

They're Talking About You! Plan to deliver story-worthy customer experiences

by Jim Barnes, Chief Customer Strategist, BMAI

Despite all that is going on around us, the ongoing turmoil in financial and political arenas, the unpredictability of markets, the instability of currencies, the threat of wars and border-hopping viruses; despite all of these undeniably significant influences on our lives, I am still hearing customers complain loudly about terrible customer service, and occasionally regaling others with less frequent stories of wonderful, caring service encounters.

I attended two enjoyable social functions recently. At both, I listened to conversations in which customer service seemed to be the second most discussed topic. Where I live, the weather is always the most discussed topic (it's unusually pleasant at the moment).

I find myself paying a great deal of attention in recent years to the content of human conversation. I am genuinely intrigued by the nature of conversations I just happen to overhear in restaurants, on airplanes, and at social gatherings. In the absence of real data on the subject, I was inclined in recent years to estimate that as much as 60% of conversation is devoted to the details of how customers are treated by service providers; by retailers, restaurants, airlines, and telecoms, in particular. Then, I came across an article that actually confirmed that, in the online world at least, 60% of posts by women actually made reference to companies or brands.

I thought it intriguing, therefore, that, in the midst of this current data-driven environment, where most larger companies seem to be concentrating on predictive analytics and the personalizing and relationship-building power of BIG DATA, customers are still talking about how many times they had to call back to get a simple question answered, how rude the person was at the airline check-in counter, and how they got the food order wrong at the restaurant down the street — all stories I have heard in the past 48 hours.

My conclusion is that the fundamental things that impress customers are not related to technology. Rather, customers still have daily lives to live, and these lives inevitably involve interacting with businesses and their employees. What really impresses is unexpectedly good service, the nice touch, the going-out-of-their-way to offer assistance or advice.

I believe that customers' awareness of and sensitivity to both positive and negative service may actually be heightened as companies increasingly and, in my view, ill-advisedly focus on data mining and the predictive power of the vast amount of data they have available. Quite simply, impressive service would go a long way to bringing some humanity into what are otherwise impersonal interactions with firms, their websites and their online shopping sites. On the other hand, poor service delivered by sullen employees will only serve to confirm customers' worst impressions that business really doesn't care about them as people any more.

There is an opportunity right now to stand out from the crowd by delivering superb personal service at a time when customers may well be expecting the opposite. Customer service stories invariably involve interactions with employees, or with the inability of customers to actually talk with employees. Customers can see when companies are cutting back on staffing levels — they see fewer checkout lines open or the wait time on the customer service help line is even longer than usual. As employees are called upon to work longer shifts or to serve larger volumes of customers, their patience is tested and their tolerance levels reduced. Then we hear more and more stories about how badly customers are being treated.

Customers also know when a company's tech-driven attempt at personalization is nothing more than an algorithm posing as a real, caring person.

So, before you allow the IT department and the data analysts to dictate the terms of your customer experience, get the marketing and HR folks together and concoct a plan to deliver even better service, thereby standing out from a crowd of competitors that in all likelihood is doing exactly what customers are expecting — reducing their ability to interact with real people, creating more and more customer frustration, and jeopardizing customer loyalty at precisely the time when companies need all the loyal customers they can get.

You can get your customers speaking in glowing terms about how they were treated by your staff. You can stimulate the telling of stories when they get together with their friends. The challenge is to encourage every employee to deliver a story-worthy experience.