



Thrown out by my barber! amazing the customer cuts both ways...

By Peter Hobson

I recently experienced first hand just how fragile the relationship is with our precious customers. Please indulge me a little whilst I explain.

I have been a loyal and satisfied customer of a certain barber shop in my home town of St.Ives for a number of years now. The owner knows me, knows what I want, and, as a rule, delivers unfailingly. Despite our little town boasting no fewer than 23 (yes, that's 23!) hairdressers, why would I ever go elsewhere?

Well, a few weeks ago, finding myself in the town and with a

little time to spare, I decided I would pop in and get my hair cut whilst I had the opportunity. To my delight, I could see as I approached the door that there was a gentleman in the chair being looked after, but no-one else was waiting. I pushed the door open with a cheery smile, to be greeted with the bald statement, "I'm just doing this one then I'm going to lunch. I'm starving." I laughed, a little hesitantly, assuming this was something of a joke. No "Hello." No, "I'm really sorry but...."

But no. He was deadly serious. This was the owner of the shop, not an employee. He knew who I was, knew I

was a regular customer every two weeks or so, knew where I lived and what I do for a living. I guess he assumed that, as I always came to him, as we discussed our respective businesses on a regular basis, as I was relatively easy and undemanding, that he could treat me as a buddy and not as a customer.

I turned around and left in something of a daze, completely taken aback, with the promise from my cheery chum that I would be allowed to return in half an hour or so. I didn't protest. Why should I? There are 22 alternatives to choose from.

Thrown out by my barber! service should be an experience...

Indeed, I did choose one, and got a perfectly good haircut for the same price from a very polite young man who had never set eyes on me before. I now have a new barber, whom I visit on a regular basis and with whom I am a very satisfied customer!

There are people who cheerfully pay £3.50 for a cup of Starbucks coffee, willingly pay hundreds of pounds to play golf and stay at Gleneagles and loyally spend thirty-five grand for a Volvo 4x4 they wait a long time to get! Where's the logic? Customer devotion launches rational economics straight into the stratosphere.

Devotion to Starbucks, Gleneagles, Volvo, or indeed a barber shop, is not about a beverage, hotel, transportation or a haircut. It's about an experience—an experience as profound and unmistakable as a schoolboy smitten for the first time! Granted, the product or outcome must be very good, but not necessarily perfect. Volvo devotees grudgingly acknowledge there really are technologically better cars. But neither Mercedes nor BMW can match the gratification of a Volvo owner as she buckles her family securely into the womb of the back seats on her daily dice with death on the school run. Devotion springs from something else.

They care for you, and although you have your separate lives and identities, if push comes to shove, they will be there for you. You are just as special to them as they are to you.

Customers who are devoted to you or your organization act very differently from customers who are simply loyal. The passionately devoted customer not only forgives you when you err, they help you correct what caused the mistake. They don't just recommend you; they assertively insist their friends do business with you. They vehemently defend you when others are critical. Even if there is a good reason for the criticism, they quickly dismiss it as an aberration or an exception.

So how do we manage to achieve such exalted status in the eyes of our customers?

The answer, for me, is simple. Why are your best friends your best friends? Because you feel you can always rely on them, right? You know that, even when you're not there, they have your best interests at heart. They care for you, and although you have your separate lives and identities, if push comes to shove, they will be there for you. You are just as special to them as they are to you.



Thrown out by my barber!

super service takes great people

This is maybe an over dramatic example, but in order to create not just customer loyalty, but customer devotion, we have to find a way to make each and every customer feel special.

How do we do that?

There are a million ways, and I certainly don't know all of them, but I do know that if we can make a customer feel really special, then we are a long way down the road to earning their business and their endorsement for years to come.

Here's an example that is the exact opposite of my barber story. In addition to 23 hairdressers, my little town boasts three Indian, one Italian and one Chinese restaurants along just one little street of the town. Now, my lifestyle no longer involves me in eating out very often, but when I do, I always use the same Indian restaurant. I prefer Chinese, to be honest, but whenever I set foot in the Kushiara (for that is the name of my chosen restaurant) the head waiter greets me like a long lost son. Although he does not know my name, he knows who I am. That makes me feel good. Whenever I have a guest to take to dinner, where do I head? The Kushiara of course! "They know me here." Doesn't it give you a warm glow if you go to your local bar and they know what you usually drink? If they know your name too, so much the better. Why would you ever leave such a safe haven just to get a penny off a pint or to sit in different chairs? But if you frequented an establishment regularly, and despite polite professional service you were still an anonymous customer, why wouldn't you "shop around" occasionally, just to have a change from the "ordinary?"

Ordinarily good service is commonplace. Extraordinarily good service is personal. I once had cause to do business with Rolls Royce, the aero engine manufacturer in Derby. There was a commissionaire stationed between the door and the main reception area, who saluted when I approached the building and asked me to sign in. Three weeks later, I had occasion to visit my contact there for a second time. As I approached the commissionaire, he stood to attention, saluted and said, "Good morning Mr. Hobson, sir."

How the heck did he do that?

How did he remember my name from all the thousands of people who visit that company

every year? The truth is, I have no idea how he did it. And the reality is, I never did buy a set of engines for my 747. But I DID feel special. And I HAVE had a good feeling for Rolls Royce ever since. And I have told that story to literally thousands of people. And if I ever do need engines for my 747, I promise you, R.R. WILL get the business without even trying!

These days, whether you sell haircuts, curries or computers, we live in an intensely competitive world. Standard good, polite, helpful service is common. Service that creates true loyalty and genuine devotion has to be personal, individual, and delivered with outstanding commitment to the needs and desires of the customer.

I know you are committed to supporting your customers as professionally as it is possible for you. But to move to the next level, to foster a reciprocal commitment from them, you will need to get personal.

