

My Soul Shoe* Store Story: Poor Product Repair and Customer Service Experience

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Abstract

A customer visits Soul Shoe store and purchases a pair of high priced leather boots that are advertised as “high quality”. A key aspect influencing the customer’s purchase is the expectation that the “high quality” boots would be “durable” and “long lasting”. Within three hours of wearing the boots for the first time, the customer notices the entire sole of the boot has separated from the upper part. The customer returns to the store to exchange the boots, but since the store has no more stock the customer requests a refund. The refund request is promptly rejected by the sales assistant, who instead offers to repair the boots. The boots are returned to the customer one week later, but the repair is of a significantly low standard. The customer asks a different sales assistant for a refund, which is then accepted.

Key words: buyer decision stages; buyers’ remorse; product quality; post-purchase dissonance; undue pressure

Story

I spent two weeks searching for a pair of 100% leather boots as I wanted to buy a pair of shoes that would last me years. I picked leather on the basis that it is frequently advertised as being a “long-lasting” and “durable” material. Finally, I found a pair that were almost exactly what I was looking for at a cost of \$180. Before purchasing the boots, I spent three days deliberating on whether to make this purchase, assessing and evaluating the following influencing factors: product price, product style, the time invested in product searching, and product durability.

After much consideration, I decided that the durability of the product made the price of the boots more valuable in the long term, which resulted in me making the purchase. Two days later, I wore my brand-new boots and after only three hours of wearing them, they broke. The entire sole of the right boot had separated from the

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*Brands and names are disguised to protect individuals and corporate brands.

bottom of the boot. I was shocked and devastated and promptly returned to the store with the expectation of either an exchange or refund.

On returning to the store I approached a female sales assistant (FSA), explained the situation, and asked if I could exchange them for another pair. She then asked me for the receipt for my boots, which I promptly gave to her. She then advised me that she would get another pair from “out the back” and exchange them for me. After waiting patiently, she returned, told me that they did not have any replacement boots in stock, and asked if I would like her to order in a pair from another store. I was happy with this option and so replied, “Yes, that would be great thank you.”

She then spent a few minutes looking on the computer and then said, “Sorry would you just wait there for one moment please.” Without any explanation, she then disappeared out to the back room again, leaving me standing at the counter confused about where she was and what she was doing, which caused me to become slightly irritated. When she returned, the following conversation occurred:

FSA: “I’m sorry, but we can’t actually order in these boots from another store, because they are now a sale item, and we don’t do stock transfers on sale items.”

Me: “Well, can I get a refund please?”

FSA: “Because they are broken and you have worn them, we actually send them away to be repaired.”

Me: “But there is a clause on the bottom of the receipt that states products can be exchanged or refunded if brought back to the store within 14 days.”

FSA: “That’s only if the customer changes their mind and the product hasn’t been worn.”

Me: “So how long will that take?”

FSA: “I’m not too sure exactly; we have to send them away where the damage needs to be assessed. If you give me your details I can give you a call when we receive them back in store.”

By this point I had been in the store for almost 45 minutes and was feeling highly irritated and disappointed with the way I was being dealt with by the FSA. As a result of both the way the FSA interacted and spoke with me, I felt that the only option I had left was to agree to the boots being repaired even though by this point I wanted a refund.

After completing the documentation to have my boots repaired, the FSA advised that I would be contacted when they it was finished. I left the store really unhappy and confused about why my request for a refund had been rejected. Since I did not really know what my rights were, I decided to do some research into the Consumers Guarantee Act about damaged goods, only to find out that I had the right to choose from having the product repaired, replaced, or be given a full refund.

One week later I received a call from a male sales assistant (MSA), advising me that my boots had been repaired and were ready to be picked up. I arrived at the store and asked MSA for my repaired boots. He then went out to the back of the store, returned, and handed me the box with my boots in them. As I pulled the boots out of the box I could not believe my eyes. The sole had been glued onto the bottom

of the boot with what looked like hot glue gun. Globes of glue were immediately apparent due to seepage of the glue to the outer leather part of the boot.

At this point I was not prepared to accept the poorly repaired boots and armed with some knowledge about my consumer rights I initiated another attempt to get a refund for the boots. What follows is my conversation with the MSA:

Me: "I am so unhappy about the repair work done on these boots, I really don't want them. The sales assistant I dealt with last week said I am unable to have a refund, because I have worn them, but the Consumer Guarantees Act states that I am entitled to a full refund. Can I speak to your manager as I would like a refund. I am not happy about the quality of these boots?"

MSA: "Who were you dealing with when you came in? Did you ask for a refund that day?"

Me: "I'm not sure, but yes I did."

MSA: "Well I am so sorry I am not too sure why she didn't give you a refund. I am happy to process that now for you if you would prefer to have your money back."

Outcomes/Solutions

- A. Sales Assistant could have asked the manager to provide customer discretion and ordered in the product despite it being reduced.
- B. Sales Assistant could have charged the customer the current sale price, giving an added discount on the product, therefore refunding only part of the payment paid.
- C. Sales Assistant could have offered the customer an exchange for a different product in the store that had the same price value as the original product purchased.
- D. Sales Assistant could have given the customer a credit note of the same price value to purchase an alternative product on another day.
- E. Sales Assistant could have given a full refund of the total amount spent due to the product not meeting the customer's expectations.

Surface Assessment

A customer purchases a product that has been advertised as being of high quality. Within hours of acquiring this product the customer experiences post-purchase dissonance. This is when a consumer buys a product, and there is a clash between anticipation and actuality for product performance in terms of expectations, resulting from the cost and effort of obtaining the product and what the customer expected the product would do (Blythe, 1997). Soul Shoe Store had the product repaired to a poor standard despite the customer wanting an exchange or refund. Solution E would have been the best service recovery option.

Deep Assessment

Due to the product breaking and being repaired poorly, the customer loses trust and forms negative attitudes with the brand due to the company failing to meet the customer's wants and needs, or to conform to the requirements of the Consumers Guarantees Act. The treatment the customer received would suggest staff were not trained adequately with respect to the company's current policies.

The expectancy disconfirmation model outlines how consumers form beliefs about product performance based on communications that imply a certain level of quality. When the product does not live up to these beliefs, the customer is often left dissatisfied and with negative feelings (Solomon et al., 2013). The boots purchased by the customer were advertised by Soul Shoes as having high quality; however, the product did not meet this value proposition, because it broke only hours after being purchased. When the customer returned, she was pressured by the sales assistant to have the product repaired as this was the only option provided; all other alternatives were ignored despite the customer stating that she wanted an exchange or a refund. Service level can be understood as the degree to which an organisation can cater to and provide something of importance to keep the customer happy and satisfied (Blythe, 1997). Instead, it appeared the sales assistant was trying to avoid monetary losses through product repair, which was not in the customer's best interest. This experience was not an exchange of value for the customer, because it took numerous encounters before the customer felt her needs were being met. Solutions C and E would have been the best recovery options.

Multi-choice

- A. Sales Assistant could have asked the manager to provide customer discretion and ordered in the product despite it being reduced. **(1 point)** *This would benefit the customer as she would be getting the boots replaced; however, it would also mean going against company policy as Soul Shoes does not do stock transfers on sale stock items. Such action could result in lower-level management being penalised or punished by higher-level management.*
- B. Sales Assistant could have charged the customer the current sale price, giving an added discount on the product, therefore refunding only part of the payment paid. **(0 points)** *This would save the customer money, however, the product would still not be high-quality or durable, and so it would not provide the functionality that is expected. This could lead to future problems for the company if the customer returns expecting a full refund as she will lose money and the customer will still feel the problem was never solved. This experience could create negative feelings and the potential for this experience to be expressed to others by word of mouth, creating a bad reputation for Soul Shoes.*
- C. Sales Assistant could have offered the customer an exchange for a different product in the store that had the same price value as the original product purchased. **(3 points)** *This would benefit Soul Shoes only if the company is able to find an alternative product that makes the customer feel she is getting value*

for money or meeting pre-purchase expectations. However, if the company cannot achieve this, then it is likely that the customer will still ask for a refund and never return to the shop, because there is nothing the brand can offer to make purchasing feel worthwhile. This is a loss for the company right now in terms of potential repeat purchases.

- D. Sales Assistant could have given the customer a credit note of the same price value to purchase an alternative product on another day. **(1 point)** *This allows Soul Shoes to provide compensation without profit loss and would allow the customer more time to go through the decision-making process, enabling a possible alternative to be found that she would feel happy about. This, however, would be an inconvenience as the customer would have to go through the process of assessing and evaluating alternatives and may still not be happy with any of the products on offer, again leaving the customer dissatisfied with the company.*
- E. Sales Assistant could have given a full refund of the total amount spent due to the product not meeting the customer's expectations. **(5 points)** *This is the best solution, because it was what the customer wanted and it would have made the customer feel her wants and needs were valued by a company that shows a customer-first orientation. This level of customer service often makes a customer feel they can trust a company, creating feelings of loyalty to the brand and an increased likelihood that she will make repeat purchases, thus generating the potential for increased sales and keeping a positive brand image.*

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Editorial Commentary

Consumers are sophisticated, informed, and highly selective. When it comes to purchasing luxury items, they invest cognitive energy (engage in search and evaluation activities) to ensure the best fit to their ideal or expected outcome. Consumers have the freedom of choice and the ability to opt out at any time. This freedom can manifest at five stages throughout the buying process: first, when they recognize that they need "something" to solve a problem (for example, to solve a headache, they can choose between acupuncture, aspirin, or herbal remedies); second, when they search for information (they can choose sources AND which ones to believe (e.g. they can find information in the newspaper, on the Internet, or ask someone they trust); third, when they select an alternative to purchase (they can buy the option they prefer online or go to a store where they might be attracted by other alternatives); fourth, when they make the payment (they might be put off by

the difficulty of paying and leave the store); fifth and finally, after purchase (when they decide the post-purchase service or quality of the item is poor, and they will dispose of the product, rather than re-purchase another one). At every one of these stages, marketers have the obligation to ensure that their offer is (and remain) the preferred option (if they wish to establish a satisfied, loyal customer base).

Adept marketers are aware of the “moments of truth”, where prospective buyers have to choose for or against the solution they offer (Grönroos, 1990; Kelley et al., 1993). Each of these points range from the reputation of the brand (Bitner, 2005), to the ease of finding information on the offering, to the way sales staff interact with the customer, to the ease with which the customer can complete the transaction, and to the customer confirming the right decision was made. Preventing and overcoming buyers’ remorse need to be top priorities for marketers and service staff (Battaglia, 2012). Löfgren (2005, p. 102) stated: “Consumers evaluate quality when they purchase an offering and when they consume it. This means that the perception of quality is created at both the first and second moments of truth. The first moment of truth is about obtaining customers’ attention and communicating the benefits of an offer. The second moment of truth is about providing the tools the customer needs to experience these benefits when using the product.”

All is not lost, should a customer return with a faulty product or a complaint. In fact, marketers should in one way celebrate this return of a dissatisfied customer (Battaglia et al., 2012). In fact, marketers should pursue such feedback, because most dissatisfied customers will not tell you or allow you a change to remedy the situation and resolve the issues. Moreover, scholars report that effective service recovery strategies are likely to lead to more positive word-of-mouth and repeat purchases (higher levels of loyalty) from previously displeased customers. It will serve marketers well to remember that the consumers’ brand experience is conceptualized as sensations, feelings, thinking, and behavioral responses evoked by stimuli that are part of a brand's identity (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt et al., 2015), including physical evidence such as product packaging, communications, uniforms, store design (including online stores), and affective experience such as the emotions evoked by the service staff and the entire shopping experience from start to end.

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