

Bad customer service: Take 'A WHIP' to it

By Catherine Milward-Bridges

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This billboard illustrates a typical case of bad service coming back to bite you in the... brand. Whatever the run-up was, this [customer](#) had clearly had enough, and they were going to hit the perpetrator where it hurts most: with brand carnage.

It doesn't take a genius to know that if you're rendering a service, being attentive to your customers' demands is an effective way of protecting your brand's reputation - and retaining those hard-earned customers. So, why do so *many* businesses seem to get it so wrong?



The [WhyFive 2014 Retail Shopper Report](#) based on an online survey with 8,000 South African participants, revealed that 46% of respondents perceive service at retail outlets to be 'generally poor', while 10% find it 'terrible'. So Houston, we *do* have a problem!

Discipline

I believe that service excellence can be achieved and maintained if a business is run on a culture of discipline. I know this from having been on both sides of the spectrum: as a customer, and as a service provider.

The trick is to start with the 'small' things, like expecting your staff to acknowledge every customer (even if it's just to tell them that they'd attend to them later). This way, customer care issues are likely to be highlighted *before* they culminate in a disaster.

The [five pillars of discipline](#) as echoed by Steve Pavlina really resonated, so I've adapted them to the topic at hand, like this:

1. Acceptance

Accept that in a competitive business landscape, you - the business owner - are at the mercy of the evolved modern day customer. They know what they want, and they won't hesitate to expose shirkers.

If you understand and truly embrace this pivotal concept in your business, it'll show through your staff; they'll:

- be motivated because they (hopefully) feel valued by you
- demonstrate a commitment to pleasing, and retaining your customers
- understand the direct link between happy customers and your bottom line ('cause it directly affects what ends up in *their* back pocket).

2. Willpower

Whilst difficult to maintain, willpower becomes more attainable when we grasp its role in achieving our goals. If the goal is clear, the willpower should follow.

With a pervasive culture of discipline, there's a good chance that everyone (even the tea lady) understands their role in achieving service excellence. They'll also 'get' the relevance of their role in relation to the business.

This in itself is a major motivator. There's nothing more soul-destroying than plodding along in a job that you feel pales in the grand scheme of things.

3. Hard work

"The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary." - Vince Lombardi

While some customers can be 'hard work', it's easier to work hard at achieving service excellence when you're committed to it.

Your (now) motivated staff should be happy to work hard at pleasing your customers, 'cause they'll have a vested interest in the business. Feeling like they belong and seeing *your* commitment to customer service will make for much-needed security all round.

4. Industry

"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it." - Warren Buffet

Knowing your industry will serve as a constant reminder of the tenuous line all businesses walk in the landscape. One day you're the best, the next day you're *persona non grata*.

Resting on your laurels - like too many businesses do, to their detriment - is therefore not an option. You need to keep striving to exceed your customers' expectations, one referral at a time.

5. Persistence

Because a business' reputation can be ephemeral, you simply cannot afford to tolerate inconsistency in customer service - starting with you as the business owner.

This is why we have mottoes in business. If it means that you reiterate your customer-service motto to your staff at every opportunity, do so. Then, live it.

When dealing with the evolved customer, letting your guard down - even for a moment - could lead to the demise of your

hard-earned business reputation.

Interestingly, the first letter of each of the five pillars spells the acronym 'A WHIP' - which is what we often need to use to 'whip ourselves into shape'.

So, the next time you find yourself 'slipping' as far as customer service is concerned, just take A WHIP to the problem, (not to the customer, though).

ABOUT CATHERINE MILWARD-BRIDGES

Catherine Milward-Bridges is a passionate communication specialist and founder of simplyput.co.za. Catherine guides her clients in taking their engagement efforts from good to great; and helps them optimise social media with strategic know-how.

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