

EXCUSES, EXCUSES!

Familiar phrases lack sincerity and often are used to mask declining customer service

By Wayne Tompkins

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His story may inconvenience you in order to serve you better, and the long delay in getting today's Business section from the person next to you is due to the overwhelming response to our exciting topic.

Thank you for your patience.

And . . . have a nice day.

The shopworn phrases above are agonizingly familiar to anyone who routinely suffers through less-than-stellar customer service, which is most of us. What's so annoying is not the sentiment -- patience is a virtue, wishing someone a nice day is a nice gesture and popular offers do draw a crowd.

What's so grating is the way they're said, often dripping with monotonal insincerity, indifference and even the occasional touch of sarcasm. So is the suspicion, often justified, that these customer service "crutch phrases" actually mask bigger problems within the company: a misguided attempt to save money -- or boost profits -- by skimping on the customer. Poor planning, failure to anticipate demand, internal communications breakdowns.

The promise "to serve you better," for example, may actually be a mask hiding a reduction in service. An appeal to patience seems to shift the onus of dealing with poor service back to the customer, triggering flashbacks of parental scoldings.

There is a movement among customer service consultants to bury these phrases in the cliché graveyard and go after the real problems -- and the real solutions -- that hide beneath the surface.

"In my opinion, 'Thank you for your patience' is already a timeworn statement that reeks of low commitment to customer service," said Denise O'Berry, a consultant and president of The Small Business Edge Corp. in Tampa. "It's a nice way to say, 'Wait in line and I'll get to you when I can.' It

makes the customer feel unappreciated and unimportant."

Call centers, with their forests of automated phone trees, recorded messages and long hold times before speaking with a live person, are a common source of customer service crutch-phrase frustration. So, increasingly, are Internet-based services.

Go on the Google search engine and type in the phrase, "Thank you for your patience." You'll find about 152,000 references, thanking us for our patience . . .

- "while we renovate our site."
- "while the page is loading."
- "as we learn the business and try to stay on top of this fast-paced industry."
- "regarding the factory delays."

Peter Post, co-director of the Emily Post Institute in Burlington, Vt., and a great-grandson of the famed etiquette author, said that while even hackneyed platitudes are better than no response at all, they can backfire if there's no follow-up action to satisfy the customer.

"They're making the effort to say, 'We know we've got a problem here and we're working to correct it,' " Post said.

"The proof is in the pudding, of course. As long as you see some real improvement. Now, if all they do is put up a sign and nothing ever changes . . . then I think, it almost becomes counterproductive."

Deanna Pelfrey, president of Pelfrey & Associates, a Louisville marketing and public relations firm, said that while technology such as automated phone systems can save labor costs, such approaches can be shortsighted.

"If you do not service your customer, you're not going to retain your customer," Pelfrey said. "It's all about building relationships. I certainly wouldn't

want my best friend to call and be put on hold for 45 minutes, so why should I do that with a customer? Our approach to working with clients is that they think about their audience. How does their audience really want to be treated and how would they feel about the lack of service?"

Bruce Kemelgor, director of the Small Business Institute at the University of Louisville, said he's also witnessed "the overuse of these phrases" as a way of masking insufficient staffing.

"In fact, the policy of answering a request within three rings or connecting a hold within 30 seconds are the marks of solid customer service policies," Kemelgor said. "Company leaders need to be reminded that it is estimated it costs seven times more to obtain a new customer than to retain an existing one."

Anthro Corp. Technology Furniture in Portland, Ore., is one company that's banned such phrases, including not only "Thank you for your patience" but also "That's not our policy" and "That can't be done." Co-founder Cathy Filgas said a receptionist answers every call, preferably by the second ring, there is no hold-message advertising, there is no pressure to get customers off the line to get to the next call and employees are cross-trained so they can handle just about every situation without bouncing callers around.

"A list of verboten phrases can only go so far," Filgas said. "A company must also put in place the structure to support a natural, relaxed, caring customer service approach."

Or as Anthro's customer service manager, Tina Gonzalez, puts it: Probably the most important part of all is "hiring warm people who actually like customers."

Sincerity can make or break any verbiage, Gonzalez said. "That sincerity just can't be trained into an employee."

Pelfrey said that while she has "strong feelings" about the importance of a human being greeting the customer, not all automated phone technology is bad. Voice mail certainly is an improvement over the old, easily lost pink message slips. So are phone systems limited to one or two options that can quickly address frequently asked questions -- say, a store's operating hours.

If there simply is no choice but asking customers to hold for an extended period, Pelfrey suggests making that time on hold entertaining, even informative. A business related to the fashion industry, for instance, offers hold messages on what's new for the season in fashion and in hairstyles. "At least they're getting some interesting information," she said.

O'Berry, the Tampa small-business consultant, said it's crucial that hold messages thank the customer for being a customer while informing them approximately how much longer they'll have to wait. That gives the customer the information needed to decide whether to continue holding or call back later, she said.

Post said the best approach when customers are kept waiting is to give them a reason for the delay, how it's being resolved and when it will be resolved. "I like to see not just a platitude, but something that helps the customer understand what's going on and what to expect. The more they do of that, the more they will engage people so they are not really frustrated."

The customer also has responsibilities in these circumstances, Post added.

"The way the customer interacts with the staff is as important as the message they are giving you," Post said, pointing out that the harried employees behind the phones and counters typically are not the core source of the problem. "I've seen customers walk up to those counters and be really in your face to these guys. I've learned that the best way for me to act is to understand they're being inundated and that whatever they can do for us would be great."

A sympathetic attitude toward the employee, he said, "makes it a lot easier when whatever is going to be able to be done gets done."

Employers can ease tensions by supporting front-line employees.

Kemelgor said managers should initiate reward programs for employees who act to resolve customer problems, "so there is more incentive to the position than simply answering the phone and directing customers elsewhere."

That's one of the approaches Oregon-based Anthro is taking with its customer service reps. for the company, and as long as that's what you're thinking, you're doing the right thing."