

Five reasons why “The customer is always right” IS WRONG

It makes employees unhappy

Gordon Bethune is a brash Texan who is best known for turning Continental Airlines around “From Worst to First,” a story told in his book of the same title from 1998. He wanted to make sure that both customers and employees liked the way Continental treated them, so he made it very clear that the maxim “the customer is always right” didn’t hold sway at Continental.

In conflicts between employees and unruly customers he would consistently side with his people. Here’s how he puts it: When we run into customers that we can’t reel back in, our loyalty is with our employees. They have to put up with this stuff every day. Just because you buy a ticket does not give you the right to abuse our employees...

We run more than 3 million people through our books every month. One or two of those people are going to be unreasonable, demanding jerks. When it’s a choice between supporting your employees, who work with you every day and make your product what it is, or some irate jerk who demands a free ticket to Paris because you ran out of peanuts, whose side are you going to be on?

You can’t treat your employees like serfs. You have to value them... If they think that you won’t support them when a customer is out of line, even the smallest problem can cause resentment.

So Bethune trusts his people over unreasonable customers.



It gives abrasive customers an unfair advantage

Using the slogan “The customer is always right” abusive customers can demand just about anything – they’re right by definition, aren’t they? This makes the employees’ job that much harder, when trying to rein them in.

Also, it means that abusive people get better treatment and conditions than nice people. That always seemed wrong to me, and it makes much more sense to be nice to the nice customers to keep them coming back.

Some customers are just plain wrong

Herb Kelleher makes it clear that his employees come first – even if it means dismissing customers. But aren’t customers always right? “No, they are not,” Kelleher snaps. “And I think that’s one of the biggest betrayals of employees a boss can possibly commit. The customer is sometimes wrong. We don’t carry those sorts of customers. We write to them and say, ‘fly somebody else. Don’t abuse our people.’”

If you still think that the customer is always right, read this story from Bethune’s book

“From Worst to First”:

A Continental flight attendant was offended by a passenger’s child wearing a hat with Nazi and KKK emblems on it so she asked his father to put it away. “No,” the guy said. “My kid can wear what he wants, and I don’t care who likes it.”

He eventually put it away, but he didn’t like it. He wrote many nasty letters. He even showed up in our executive suite to discuss the matter with me. I let him sit out there. I didn’t want to see him and I didn’t want to listen to him. He bought a ticket

on our airplane, and that means we’ll take him where he wants to go. But if he’s going to be rude and offensive, he’s welcome to fly another airline.

The fact is that some customers are just plain wrong, that businesses are better off without them, and that managers siding with unreasonable customers over employees is a very bad idea, that results in worse customer service.

So put your people first. And watch them put the customers first.



It results in worse customer service

Rosenbluth International, a corporate travel agency, took it even further. CEO Hal Rosenbluth wrote an excellent book about the company’s approach called Put The Customer Second – Put your people first and watch ‘em kick butt. Rosenbluth argues that when you put the employees first, they put the customers first. Put employees first, and they will be happy at work. Employees who are happy at work give better customer service because:

- They care more about other people, including customers
 - They have more energy
 - They are happy, meaning they are more fun to talk to and interact with
 - They are more motivated
- On the other hand, when the company and management consistently side with customers instead of with employees, it sends a clear message that:
- Employees are not valued
 - That treating employees fairly is not important
 - That employees have no right to respect from customers
 - That employees have to put up with everything from customers

Some customers are bad for business

MOST BUSINESSES THINK that “the more customers the better”. But some customers are quite simply bad for business. Danish IT service provider ServiceGruppen proudly tell this story: One of our service technicians arrived at a customer’s site for a maintenance task, and to his great shock was treated very rudely by the customer.

When he’d finished the task and returned to the office, he told management about his experience. They promptly cancelled the customer’s contract.

Just like Kelleher dismissed the irate lady who kept complaining

(but somehow also kept flying on Southwest), ServiceGruppen fired a bad customer. Note that it was not even a matter of a financial calculation – not a question of whether either company would make or lose money on that customer in the long run. It was a simple matter of respect and dignity and of treating their employees right.

Alexander Kjerulf is one of the world’s foremost authorities on happiness in the workplace, and author of the book “Happy Hour is 9 to 5”. To contact him or buy the book go to www.positivesharing.com



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