

Customer Service When is it Ok

to “Break the Rules”?

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This past summer, I was refueling at one of the many local gas stations near my house, when it occurred to me that the story I’m about to share would have been the perfect opportunity for a customer service person to “break the rules”. My Ford Expedition was on empty and, of course, I was running late trying to get from one kid’s soccer game to the next. You may recall that, just a few months ago, fuel prices were at an all-time high and it was painful just filling up the gas can for the lawn mower - let alone what I was driving. I pulled up to the pump and reached for my credit card so I could slide it through the card reader at the pump, while thinking to myself, “There goes another semester of the kids’ college tuition,” but the card reader was already occupied. Inserted in the slot normally reserved for credit and debit cards was a card from the gas station that read, “Card reader at this pump is not working. Please pay inside after fueling.”

Since the light bulb did not go off, I shook my head and walked away in defeat.

I think you’d agree, this is not as convenient as paying at the pump, but not an unusual occurrence at the gas station either. You lift the nozzle, select the grade of fuel and proceed to fill up, never thinking there might be a problem. After all, they turned the pump on,

right? When your tank is full (and your bank account is now on empty) you take your credit card inside and pay. No problem – usually. So I started to fill up my SUV. Thirty dollars...forty dollars... At fifty dollars I hear a muffled voice on the loudspeaker at the next pump, say something that sounded like “cash only” to the customer filling her tank. Cash only??? I immediately take my hand from the nozzle, stopping the flow of liquid gold and college tuition into the tank and look at the total, which by the way, is now over sixty dollars.

Knowing my wallet was cleaned out of all cash (remember, three kids and soccer games), I proceeded to walk toward the door of the gas station intending to

ask the attendant to repeat what I thought I heard, albeit not very clearly. On my way to the door, I notice a large hand-written piece of notebook paper taped over the credit card readers on the pumps closest to the building. These pumps, by the way, face the door and can only be seen when you are exiting the building. The sign read “CASH ONLY. Credit card system is not working.” Maintaining my composure, I walked to the line at the counter to wait for my turn to ask the attendant how we can handle this problem. After a five-minute wait it was my turn to plead my case. I explained my problem, for which she replied, “Go stand in line at the ATM over in the corner and get cash or call someone.”

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I walked over to wait in the ATM line with everyone else who failed to process the cryptic message at the far island of gas pumps. Finally, it was my turn at the ATM. I put my card in, said yes to the five dollar ATM fee, and took out the cash to settle my debt at the counter. I went back to the line at the counter, where I reacquainted myself with the people from the line at the ATM machine and we all waited patiently. Finally, it was my turn. While I was paying, I said to the attendant, “I noticed you have nice hand-written notes on the pumps closest to the building that say your credit card system is not working and it is cash only.” For which she replies, “Yes, the credit card system has been down all morning because the company is upgrading it.” I then proceeded to ask why the nice hand-written and very informative notes were not on all the pumps, for which she replied, “Corporate policy prohibits us from placing notes on the pumps.” Now I’m confused, as you probably are right now. So I ask, “If corporate policy prohibits you from placing notes on the pumps, then why do you have big, very informative notes on the pumps facing the building?” For which she replies, “We ran out of the card inserts.” Still perplexed, I say “So let me get this straight. Corporate policy prohibits you from placing notes on the pumps that explain the actual problem, as long as you have the little generic credit card slot-blocking gizmos?” “Yes,” she responds. Not being able to let it go, and willing to waste another five minutes of my time at this point, I asked one more time just to make sure and maybe drive home my point, “So if you could not find the little credit card-blocking “gizmos”, you could put a nice hand-written note on every pump explaining that the credit card system is down and transactions are cash only, thus eliminating the problems you are dealing

with now?" Again, I get a yes. Since the light bulb did not go off, I shook my head and walked away in defeat.

We probably all have similar stories in which we have experienced sub-standard customer service, which unfortunately seems to be the norm these days – to the point where we accept it. Don't get me wrong. I do not have a problem standing in line waiting for my turn, or sitting on hold for a period of time to have a question answered or a problem resolved. What becomes a frustration to me is when, after I've sat on hold or waited in line, that a company's policy precludes or limits what the person on the other end of the phone, or the other side of the counter can do to solve my problem. Maybe it is because the corporate policies are developed in a vacuum without the input from the people in the trenches? Or maybe it is that the people in the trenches have not been empowered by management to "break the rules" when it makes sense to solve a customer problem, or better yet – prevent it from happening in the first place.

On a final note, when was the last time you looked at your business from your customer's perspective? Have you called your office to see how the phone is

answered, or have you jumped on the road with a driver (or two or three) for the day to make deliveries? Did road blocks exist that prevented your customer service representative from providing great customer service, or did your representative have to break the rules?

Imagine how much easier the gas attendant's day would have been if she had "lost" the credit card slot-blocking "gizmos" or, better yet, how much more effective she would have felt as an employee if she been empowered enough to break the rules and make the decision to do what she believed was right in the first place.

About the Author: Scott Bidwell has over 16 years of experience providing support, leadership and solutions to the records and information management industry. With six years in operations and sales for one of Northern Ohio's largest independent records centers, Scott moved to Andrews Software, Inc. in 1996 as National Sales Manager. He was appointed General Manager in 2000 and today is VP Sales & Marketing for the growing software company.

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