. I am treated as unimportant and unworthy.

For the call centre agent:

- Day in and day out I am shouted at to solve problems I cannot magically solve. I feel like a doormat.
- I am so tired of people complaining and getting angry with me. I did not invent the product. I feel useless and I get told that many times a day.

When anger meets disempowerment and a dreaded sense of foreboding, we want to avoid these interactions at all cost and that is why we so often hear the words, "I hate speaking to your call centre!"

However, I don't believe all is lost, so here is what I would recommend:

1. Find new ways to measure and manage the volumes of customer calls.
2. Portray the real-time metrics in a more positive way than having red blocks flash on a board.

3. Teach agents the skills of anticipation, active listening, compassion and mindfulness.
4. Replace the rigid scripts with more creative ones to guide the conversation.
5. Teach people how to do real-time design of interactions with customers as they happen.
6. Empower agents with a deliberate set of solutions on how to solve the top 10 most common complaints.
7. Let them create the quality measures and let them evaluate themselves.

In an article titled Don't Trust Companies Who Put Customers First, Simon Sinek said:

"I have a dream! I have a dream that one day, customers and employees will both be treated equally and treated well. Not because of what they do or how they are seen but because they are both people. Customers and employees both bleed red. Customers and employees both feel happy and hurt. Customers and employees both live to feel valued for the effort they exert and the expense they put forth."

This is what we strive for as employees of BrandLove. We live this for ourselves and try to guide our clients to create an environment where their employees and their customers are equal and happy.

Find out more about Happiness Matters: Engaging Employees for Purpose and Performance, taking place in Cape Town on 25 & 26 April. It will be an experience not to be missed. Visit www.happinessmatters.co.za for further details.

ABOUT CHANTEL BOTHA

I'm Chantel Botha, the author of "The Customer Journey Mapping Field Guide" and the founder of BrandLove.
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