

How Do Assumptions Impact the Customer Experience?

By Marilyn Suttle

A lot is said about how to turn angry customers into happy ones. But, sometimes the customer is happy, but YOU'RE the one who's angry. What do you do then?

If experience is what you get when you don't get what you want, I got a whopper of an "experience" with an angry service provider that solidified for me the need to train staff to challenge their worst assumptions.

I love everything about the experience of buying my favorite perfume. I've purchased it at the same location for years... up until now. It only took one service provider who made an incorrect assumption to permanently change my buying habits.

I had about a quarter of a bottle of perfume left when the sprayer broke. The top wouldn't come off, and there was no way to use the perfume inside. It was too expensive to toss out, so I brought it back to the store to get some help.

The counter girl greeted me with a smile. I pulled out the perfume and asked, "Is there any way you can get the sprayer to work, or open it up so I can use the rest of my perfume?" She fiddled with it but couldn't get it to open or squirt. A manager stepped in and assessed the situation. "Let's just treat this like an exchange, and give you a new bottle," she said. I was shocked and thrilled! "Wow! Thank you so much," I said.

When the manager left, the counter girl fumed. "It's very convenient that your sprayer stopped working when you were almost out of perfume," she said.

"Oh no, she didn't," I thought. She did. She reacted on her whopper of an incorrect assumption. She didn't stop long enough to ask herself, "Could I be wrong about this?" or "What's to be gained by saying what I'm about to say?" She didn't adapt her manager's perspective or even consider that being generous was a profitable way to keep a long-term customer happy. More likely, she simply reacted to her assumption without thinking about it at all.

Instead of holding on to my negative assumption about her, I checked it out, "Do you think I was just out to get a free bottle of perfume?" I asked her. Instead of apologizing or explaining away her comment, she offered me a smirk and an eye roll.

It felt horrible! She took a happy customer, who was thrilled to receive an act of over-the-top kindness to solve my problem, and turned it into an ugly experience.

I lovingly refer to those customers who challenge service providers to grow as [Gladys](#). Gladys is a gift because she's willing to tell you why she's not happy. It gives you an opportunity to fix the problem for her (and the many other customers who may experience the same thing.)

If I was a Gladys, I would have asked to talk with the manager who had treated me so well. I would have shared her staff person's misconception and its effect on me, so that she'd have an opportunity to educate this woman in the ways of not letting assumptions alienate good customers. Unfortunately for the store, I'm more like the rest of the world... not willing to go through the stress and discomfort it takes to do so.

What's important to note is there's a good reason why the counter girl (or people who provide service in your company) make negative assumptions. They've probably had customers "cheat the system," steal, or demand something they didn't deserve. Once burned, it's easy to assume the worst of every customer.

A week after the perfume incident, I met Sarah. She works for a pet supply retailer. She told me, *"My employer has a liberal return policy. They'll take back things a year after they were purchased. A woman returned a dog collar after six months, and I could tell it had been used. According to policy I was supposed to return it, but no one was around, so I refused. I told that woman she should be ashamed of herself for trying to return a used item."*

Sarah thought she was doing what was best for the company. She wasn't. Even though some customers take advantage, most people do the right thing. Simply knowing you have the ability to get a refund or have problems solved gracefully makes it much more appealing to do business with a company.

What you think inside your head, comes across in your tone of voice, attitude and overall "vibe." For every assumption you make, take a moment to consider the consequences of acting on that assumption. Sometimes it's the most appropriate thing to do. Other times, you'll quickly realize that there's nothing to be gained by acting on it.

What about you? Do you have an established way for upset employees to vent their frustrations and receive sensitivity training to better understand why some of your over-the-top customer-friendly practices are truly good for business?

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