



Keeping an open mind

# The great service divide...

# expectation

# experience

When service goes wrong and no one seems able or willing to put matters right, customers are left trying to understand why the reality of their experiences is so different to the promises that seemed so convincing. Ian Smith describes an example typical of the all-too-frequent chasm between service expectation and the customer experience.

**This is a true story.** Recently, a colleague needed an early morning flight to Leeds-Bradford airport to attend an important client meeting.

Arriving at the boarding gate she and her fellow passengers were told that, due to "operational difficulties" their plane was stuck some 180 miles away and they would be flown to Manchester instead and then catch a bus to Leeds-Bradford.

This news was not well received, especially by business people working to tight deadlines who had risen before dawn to catch their flight.

Something was needed to ease the

situation. It certainly didn't happen on the flight when the airline tried to charge over £3 for a cup of coffee.

"Is that really advisable in these circumstances?" my colleague protested to a member of the cabin staff. "It's company policy," was the terse reply. With insult being copiously added to injury, she stood her ground and refused to pay. Finally she was grudgingly served coffee without payment.

Passengers were assured that someone would meet them at Manchester Airport and escort them to their bus. There was no one in sight. Using their own initiative, they eventually

tracked down the bus themselves.

Twenty minutes into the journey the bus turned off the motorway. "What's happening?" the driver was asked. He pulled over and the following conversation ensued:

**Driver:** "We've got to turn back to the airport."

**Colleague:** "Why?"

**Driver:** "A passenger got lost and was left behind."

**Colleague:** "But that could add an extra hour to our journey and we're already over an hour late. A lot of us have important appointments to keep."

**Driver:** "But we've got to turn back."

**Colleague:** "You can't."

**Driver:** "We've got to. I'm only the driver."

**Colleague (with others adding their support):** "You can't turn back and further inconvenience all these people. The airline should do the sensible thing and put the passenger in a taxi."

**Driver:** "I'll have to phone my boss." He then phoned his manager, relaying what had been said. His boss insisted he turn back, so my colleague demanded to speak to him.

**Colleague:** "We're not turning back."

**Boss:** "You've got to. We have to pick up that passenger. The airline says so and we're only the bus company."

**Colleague:** "As I said to your driver, the airline should put them in a taxi."

**Boss:** "The driver has to do as he is told."

**Colleague (backed by cries of "Go for it!"):** "So he has. The passengers on this bus say he has to drive on to Leeds-Bradford."

The manager finally and reluctantly agreed. He grumpily asked to speak to the driver again and, after several expletives, told him to drive to Leeds-Bradford. My colleague made her appointment, just, as hopefully did the other passengers.

So, is this customer experience-cum-battle a rare exception to the generally excellent service in the UK? Unfortunately not; such incidents are commonplace.

In our brave new mission-led, values-driven, customer-centric, corporate world, where the ambition to 'exceed every customer's expectations' appears to be the norm, it would seem beyond belief that such appalling episodes could occur. But, as we know from our own bitter experiences, horror stories do occur and not just in the transport industry.

This early morning misadventure raises some important issues. Why, for instance, would you:

- fleece already seriously inconvenienced,

annoyed and in many cases regular customers for the price of a cup of coffee?

- promise them they would be met on arrival and then leave them in limbo?
- exacerbate people's stress and frustration by further increasing an already severely delayed journey by up to an hour, for one person?

- tolerate an employee who claimed: "It's nothing to do with me Guv"?

- tolerate a manager in the same organisation who claimed: "It's nothing to do with us Guv"?

Apart from the plane being stuck in the wrong place, all these customer experience atrocities were preventable. So, bearing in mind all the things that can and frequently do go wrong, why did an experienced airline not act in advance to prevent them happening?

To broaden the question, why do so many organisations with similarly high-flown (pardon the pun) customer experience ambitions commit their own inexplicable atrocities? Why, all so often, does the reality depart so drastically from the rhetoric?

As with many issues in business life, the problems often begin at the top. In some organisations, because of the relentless focus on high-level issues, senior management simply lose touch with the day-to-day challenges and conditions faced by their frontline staff and, of course, their customers.

Too often, as with the airline, management control is imposed by implementing rigid policy at the expense of good judgement. Staff are encouraged to "take ownership" of customers and their issues despite being given no authority or backing to exercise that ownership.

There is also a widespread lack of recognition at all levels that management style drives the customer experience. Staff are implored to deliver 'outstanding' customer service while the 'employee experience' they endure leaves much to be desired. In other



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words, "our customers are important but you're not."

To quell the rhetoric and create a much rosier and productive reality for all concerned, maybe organisations should look at themselves closely and honestly and do what it takes to generate a positive customer experience chain reaction – from the top down.

This means:

- taking time to visit the front line regularly to sample the customer experience from both sides
- being seen to have a go at delivering that customer experience yourself – it may be harder than you think
- ensuring that the core values enshrined in your targeted customer experience are reflected in your employee experience – they may be further apart than you realise
- equipping and supporting managers at all levels to deliver that employee experience – become a role model yourself
- giving frontline staff the authority and capability to override policy with good judgement when a positive customer experience demands it – and backing them when called for.

So what's the good news in all this? When it comes down to it, 'doing what it takes' is much more about a way of thinking than a way of spending money. It's often an organisational mindset issue rather than one concerning budgets.

By the way, when my colleague arrived at the airport that evening to catch her return flight, she was greeted with applause and a glass of wine from her grateful fellow passengers. Maybe it was a battle worth winning after all! ☑