

To Create or Not Create: When the Customer's Paid Request Is Ignored

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Abstract

A customer goes into a hardware store and purchases an outdoor table setting from *Sun, Sea & Sand (SS&S). The customer pays extra for the setting to be assembled and delivered within less than one week. The furniture arrives un-made and in boxes. The furniture is sent back to be assembled, but later that day the customer receives different outdoor furniture from those she had purchased. The customer asks for the correct furniture to be made and delivered the same day, but the store is closing for the day. What should the store do?

Key words: contractors; insight; responsibility; service failure; probing capabilities

Story

I purchased a seven-piece outdoor table and chairs to be delivered in four days already assembled. I paid an extra \$20 for the furniture to be assembled and another \$40 for the furniture to be delivered early. When the furniture arrived I immediately asked the truck driver, "Where are the table and chairs I paid for?" He responded, "It's right here", pointing to some heavy-looking boxes. "I just need you to fill in the release form saying you have the furniture." Confused, I said, "No, I paid extra for the furniture to be assembled; it even says so here", while pointing to the invoice.

Realising what had happened, the driver contacted his manager who then informed me that they would take the furniture back to the store to assemble it and re-deliver it in the afternoon that day. Happy with the response I remained home that day until I saw the truck driving towards my house at 4.45pm. "It's all sorted and correctly put together; we are so sorry for the delay; these types of things happen all the time," the driver said, getting out of the truck. "That's fine. As long as I have the table and chairs for this evening, it's fine." I replied.

Looking further into the truck with the furniture the driver was pulling out, I stated rather abruptly, "That's not my furniture." The driver responded with, "What

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do you mean it's not your furniture, this is what you purchased, so this what we made." "No, no, no," I replied. "I purchased a six seater and table setting, not a four seater. You have to take it back." The driver replied, "We can't do that. The store closes at 5pm each day." I said again, "I need it tonight, not tomorrow night".

The driver left with the furniture and did not return that night with the pre-made furniture. I did not mention to the driver that I needed the furniture for a surprise birthday dinner, since my perception was that he did not have the authority to make a decision; nor did I previously mention it to the manager earlier in the day, as any likely delay was not indicated at any point throughout the transaction. The correct furniture was made and delivered the following day early in the morning.

Solutions

- A. The company manager should call back the customer and apologise for the mix-up with the furniture.
- B. The company should refund the customer the extra \$20 she paid for the furniture to be made, because it was delivered in boxes.
- C. The furniture store driver should have personally apologised when he turned up with the incorrect furniture, and then proceeded to call the shop manager to ask if they could quickly make the furniture, so that he could pick it up and deliver it to the customer as soon as possible.
- D. The company should have asked the customer to give it an emailed response about the event, so that it can try to place together where in the company the issue first arose surrounding the miscommunication about the furniture.
- E. The company should have offered the customer a free table accessory to go with her furniture as a sign of good-will and also offered a 10% discount on her next purchase.

Solution Points Awarded for Multiple-choice Selection

- A. The company manager should call back the customer and apologise for the mix-up with the furniture. 4 Points: this solution remedies one of the main points in a company–customer relationship as stated by Kadar, "to be effective the company needs to have respect for the customer". Apologising shows that the company has accepted that it has mistreated the client, and also the apology can be seen as a type of gift to the person on the receiving end (Kadar, 2009).
- B. The company should refund the customer the extra \$20 she paid for the furniture to be made, because it was delivered in boxes. 0 Points: this solution costs the company more money as it is repeatedly driving to and from the customer's home.
- C. The furniture store driver should have personally apologised when he turned up with the incorrect furniture, and then proceeded to call the shop manager to ask if they could quickly make the furniture, so that he could pick it up and deliver it to the customer as soon as possible. 4 points: this concept is a good idea as it

would help secure the relationship with the customer for future reference by the company going out of its way for her; there is also potentially strong word of mouth due to the positive customer service, as the key to success in marketing relationships is to create a lifelong relationship between customers and companies/brands through a trusting bond (Solomon et al., 2013).

- D. The company should have asked the customer to give it an emailed response about the event, so that it can try to place together where in the company the issue first arose surrounding the miscommunication about the furniture. 2 points: this solution is ideal for the company to identify where issues begin, but does not solve the problem for the customer.
- E. The company should have offered the customer a free table accessory to go with her furniture as a sign of good-will and also offer at 10% discount on her next purchase. 0 points: this solution would likely infuriate the customer, because the issue was not resolved at the time. The company would also be losing money as the next purchase by the customer may be for an expensive product and 10% may reduce the profits needed by the company.

Your point score for this customer - Furniture talk case study: ____

Surface Assessment

Does this company focus and rely on customer-company relationships to get its daily profit? The customer likes the company, having purchased an expensive outdoor setting. If the company does value the ongoing customer-company relationship, then solution 3 is the best option. The company should thus follow up the response with a review from the customer.

Deep Assessment

The customer's story shows a deep connection with the purchased product. The story shows the connection through the way she needed that table and seats for the night she ordered it. The customer comes across as having an attachment to the product, which could be linked to the party that she is hosting the same night. Clues to this include the emphasised, "No, no, no", after the company driver told her they were closing the store for the night before her purchased product could be delivered. The customer was having family and friends over that night, which also suggests that this event she was hosting was very important. The outdoor setting was so important to the customer that she became upset and rude after she realised that she could not get the right furniture in time; originally, she was polite and happy when the driver was to return with the correct furniture for her. Tables are generally seen as a way for a family to come together and reconnect over a meal, and so the loss of this for the night surely affected the customer. The attachment to the furniture may also be a stepping stone for the customer in re-establishing lost ties with family members as people sit beside each other, allowing people to bond together.

When customers go out of their way to pay for furniture to be delivered on a certain day, the company should be aware of how important this product is. The fact

that she chose to pay even more to have her furniture delivered early highlights the importance. Moreover, the point that she paid an additional \$20 to have the furniture assembled should have shown the company the significance of this furniture being at the customer's home on this day. The repeated failure of the company in providing unassembled furniture, followed by the wrong furniture, immediately breaks the trust between the consumer and company, while also making the customer question the reliability of the relationship built up with the company. Many companies rely heavily on consumer relationships, as they market their products on the assumption that the consumer will return for additional products and help advert the company through positive word of mouth.

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Editorial Commentary

This story illustrates the importance of appropriate levels of social or emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006; 2014) as manifested in the ability and willingness of customer care professionals (agents, sales, and frontline staff) to ask open-ended questions. Adept representatives of a company will, either through natural talents or from trained competencies, have the inclination to determine the WHY and the HOW of expressed customer needs. Experienced customer care staff will be aware that one cannot wait for the customer to indicate the reason for requesting (or demanding) special treatment, even if it is part of the normal service offering. Good probing skills will enable customer care professionals to build rapport with customers and thus improve the buying experience for them.

Research shows that customers are more likely to buy and to make return purchases when they have a relationship with the sales professional. In addition, probing skills will enable caring professionals to respond to issues around a lack of insight through the sharing of information, such as the one in the story (Cialdini, 2001; Conger, 1998). The customer indicated that, at no point throughout the transaction or decision-making process, did any staff member of SS&S show any concern that the assembly and/or delivery could or should be a concern. It is not enough for the product provider to determine a date and time for delivery; as in many other touch points between service provider and customer, the "why" of the transaction or service is also important.

According to the consumer decision-making model, prospects may decide to buy or walk away at any one of five decision points. First, when still identifying that they have a need ("Do I really need a table and chairs?"); second, during the

information search process (What are the benefits and value of buying the suite from SS&S?); third, an alternative evaluation (How does the suite from SS&S compare with other suppliers in product quality and various other brand attributes?); fourth, transacting (deciding to purchase it today at SS&S for the given price and the promised augmented services); fifth and finally, the disposal/satisfaction phase (importance of the entire supply chain, including delivery, even if it is not an internal business unit, i.e. a department within the business).

The statement by the delivery agent (truck driver), “these types of things happen all the time”, does not inspire confidence and certainly does a lot to damage the brand’s attributes. However, when a marketer wishes to position a brand or offering, trust is at the core of the customer’s willingness to exchange his/her time, money, information, and loyalty for the firm’s product offering (Hutton, 1997; Lihra & Graf, 2007; Liu et al., 2013).

One has to admit that the entire scenario is complicated by the fact that the customer never pointed out to the sales representative at the store, nor to the truck driver at the house, how urgent the issue was. In addition, if she had explained, would someone have had the decision-making power (authority) and willingness to consider leaving the suite there in order to make the party work and then having it replaced the next day? Can the supplier take that kind of risk? Is the delivered dining suite, after one has used it, be classified as second-hand or as a used good and thus cannot be sold as new? The customer does have an unfortunate tendency to come across as the architect of her own misfortune, given that she did not signal the importance of her need, although this in no way excuses the monumental ineptness of the service response by SS&S. The customer clearly believed that the additional \$20 is not merely a payment for services rendered, but also a clear signal to the provider about the importance of assembly and delivery.

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