

THE EXTRA MILE

by Robert Gignac

"I always tell people: You know what's great about going the extra mile? There's very little traffic"—*Jim Larranaga, George Mason University Basketball Coach*

I am back at my desk in Switzerland feeling refreshed from a two-week break in Canada—catching up with friends and family, and inadvertently stumbling across the inspiration for this article. I continually tell people that one of the biggest differences between Canada and Switzerland is “customer service”. You do get served here as a customer, but it often comes across as them doing you a favour—and don't expect them to go out of their way to find a solution to your problem.

When I speak to organizations about customer service, I often use the following equation as a key to providing quality customer experience: “P - E = VAT” where “P” equals “perception”, “E” equals “expectation”, and “VAT” equals “value-added transaction”. We can be confident we are delivering quality customer service when the customer perception of the service exceeds their expectations, leaving a positive value-added transaction. If you want to provide quality customer service, ensure your customers leave with their expectations not only met, but also exceeded. The Cajuns use the word “*lag-niappe*” (pronounced ‘lan-yap’) which means “a little bit extra for the same price”.

How does this work in the real world? My wife and I had received a farewell present “gift card” 24 months ago—the name of a major Canadian retailer on the front—we had no need to use it at the time. On the back it read “treat this card like cash”, so we decided to save it until we needed to make a significant purchase. The time came during our Canadian trip two weeks ago.

We loaded up our cart with goods and headed to the checkout. After scanning and totalling, the clerk asked us how we would like to pay, and we handed over the gift card. He swiped it and much to our surprise told us “your gift card has expired—how would you like to pay?” Since this concept had never even occurred to us, we asked if we could speak with the manager. He quickly made a call, explaining that we had an expired gift card and would like to speak with him. We were told that if the card was expired, that was the end of the story, there was nothing to discuss. When asked again how we would like to pay, we simply replied that we were no longer interested in the over 25 items and left the store (leaving several annoyed customers behind us in the checkout line as well...).

We called the 1-800 number on the back of the card and were told the gift cards expire after 24 months from date of purchase, even if the card had never been used. They suggested that we could try speaking with a store manager, explain that we were living out of the country, and perhaps they “might” agree to honour the gift card, but they were under no obligation after the expiry date. When I countered that if the card actually had an expiry date on it (which it did not...), or perhaps showed a date of purchase on the card (allowing us to determine the expiry date...), or had not read in bold print on the back “treat this card like cash” (have you ever had someone refuse your cash by saying “sorry, it's expired”?), we might actually be more sympathetic to their point. An awkward silence ended when he said, “I wish there was more I could do...”

I was disheartened that this Canadian organization seemed to be lowering the expectations of their customers and by doing so conditioning them to expect less than quality service. If customers do not expect too much, guess what—they won't get it. It is the willingness to “go the extra mile” that creates the ‘winners’ in the customer service arena.

Undaunted, we tried again at a different location in a different town, first by inquiring of the closest employee, “Where can we find the customer service department?” We were told they did not have an actual department, but she would be happy to help us. We explained our story. She got on the phone. A lengthy conversation ensued. We heard her say, “that's unacceptable”. She asked us to be patient and continued talking. Ten minutes later, we had a reinstated gift card, and by the time we left the store, had purchased goods in excess of the gift card amount.

“Extra milers” are easy to spot, they have a friendly smile, stay until the job is complete (even if the store closed five minutes ago...), provide the feeling that your request is something important—not merely an interruption of something they would rather be doing. I am glad we had the chance to run into one—and I hope you strive to be one too. **E**

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