

RANDOM

William Blinn
COMMUNICATIONS

179 Caren Avenue
Worthington, Ohio 43085
614-785-9359
Fax 877-870-4892
www.Blinn.com

June 2006

COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Excellence in customer support: easier said than done

Fifteen or twenty years ago, I said that cellular phones were a great idea for people who lived in Los Angeles and spent a lot of time in their cars, but who else would want one. I've had a cell phone for at least 10 years and, although I don't use it often, I'd hate to be without it. I went to the hardware store to buy a toilet seat and discovered that there are two main sizes: round and oblong. I thought I needed a round one, but I wasn't certain. One quick call home confirmed that round was right.

Far more than half of Americans have cell phones. I know a few people who don't yet have one, but they're in the minority. And most of the younger people I know have no "home" phone. They have just a cell phone. Those who are married have two. But no home phone. Why should they have a home phone? They're rarely home.

Despite this, cellular providers continue to be in turmoil. Churn is endemic despite the companies' best efforts to create barriers. We recently added a 3rd phone to our family plan and that required extending our contract with the carrier for 2 more years. Leaving will cost us \$200 per line, so the company is essentially guaranteed that we'll continue to be customers for 2 years. This is a bad way to create loyalty, though, because it doesn't create loyalty. It creates servitude.

The company I currently use (T-Mobile if it makes any difference to you) provides adequate service, but the only way it can gain my loyalty is through the use of contracts that exact heavy penalties if I leave. Wouldn't it be better, I wonder, if these companies would generate loyalty by doing things that would encourage loyalty instead of exacting penalties?

Eventually I convinced the support folks that all I really needed was a SIM card, that I understood there would be an extra \$9.95 (why not say \$10?) charge per month, and that there would be an activation fee.

Apparently not.

We wanted to add a third line to our family plan, so I called T-Mobile and explained the situation: My phone is due for a "free" upgrade, but the phone I have is fine. May I use the "free upgrade" to obtain a 3rd

phone and then activate it to add a 3rd line to the family plan? The answer was yes and the person I spoke with said that she made the appropriate notations in the record.

This is a bad way to create loyalty, though, because it doesn't create loyalty. It creates servitude.

Later, when I called back to order the phone, the person I spoke with took the order for the phone and then told me that I'd need to speak with the "activations" department. She transferred me to that department, but the person I spoke with said that she couldn't help me until the phone arrived. "The phone will ship with a SIM card?" I asked, and I was assured that it would.

It didn't. The phone arrived without a SIM card. Cell phones don't work without SIM cards. I called T-Mobile again and explained the situation. "Of course the phone didn't ship with a SIM card," my representative said. "It's an upgrade and upgrades don't come with SIM cards."

After a few more transfers, I was speaking with someone who seemed to understand the problem, but who then connected my call to the sales department so that I could order another phone. Fortunately the customer service person had remained on the line. "Wait!" I said. "I already have 3 phones – the one for the primary line, the one for the secondary line, and the one I want to add. Why do you want to send me a 4th phone?" The support person disconnected the sales person.

I thought we had been speaking the same language.

Eventually I convinced the support folks that all I really needed was a SIM card, that I understood there would be an extra \$9.95 (why not say \$10?) charge per month, and that there would be an activation fee. By then I had spent nearly an hour on the phone with T-Mobile over several days.

In the process, I learned that the customer service people can see my record but that sales people cannot. Apparently this is because T-Mobile trusts support people not to steal my identity, but feels that sales people are likely to do so. It's still unclear what "activations" people can see.

T-Mobile later told me “At this time, the USPS website shows that they have received the package but have yet to post the date of delivery. Please check later today or tomorrow for updated information on your package at the USPS website.” But the USPS website actually said, “The U.S. Postal Service was electronically notified by the shipper or shipping partner on May 23, 2006 to expect your package for mailing. This does not indicate receipt by the USPS or the actual mailing date. Delivery status information will be provided if / when available. Information, if available, is updated every evening. Please check again later.”

This is the same kind of support I received from Sprint, and it's one of the reasons I'm no longer a Sprint customer.

Subsequent messages from T-Mobile referred to me as “Adam”, thanked me for using T-Mobile, and explained that they understood my frustration because I had not received the SIM card and then noted in the same message that I had received the SIM card (which is something I'd mentioned in a previous message to them.)

“Also William,” the message went on, “I have visually reviewed your account and am noting it to ensure that I've provided you with excellent customer service today.” Other than “visually”, how else would someone review an account?

The message continued, telling me that I had 791 minutes remaining, noting that the writer is happy I'm getting “the most from your T-Mobile service”, and reminding me I can see how many minutes I've used “no extra cost.” Several additional paragraphs later, it finally ended with “Thank you for choosing T-Mobile, William. We appreciate your business.” To this, I could only reply “Have a nice day and I hope that I have provided an excellent customer response.”

Do companies really think that these kinds of nonsensical fluff phrases convince customers that the company cares?

Each telephone conversation I had with T-Mobile included a question from the T-Mobile side, “How's your day going today?” I considered responding by saying, “Not too good. I was mowing the lawn and I accidentally cut off my left foot,” just to see what the response would be.

If you're in a position to have an effect on “customer-facing” communications, get rid of the scripts. Give your employees permission to listen to clients, understand them, and respond appropriately. Some of us appreciate it when our questions are understood and the response is actually based on what we asked.

Oh, by the way: When I called to activate the phone, the young lady I spoke with was engaging, funny, and efficient. She left me with good feelings for the company even though she was working from a script.

The right way

That same week, I checked on my Quality Paperback Book Club account. I had missed one of their notices and they had shipped me a book. I had returned the book and I wanted to find out if they had credited my account for the returned book. They had, but I noticed that I had missed yet another notice and that another book was on its way to me.

I'll return it and they'll credit me, but there must be a better way to do things! So, keyboard under hand, I composed a note to the customer service folks the Friday evening before Memorial Day: “Is there a way to change my account so that

books aren't automatically shipped? Another order has slipped through and I'll have to return it. This costs you money and annoys me.”

A mere three hours later, I received a response. Most, if not all, of the response is a form, but it's a well written form that exactly addresses the problem, states the solution, and goes on to provide additional useful information that I didn't think to ask for – unlike the T-Mobile form replies that include long sections of useless blather.

Here's what Quality Paperback Book Club's Meghan 192 said (my comments are in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS):

Effective immediately, your account has been placed under a new service plan. Under this plan, you will not be sent automatic shipments. You will continue to receive the club mailings; however, you no longer have to return the Reply Form in order to refuse the Main Selections. THIS EXACTLY ADDRESSES MY CONCERN AND TELLS ME THE PROBLEM HAS BEEN SOLVED EXACTLY AS I REQUESTED.

When you wish to place an order, simply complete and return your Reply Form. You may also use our automated answering service or the club website to place your order. (Please note that special sale offers may only be offered through the mail.) THIS PART EXPLAINS HOW I CAN ORDER A BOOK NOW.

Thank you for letting us know that you are returning a recent shipment. As soon as we receive the return, the charges will be removed from your account. Please allow up to four weeks for us to receive your return and credit your account. THIS SETS MY EXPECTATIONS FOR HOW QPBC WILL RESPOND TO THE BOOK I WILL RETURN.

If you receive a statement for the returned shipment within this time period, please don't be concerned. It just means that the statement was prepared before your return was processed. If a subsequent statement does not reflect the correct balance, please notify Customer Service at that time; include the product title and date of return. And finally, this section tells me that I may see an invoice. I COULD FAULT MEGHAN 192 FOR INCLUDING THIS PARAGRAPH BECAUSE I PAY BY CREDIT CARD AND THE CHARGE IS PUT ON THE CARD WHEN A BOOK IS SHIPPED, SO I NEVER SEE AN INVOICE.

And that's it. No blather about wanting to “meet and exceed” my expectations. No hoping that “I have addressed all of your questions and concerns”. No discussion of “World Class Customer Service” (and why does T-Mobile capitalize that?)

Just answer the customer's question. Resolve the problem. Stop. QPBC understands that when a customer has written with a question or a concern, that customer doesn't want to be told about “world-class customer service”.

All the customer wants is for the problem to be resolved. Take a look at your business from the customer's perspective; you may not like what you see, but at least you can fix it before it drives away too many customers. **℞**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

A totally appropriate comment for this month's Random Thoughts:

“To communicate is to make yourself understood.”