

Don't Deflate a Customer's Sails: Know When Rules are Meant to Be Broken

written by Lori Jo Vest

As a first time published author, I've experienced many "firsts" over the last few years. The first time I've worked with an agent, my first book contract, my first advance check, my first galley copy and then, most recently, the first time I've ever seen "Who's Your Gladys?" on the shelf in a book store. Every "first" has been exciting, though the last "first" was the most ironic.

My co-author, Marilyn, had been to the store the night before to visit the book on the shelves. She had gone with her husband and her son, who took pictures of her in her excitement. After seeing her photos on our Facebook fan page, I couldn't wait to see it for myself. My husband, son and I went to one of the large chain stores mid-morning the next day.

I made my way through the rows of books until I came to the business section and there it was. My first book on the shelf of a major store. Wow! Needless to say, I was being a bit boisterous. My husband had his camera and snapped a few photos of the magic moment as my son looked on. It was a nice few seconds, and then...

A young woman came from behind the "customer service" counter. "I'm sorry, but you can't take pictures in our store," she said dourly. I explained the situation, thinking to myself, "of course, she'll make an exception for a few close-ups." It should have been obvious I wasn't stealing proprietary information or working for a competitor. Apparently, this young customer service representative cared not about my personal situation. She knew the rules and she was going to enforce them. Period.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. You still can't take pictures," she responded. I was a bit taken aback. My husband was furious. "Okay, never mind," I said, "We'll go to the store across the street." I led my boys out the door.

At a competing big name book store, it was a completely different experience. I learned from my mistake at the previous store and paved the way with the first store employee I saw. He looked up "Who's Your Gladys?" in his computer and walked us over to the shelf. My husband got out his camera. The friendly service guy moved the store's copy of "Who's Your Gladys?" off of the shelf and on to the end cap so we could get better pictures. It was a wonderful experience, even if it was my second "first."

Of course, being a customer service geek, I had to think about why the young woman at the first big chain bookstore didn't understand that sometimes it's appropriate to break the rules. Most of us who write books also buy a lot of books. We like them and we spend money on them. We're good solid customers for booksellers. While I wouldn't have expected the newbie store rep to make that connection, she should have known to check with her manager to see if the rules could be broken for this one special occasion.

Toward the end of the day, I called the misguided store clerk's manager. I told him what had happened. I made sure he knew that while I wasn't personally upset, she had "taken the wind out of my sails on an occasion that would only happen once in my life." (I know, it sounds so dramatic!) He was apologetic and promised to correct the young woman.

Unfortunately, one manager talking to one employee isn't going to change the face of customer service. What would? If every manager told their employees that rules were sometimes meant to be broken, then customer service levels would soar.

Understanding WHY a rule is in place can make a world of difference in determining WHEN it's okay to bend them. Rules are made to cover most situations and it's virtually impossible to make rules to cover every situation. Don't neglect to tell your employees that if something doesn't feel right – particularly when they're applying a rule that doesn't seem to fit – they should get another opinion before simply following the rule.

Front line staff members can also provide exceptional insight into how to best serve customers. When you encourage your employees to revamp procedures and processes that adversely affect their customers, they're empowered to create new and better rules.

What do you think? Do your staff members know that there are times that rules need to be broken? Are you listening to what they tell you about how to improve processes and procedures that affect their customers?

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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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