

Hello – and welcome to my July newsletter. Since the days of the Institute of Customer Service, I have queried why so many people complete an apprenticeship in customer service and yet the level of customer service across many organisations in the UK remains atrocious. Recent work tells me it's because we look only at service (and not always too well at that) and not the customer experience.

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Customer service, the whole service and nothing but the service!

On a dreary autumn day last September, my wife and I stood in terminal three at Heathrow airport after bidding farewell to our daughter who was off to spend a year in Australia. We were worried of course, that she was to spend the next 12 months on her own, but also given that she gets lost leaving Derbyshire, we couldn't be certain that she would successfully change flights in Singapore airport and then find her way to the Youth Hostel after arriving at Brisbane airport! As we gave her words of encouragement, mine were along the lines of "if it doesn't work out, at least you've tried and you can come back anytime – but not before April because that's when we are coming out to visit!" And so in April, we found ourselves standing in that same terminal ready to fly out to meet her.

I wasn't sure what to expect by way of customer service, but I couldn't have wished for more or better!

Day two: Heading into Perth to explore the city, we caught the bus from our apartment location to the city – about a 45 minute bus ride (we hadn't booked a car as I already do way too many miles). As we boarded, we asked how much a ticket into Perth was and whether we could get returns. "Are you a family?" the driver asked. When we confirmed that indeed we were, he said we could have a family ticket (the fact that daughter is in her twenties didn't seem to matter!) for about 11AD – that's about £6.00. He then went on to explain how and where we could use it and told us about other ways into the city. I can't even begin to compare that with my local Arriva driver!

Day four: We decided to visit the port of Fremantle and its prison. We repeated our day two experience, getting another family day ticket from a different, but just as helpful, bus driver. We then got a ferry from Perth to Fremantle, where a "tourist tram" was waiting to meet the ferry; its circuit timed to ensure that a tram met every arriving ferry. An equally informative tram driver advised us which prison tours to take, taking into account how busy the place was and depending on our return journey arrangements. The prison tours

were timed to start about ten minutes after the tram set down. The tram pick up – about ten minutes after the tour finished. All of these independent organisations coming together to ensure a smooth and efficient customer visit – that's the customer experience!

But it didn't stop there! We changed our plans during the day, staying much longer than we planned – with no real idea how to get back! We eventually found the train station (the last bus having gone) and looked at options open to us. A station attendant asked where we were going, then told us which platform and which train, checked our bus ticket (the £6.00 one) and confirmed that would get us back. He also told us where to go when we arrived back in Perth. When a train arrived at the platform about ten minutes before ours was due – that same person found us and told us it was OK to board, as that would become our train. The trains ran on time with perfect synchronisation, so no long waits for connections; planning that even extended to the bus times.

That for me is true customer service – thinking about what a customer wants and providing it – not just telling me to "have a nice day"! Over recent months, I have been doing some work with a company called Custerian, who specialise in helping organisations evolve their customers' whole experience, not just customer service. By doing that, it becomes easy to see how meaningless a qualification in customer service can be, if it is not backed up by organisational commitment.

The customer service apprenticeship has the potential to be a great learning tool for forward-thinking businesses; yet it continues to be derided by most because of the reputation it has gained – few units, easy to achieve, box-ticking activities and no meaningful training. Sadly, that is often correct and something I have witnessed all too often. It must be time to change that and make our customer service training work!

Kevin Dowson