



Misplaced marketing

Training book for the new store clerk:
“Go and be charming!”

Herbert Jack Rotfeld

Professor of Marketing, Auburn University, Alabama, USA

Keywords *Customer service, Race, Marketing*

Abstract *Notes that even large organizations report reductions in time or budgets allocated to employee training. Points out that, as a result, customer-contact people do not acquire a marketing perspective of satisfying different groups of customers and are often only able to serve effectively the smaller group of people just like themselves. Considers various situations where differences in race can lead to unsatisfactory customer service and concludes that charm does not compensate for insensitive actions.*

Inequitable treatment

A strong body of research evidence has found discrimination in some housing, credit and auto markets and that black customers encounter inequitable treatment in the marketplace due to their race. There have been many reported instances (and resulting lawsuits) of African-Americans waiting inordinately long times in restaurants, being denied products by car rental agencies or not getting picked up by taxi-cab drivers. A field audit of retail customer service counters found that black customers were kept waiting longer than white customers (Ainscough and Motley, 2000).

Regardless of the cause, bad service seems to be both common and counter-productive to what should be standard marketing perspectives. Sometimes an innocuous explanation might exist, but many problems are caused by an employee's sexism, racism or other prejudice. And sometimes, cultural expectations are in conflict.

The dark-skinned foreign visitor thought that racism was the reason for her rude treatment by the New York City waiters and store clerks. But, strange as it seems, some restaurants in that city seem to have insulting employees as a proud feature that customers seek out and enjoy. The people the visitor encountered were probably similarly rude to everyone. Coming from the pathologically polite culture she found among her neighbors back home, she did not expect to experience this New York style where consumer masochism often is a strange consumer benefit.

The unavoidable problem

The unavoidable problem for anyone managing a customer service business is that, especially in a multi-faceted and multi-cultural modern society, people walk in the door with a wide variety of prior experiences and expectations. And not all people that work in the same store, restaurant or bank are equally capable of serving customers. The insensitive employee could be different from the other people working there and the only person

Author's note: Material for the article is drawn from chapter 3 of the author's new book, *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing* (Quorum Books, Westport, CT, 2001).



The research register for this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregisters>
The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0736-3761.htm>



who acts like a jerk. No manager can control every employee in the short run. And some examples of customer frustrations might logically be caused by relatively innocent motives.

A black man waits in line in the bank and sees two other people not showing the clerk any identification before cashing checks. However, since he rarely comes into the bank, he might be asked for a driver's license to cash his check, simply because of a policy that requires a picture ID, "unless the clerk personally recognizes the customer." He might have been in line behind a few frequent visitors to the tellers' windows. On the other hand, the teller's problem also could stem from the difficulty people have in recognizing the faces of members of a race with whom they have had little prior contact or experience (Henderson, 2000). Unfortunately, this recognition difficulty is a weak "excuse" to a frustrated customer, so, at the very least, it raises a need for better employee training on how to recognize and remember the faces of all customers that they meet (Seiders and Berry, 1998).

Different backgrounds

From a marketing management point of view, it should be intuitively obvious that people from different backgrounds expect different types of service in a store. Clear differences exist in the way people of different races or other sub-cultures interpret identical situations (Williams *et al.*, 2000). And the manager is rarely the same type of person as all of his or her customers.

As a confounding variable in service businesses, managers set the policies, but day-to-day customer contacts are carried out by people at the bottom of the business chart. No store can hire clerks of every cultural group that might be customers. And even if it were legal and they physically could, such matching of personnel and customers would be a logistics nightmare. So management policies and directives need to try and take into account the different possible customer experiences and expectations. If management is to avoid problems and not misplace marketing, they need people on the floor with an ability to empathize with the subjective expectations of all potential customers.

Racially prejudiced pain

For example, take the intuitively simple situation of asking retail store customers if they want help. Many people consider overly helpful clerks to be intrusive, yet, like everyone else, they will complain when no one is around when assistance is needed. Absent a salesforce possessing telepathy, the manager instructs all the employees to stand nearby "in case" a customer needs assistance. It seems like a logical solution. However, many African-Americans have dealt with unfounded suspicions of other stores' clerks, who considered every black face a shoplifting threat. To these customers, the hovering-yet-quiet salesperson is seen as yet another racially prejudiced pain for the honest shopper.

In the modern climate, many firms try to standardize every phrase or greeting that must be used even in a context where the statement seems a bit out of place (Cameron, 2001). Management rules can only go so far, inflexible rules can backfire with certain groups of customers and employees need training in how to spot the different types of needs of the customers. Beyond the youth and inexperience of the people who fill most retail service jobs, some businesses seem dedicated to recruiting people from the shallow end of the intellectual gene pool.

Since doing a good job involves even the lowliest employees, it requires more than a manager's simple directive to "go out and be charming." Retail

store clerks need better training on recognizing to ask whether assistance is needed and how to then unobtrusively leave the customer alone, while being available when help is desired. And it is better that the potential employees' prejudiced views come to light before they are given any responsibilities.

Unfortunately, even the large organizations report reductions in time or budgets allocated to employee training, such that it is now best stated in minutes instead of hours or days. As a result, these customer-contact people do not acquire a marketing perspective of satisfying different types of customers. Instead, they often are only able to serve the smaller group of people just like themselves.

In customer service, the marketing questions are really quite straightforward and simple. And charm does not compensate for stupidly insensitive actions.

References

- Ainscough, T.L. and Motley, C.M. (2000), "Will you help me, please? The effects of race, gender and manner of dress in retail service", *Marketing Letters*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 129-36.
- Cameron, D. (2001), "The tyranny of nicespeak", *The New Statesman*, November 5.
- Henderson, G.R. (2000), unpublished comments and presentation, Marketing and Public Policy Conference, Washington, DC, June 1-3.
- Rotfeld, J.J. (2001), *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing*, Quorum Books, Westport, CT.
- Seiders, K. and Berry, L.L. (1998), "Service fairness: what it is and why it matters", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 12, May, pp. 8-20.
- Williams, J.A., Grier, S.A. and Crocket, D. (2000), "Experience matters: consumers' perceptions of discriminatory shopping experiences", unpublished paper presented at Marketing and Public Policy conference, Washington, DC, June 1-3.

