



How to Serve Customers

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate communications training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

One of the rarely acknowledged rules of business is that, to make a profit, you usually can offer only two of the following three things: price, quality, or service. Nordstrom, for example, prides itself on high quality and great service – not bargain-basement price. McDonald's is known for inexpensive price and drive-through service – not gourmet quality. Wal-Mart is thought of as forerunner of bottom-line price and reasonable quality – not tremendous service.

But wait a minute. Sometimes, businesses surprise you.

A few weeks ago, I stopped by a Wal-Mart near my home to pick up some cheap giveaway items for an upcoming executive training seminar in creating and sending high-impact emails. Because most adults regard writing instruction as deadly dull, I routinely stage team contests and award giveaways such as notepads, pens and erasers. I usually shop for these so-called valuable prizes in the bargain bins at K-Mart, Staples, or Target.

During my foray into Wal-Mart, I also bought several items for the house, my husband, the dogs and, OK I admit it, myself. When I got home, I realized that the myself bag was missing. I had no idea what had happened. So I called the store and asked for customer service. Twice, I was left hanging on the line for almost five minutes. And then, each time, click, the connection went dead.

Every bad rumor I had ever read or heard about Wal-Mart raced through my quasi-brain. Cheap imported goods. Lousy employee benefits. Heavy-handed vendor negotiations. Anti-union sentiments. Local competitor destruction. None of my thoughts was one bit relevant to the current situation. But I was getting steamed, and mentally on quite a roll. On my third go-round on the phone, I asked for the store manager. And, within seconds, that's exactly who I got. Coincidentally, his name was Bill Begley, absolutely no relation to me.

I told Begley my story about the lost bag, noting that I was clueless about its whereabouts. I related my exasperation about making two prior calls, insinuating that I was waaaaaaaaaaaaay too important to spend time on hold. I mentioned that I had no receipt because it apparently was in the where-the-heck-was-it package.

At that point, I was certain Begley would stop me in my tracks, saying he could do nothing for me without printed proof of purchase. I was steeling myself for a quick comeback, to include a snotty and, I hoped, intimidating reference to the fact that I have taught customer service at corporations all over the country. I wanted him to infer, rightly or wrongly, that I knew of what I spoke.

But Begley took another tack. He listened without interrupting. Then he asked a few specifics. Finally, he said he would be happy to resolve the problem by sending me a gift card worth exactly what I said my lost items were worth. "How much was that?" he asked. I was speechless, a rare condition for me.



Dr. Kathleen A. Begley
The Write Woman
KBegley@writecompanyplus.com
610-429-1562

The experience got me thinking about the general value of treating others well in business, whether they're your managers, your co-workers, your subordinates, or your customers. Some thoughts:

Trust people until they prove untrustworthy. If the truth be known, and now it will because I'm going to tell it, I can easily fall into the trap of suspecting others of ill motives – especially in business relationships. Inevitably, my negative attitude causes a bad result. Adults, like children, tend to act exactly the way you expect.

Avoid judging the book by its cover. In the annals of business research, you can find hundreds of studies in which the same customers approach sales clerks on different days. In one instance, the men and women dress in expensive clothes; in the other, in cheap casual garments. Guess which version of the same individual invariably receives better service?

Greet people with enthusiasm. The first thing I noticed about Begley was the lilt in his voice. Unlike many people I encounter in my business life, he had no trace of that irritated tone that conveys, without words, "oh, crap, another disgruntled, unreasonable, and possibly crazy customer that I don't want to deal with."

Hear out your speaker. Listening is the rarest communication gifts. Because of the need to work fast, most business people come up with advice and solutions long before even understanding the problem. But guess what? Most complainers, above all, want to vent their emotions.

Recognize the benefit to you. For the rest of the 21st century, according to business gurus, the core of success is going to be phenomenal service – not high quality or low price. In relative terms, the last two factors are easy to come by. So the employee, manager, or entrepreneur with the best interpersonal skills is likely to come out way ahead.

Focus on your positive experiences. I suspect the main reason that Begley blew me away is that I have encountered so much horrific treatment in recent years at the hands of the airline industry. A frequent business traveler, I almost never get through a week without being told – without any apology – that my flight has been canceled and that I'm on my own to find a hotel for the night or an alternative means of transportation. Last year, I spent about \$25,000 on flying, rarely getting so much as a friendly greeting much less any financial compensation.

Kill difficult customers with kindness. This approach works for two reasons. The first is that cantankerous individuals usually expect you to match anger with anger – so the friendly, calm approach throws them off guard. The second is that you'll feel good about yourself for taking the high road. As I was ranting and raving about my lost package at Wal-Mart, I was beginning to disgust myself. But Begley never showed even a trace of impatience. I suspect the man someday will go straight to heaven.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training outside Philadelphia. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.