

Bossy Doesn't Work in Customer Service

by Lori Jo Vest

Like most Americans, I have health insurance and once in a while, I have to talk to someone at the insurance company to provide information before they'll pay a claim. Since I've changed insurance companies recently, I find myself talking to the health insurance customer service department rather frequently lately. They want to know when my former coverage was canceled. They want to know if I have additional coverage. They want to know if the trip to the ER was anyone's fault besides my own. (It wasn't – I twisted my ankle in my own backyard.)

Last week, I had to call them to discuss when my former dental insurer's coverage had expired. It was a fascinating study in customer service, as the call center representative didn't seem to understand that I was, in fact, a "customer."

Her initial tone was more than a bit condescending. "Your name?" she asked. I told her and spelled it out. "V as in victor, E – S – T." I went on to explain that I had received a letter and was calling to discuss the cancel date of my last dental insurance policy.

"Ma'am," she said in an impatient tone, "we'll get to that. Let me get through the rest of the information I need first." She was determined to lead the conversation and wasn't pleased that I wanted to be a bit more conversational. It's my nature to talk to people in a friendly fashion and if you're a customer service rep, I'm even more likely to do so, as I find service so fascinating. I found myself wondering how many customers are intimidated by their insurance company customer service reps and simply go along, doing what they're told.

I've had this experience several times over the years, with many different companies. Though health insurance providers have what I would consider a "captive audience" of customers, since many of us are insured through our employers, as the industry becomes more and more competitive, a serious look at the industry's customer service is definitely in order.

What could this rep have done differently? She could have taken a friendly tone and said something like, "Got it. Let me pull up your file and to do that, I need to ask you a few quick questions." In fact, had she simply taken a more conversational tone, she could have gotten the information she needed just as quickly, without making me feel as if she was the "boss" of the transaction.

It's something that all of us should think about. It's common knowledge that when you smile during a conversation, your tone changes. When you think of your customers differently, as people – not problems or phone calls to get through – you will talk to them in a more conversational and pleasant way.

What do you think? Is it possible to guide your customers to provide the information you're looking for, without coming across as "bossy?" Do you smile when you talk to your customers, even on the phone?

Co-author of the customer service bestseller, "Who's your Gladys? How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer into Your Biggest Fan," Lori Jo Vest has been involved in relationship-based sales and customer service for over 20 years. She has developed extensive marketing, sales and customer service expertise through her work in business-to-business sales and marketing positions. She consults with mid-sized and second stage businesses on methods to enhance their sales and customer service efforts through one-on-one awareness campaigns, methods for developing personal connection and custom strategies for long-term relationship building. You can reach Lori at lori@lorijovest.com.

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