

| BeyondBusiness |

A monthly column about business and more—by contributing writers, pictured left to right, Laura V. Page, Lori Silverman, Eve B. Scheffenacker, Julie Hedlund and BJ Pfeiffer.



Taking charge:

Responding to poor customer service

By Lori Silverman

Maybe it's me. Regularly, I experience poor customer service. Like the following two situations.

One day, an HMO's billing office representative called and said I hadn't fully paid two years of medical bills. Being self-employed, I explained the non-reimbursable services discount I had negotiated based on my insurer's discount schedule. Her response? "You're a deadbeat. We're taking you to collections." I was dumbfounded. Realizing she was serious, I asked for her supervisor, who wasn't available until the next day.

The following Sunday's newspaper advertised a sale on shipping boxes—buy two, get one free. Needing 300 boxes to send my new book as a thank-you to contributors, I called the store and asked the manager what was in stock. Since his store and a second branch had insufficient quantity, he suggested using the 800-number, which offered free shipping. So I did. The first rep said, "I'm new. Can't help you." The second said, "A special department handles large orders." So I called it. Imagine my surprise when I heard the message: "The department no longer exists." Finally, on my third call, the rep processed my order.

I had five weeks before my mom and a colleague's employee were scheduled to help gift-wrap and ship books. When the boxes didn't arrive as promised, I called and was told they'd appear shortly. They didn't come. I called again. They didn't show up. Four weeks later—still no boxes. Exasperated, I canceled my order and placed another with a different company, incurring significant shipping fees and box costs.

What I have learned

As a consumer, you have several choices when faced with poor customer service. First, you can do nothing. Some situations may not be worth the hassle—to you—to resolve.

On the other hand, you could become angry and demand satisfaction. While this may work in the moment, your behavior may not fare well long-term if you regularly do business with the organization. Plus, anger zaps energy you may need elsewhere.

There is a third option. In a courteous manner, locate someone who can help you. It may be the original person who serviced you, another employee, a manager or someone outside the organization. At the HMO, the billing supervisor apologized profusely for her employee's behavior and found documentation of my negotiation. However, the HMO wasn't honoring it going forward. She suggested contacting the clinical supervisor in the department that houses my primary physician, which I did. This supervisor helped me brainstorm creative ways to reduce healthcare expenses—ideas that hadn't occurred to me.

After canceling the box order, I re-contacted the store manager and shared my story. He was mortified and went in search of help. Soon after I received a call from the corporate office. This individual listened to what happened and two weeks later I received a gift card covering my expenses.

Tips for you

What can you do when poor service touches you? Try these ideas:

1. Keep a written record of customer service interactions. Note the date, the problem, responses you receive, and the resolution, if there is one, or the date of next follow-up.

2. Find someone who cares about your situation and treat them with diplomacy. Talk calmly, without confrontation and name-calling. Use your documentation to describe what happened. Repeat what you're told to minimize further misunderstandings.

3. Share why you're giving feedback. I provide two reasons: First, fix the systems that caused my problem so nobody else experiences it. Then, if appropriate (sometimes it's too late to do anything), I ask for help: "Tell me how to resolve my issue—now and/or in the future."

4. Keep an open mind. The outcome may differ from your expectations. On occasion, I misinterpret information (for example: misconstruing the fine print on an offer), which means my concern isn't valid. Other times, the solution is a surprise to me.

The next time...

When you're faced with a customer service challenge, document the situation and determine what's most important. Then make a conscious choice: Do nothing, get angry, or provide detailed factual feedback and obtain help. If you embrace the latter, you'll often get greater satisfaction. Try it and see for yourself.

© Copyright Lori L Silverman 2007. All rights reserved.



Lori Silverman is a business strategist, speaker and author, and the owner of Partners for Progress. Her new book, "Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results," is available at Amazon.com. She can be reached at lori@partnersforprogress.com.