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Management Lessons from a Car Wash Guy

By Jeff Mowatt

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If you're serious about strengthening customer loyalty, consider this management lesson I learned from an odd source – a car wash attendant. It's an easy customer service concept that may change the course of your business.

This guy was amazing. I was speaking at a convention in Washington, D.C. My wife and I decided to rent a car to drive to the Civil War battle site at Gettysburg. Here's what happened as we entered the car-rental location to pick up the vehicle...

Nothing. We stood waiting in front of the counter for at least three full minutes while the half dozen or so employees behind the counter talked on the phone and ignored us. Then another customer entered and, because we're standing at a long counter, he doesn't line up behind us, but beside us. So, now I wasn't only annoyed, I was worried. Maybe we won't even get served next. I tried desperately to make eye contact with the employees engrossed in telephone conversation. I was painfully aware that they didn't know how to juggle a phone caller and a visitor. (By the way, you'll find the secret in an article I wrote called, "Test Your Telephone Effectiveness." Download it for free at

www.jeffmowatt.com

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Finally! One employee noticed us, smiled in blissful ignorance of my frustration, and asked with a tone that's irritatingly perky, "Who was here first?" Turned out the customer standing next to us was a gentleman. He motions toward us and volunteered, "These folks were here first." I could have kissed him (not on the lips)! We rented their car despite the service.

The next day I returned to the agency's underground car-rental return area. Remembering the slow

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counter service the day before, I reminded myself that next time I'd rent from one of their competitors. As I parked the car, the guy who was washing the rental cars walked over and offered to take care of the paperwork. We entered his kiosk. He grabbed a clipboard and casually asked, "How was the rental?" I paused. He's the car wash guy—if I complain about yesterday's slow service what's he going to do about it? I just wanted to get out of there without any hassles. "Fine." I lied.

That's where the vast majority of front-line employees would leave it. But he then asked a question that took me by surprise, "Is there anything you think we could do to improve our service?" I paused again. The guy seems to be sincerely interested. Oh, what the heck. So I told him about the experience at the front counter and suggested a way they could improve without hiring more people or working faster. His response was surprising.

He said he loved the idea, apologized for the delay, assured me that he'll bring it up in their next meeting, and then offered, "If I take ten per cent off the price of this rental, would that be OK with you?" This was the CAR WASH GUY! Him, I kissed on the lips! Not only was that alright with me, but I decided that the next time I had to rent a car, I'd give them another chance.

That was the best example of how to conduct practical customer research I've seen. The magic question is not, "How is everything?" That's just a prelude to the much more useful question, which is,

"What do you think we could do to improve our service?" It's a simple survey that I encourage you to start having your front-line employees conduct on an ongoing basis.

How to ask the magic question

Once you begin asking customers for improvement suggestions at the front line, you need a system for collecting the information. That means creating simple customer-feedback forms—not for the customers to complete, but for the employees who are conducting the surveys to fill in. You'll also need to create a procedure so that the surveys are completed on an ongoing basis. Of course, I don't advise asking this question of your regular customers on every visit because it could become annoying. You need to adjust the system to make the question appear to the customer to be a natural, logical part of the conversation.

Fixing problems on the spot

When soliciting customer feedback, employees need to be empowered to handle complaints immediately. The beauty of the car rental example is not merely that the car wash attendant asked a great question; it's that he had the authority to address the issue on the spot without calling a manager and taking more of my time. One of the goals of the survey is to nip problems in the bud before the customer ends their relationship with the company. That's why it's so important that this survey method be tied into training for both managers and front-line employees.

You can use this as a morale booster. When employees start asking customers the question, "What can we do to improve our service?" employees learn that one of their key roles is to become the eyes and ears of the company. That helps them to understand that the company views them as more than just workers. Instead, front-line employees are, in a very real sense, a source of intelligence. Not a bad management lesson from a car wash guy.

This article is based on the critically acclaimed book, "Becoming a Service Icon in 90 Minutes a Month" by international speaker and customer service strategist, Jeff Mowatt. To obtain your own copy of his book or to inquire about engaging Jeff for your team, visit

www.jeffmowatt.com

or call 1-800-JMowatt

(566-9288).

Why Water Is More Expensive Than Gold?

By Jim Thio

What is marginal economy?

Think it this way, which do you need more, gold or water?

Of course you need water more.

Which one will you pay more money for? One kilogram of gold or one kilogram of water? Of course, gold.

Why?

That's because in economy, only the marginal matters. What does that mean?

Water is precious.

However, the value of water is the value of that least useful water that you still use anyway.

You use water to drink, you use water to take a shower, you use water to water your plants, then you use water to wash your car.

Obviously, the water that you drink is much more useful than the water that you use to wash your car. However, the value of water is the value of that least useful water.

Why is it so?

That's because you're trying to maximize your profit. Of course, you use your water for what's the most useful first.

Yes, but why is the value of water so low?

Say the value of water is higher than that. Say it is \$5 per gallon. The satisfaction you'll get from

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washing your car is \$1 per gallon. Then you simply don't wash your car.

Say the value is lower than that. The satisfaction of washing your car is \$1 per gallon. However, water is so abundant that its cost is only \$0.50. Then you'll use water for stuffs that give even less satisfaction, such as washing your house.

In fact, water can be so abundant that the price is negative. A negative price means that you're willing to spend money to get rid that water. Such is the case during a flood.

In which case, you'll actually spend money to get rid of water, such as buying water pumps. That's what happened to one of my grandmas because her house is often flooded.

What's the moral of the story? Be rare. When you're rare, you're valuable. When you're not rare, you're

worthless.

Jim Thio is a silver medalist in International Physics Olympiad. He's the author of

<http://howtolearnmath.com>

a book on how to learn math well. He also uses his Math skills to provide

free financial, business, and marketing advices in

<http://discussionbucks.com>

His articles are featured

in

<http://FasterFinancialFreedom.com/art.390.0.html>



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