“You people lied to me!”
Her biting words bounced off the walls of the customer waiting room. Customers were startled out their seats. I was one! I thought of that old line: “Hell hath no fury like …”
“I am SO glad you came to ME,” the service person said with noticeable confidence. He moved closer to her and aimed his best eye contact straight at her face. “Would you be willing to tell me the details?” he said, world-class concern oozing from his voice.
“Mister, I’ll tell everybody up your chain of command if I have to.” Her mean junk yard dog style had bit down on a sympathetic ear and she was not about to let go.
“I don’t want to miss any of this,” the service person said, unshaken by her rage. “Could we please move in here so I can give you my complete attention?” He ushered her into an office away from the waiting area … and probably away from the object of her irritation.
None of us heard the conversation at the other end of the hallway. Oh, we all talked about his shoes, her loose screw, and his “grace under pressure.” Ten minutes later they emerged from down the hall. “Why can’t they all be like you?” were her parting words as the waiting room door closed behind her.
I was lucky. I later got the same service person, giving me the opportunity to learn of his winning magic. “It was no big deal,” he shrugged. “We all have our bad days. Today was hers. Since she’s one of our customers, she deserves my best effort at problem solving.” His too-good-to-be-true talent seemed way too special for me to let it go.
“So, you think the customer is always right?” I pressed.
“Oh no,” he said, resigning to the fact he was going to be interviewed! “The customer is the customer … a regular person, right AND wrong. They are really no different here than anywhere else in life. Nor am I, to be honest. I try to deal with a difficult customer just like I try to do when my son or wife or neighbor is being difficult.”
He handed me my receipt with one last piece of wisdom: “It is not about ‘who’s right;’ it’s about making the customer feel right. It’s all about living with customers as people every day.”

Rules for Living with Challenging Customers
I thought a lot about that waiting room scene. Customers are people with bad days. While there may be “customers from hell” — those evil, rip-you-off types — most customers are far more likely to be “customers who’ve been through hell!” They rant, rave, and raise their voices in embarrassing ways, but mostly they are people just trying to get through life … right and wrong. Coping with difficult customers is just a part of “living with customers as people every day.”

Yet some people are more effective at “living with customers” than others. Some service people get hooked by a customer’s rage and end up costing the organization both the customer and a good reputation. Others seem to be adept at living with customers…especially testy ones everyone infrequently meets with dread. What’s their secret?

I found a unique source of advice on living with the difficult customers in a Peanuts comic strip! Peppermint Patty asks Charlie Brown: “Chuck, do you know any good rules for living?” And,
as if he had been for days waiting for that very question, he quips: “Keep the ball low. Always get your first serve in. Always knock before entering. Don’t let the ants get in the sugar. Don’t spill the shoe polish. Give four weeks notice when ordering a change of address. Don’t let your crayons melt in the sun.” At this point in the strip, Snoopy appears, lunch pail in his mouth. As Charlie leaves the strip, he gives his final rule: “And feed your dog when he’s hungry.” Charlie’s wisdom is powerful advice for living with difficult customers.

“Feed Your Dog When He’s Hungry”

Customers are obviously not dogs. But Charlie’s coaxing us to URGENTLY deal with a customer’s distress is prudent prose. Making an angry customer wait is like watching an overfilled balloon get even more air. While we may be reluctant to oil the squeaky wheel, the price for unrestrained fury can be enormous. Angry customers can make others question their own wisdom in selecting the organization. Unbridled anger takes a toll on the self-esteem of all in its path, especially service people. And customer anger, left unchecked, can turn into “customer terrorism” — that scary realm of lawsuits or trashing the organization to hundreds in today’s cyber world marketplace. Feed your angry customer’s need when he or she is “hungry.”

“Always Knock Before Entering”

The best antidotes to customer communication challenges are assertive concern and quiet confidence. My front line service person stated, “I am SO glad you came to ME” — communicating to the customer she had selected the buck-stops-here person. Positive and upbeat, his goal was to make her feel she hit the jackpot by getting him. He kept his tone confident, but not cocky; he looked concerned, but not happy. Giving an angry customer a big smile is oil on fire; customers view it as uncaring or patronizing. So he stepped toward the customer. Moving closer creates more intimacy. It is not about invading Empathy is to communication what knocking on a door is to entering.”

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the customer’s personal space; the goal is to demonstrate both concern and confidence. He also showed concern by making eye contact and asking, “Would you be willing to give me the details?” Empathy is to communication what knocking on a door is to entering.

“Always Get Your First Serve In”
Tennis players know that missing the first serve adds pressure to the serving process. You pucker up to make the last-chance serve error free. Communicating in challenging encounters has an even greater pucker factor. Blow your first shot and you may see your “opponent storm off to court or Facebook.” You only have one chance to make the right first impression. Take a deep breath when you see rage on your path. The added oxygen in your blood stream helps calm you. Recall a great past success and how you felt — get in that “spirit of greatness!” Positive self-talk works as a private half-time pep talk and mentally readies you to deliver your very best.

“Keep the Ball Low”
The next step my service person took was to create a change of venue for the angry customer. I suspect he also wanted her out of earshot of other customers. Moving her away from the object of her wrath provided a less volatile setting for her to vent her feelings. Keeping the ball low implies focus and precision. Finding a setting where customers can get undivided attention is a key to their unveiling their unspoken issues. This enables you to more precisely find a solution with which you both can live.

“Don’t Spill the Shoe Polish”
When shoe polish gets spilled, it’s usually due to focusing just on the shoes and not the shoes and the nearby polish. Granted the customer’s spoken concern is important, but helping to surface the underlying concern is equally important. It means asking questions to learn, not to prove, correct, or make a point. It means listening to the problem while at the same time listening for a route to resolution. It is important to get customers out of a “right or wrong” mode and into a joint problem-solving mode. If the confrontation remains on a “who’s right or who’s wrong” plane, you’ll lose, even if you win. Never resist resistance.

“Don’t Let the Ants Get in the Sugar”
Customer fury is always emotional. Your mother probably taught you heads don’t talk to hearts; only hearts talk to hearts. If customers are angry, let them feel your empathy and sincere concern. Be quick to acknowledge their feelings. Be humble not haughty; focus...
on concentration, not on protection. Be quick to say: “I am very sorry this happened.” Try to stand in their shoes. Ask: “How would you like to see this problem resolved?” You are not eligible to change a customer’s view until you first demonstrate you understand the customer’s view. It is not about agreement; it is about understanding.

“Don’t Let Your Crayons Melt in the Sun”

Customer fury is rarely personal. Sometimes intense anger is old negative baggage triggered by a small incident. Customers are sensitive to being betrayed by service providers. They are calloused by too frequent incidents of promises not kept, unreliable products and unbelievable propaganda. Their jaundiced attitude starts them out on the service road with skepticism. One small misunderstanding can unleash a large “I told you so.” Consequently, they come ready to do battle with “the whole lot of you.” It’s usually not about you personally. Eleanor Roosevelt advised, “No one makes you inferior without your permission.”

“Always Give Four Weeks Notice When Ordering a Change of Address”

Sometimes the best efforts to “soothe the savage beast” are to no avail. Smart organizations work out plans for how to handle those situations when a service person reaches an absolute dead end. Sometimes it may be finding a different person to serve that customer … a younger or older person, a different gender, different style. It depends on who you think might be a better personality match to the customer. Work out a plan to identify who it is that can get on the right wave length and save the customer. After the problem is resolved, follow up with the customer to make sure there are no leftover bad feelings.

Charlie Brown’s “Rules for Living” can be valuable tools for dealing with those rare challenging customers. But, the Peanuts comic strip had one final frame. “Will these rules give me a better life, Chuck?” Peppermint Patty asks as Brown exits the strip to feed Snoopy. Charlie’s closing line gives hope to us all: “A better life … and a fat dog!”

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