

THE COLD SHOULDER OF CUSTOMER CARE

If staff are indifferent, hostile or snub consumers, how much worse can a robot be?

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“Cold shoulder” is defined as “deliberate coldness or disregard, a slight or snub” (*American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*). The term first appeared in writings by Sir Walter Scott in the early 19th century and remains a common idiom today, for good reason.

Today’s consumer has multiple options to consider when purchasing pretty much anything. During this past holiday season, Internet e-commerce sales exceeded all forecasts while brick-and-mortar sales fell short. The slump in retail sales has been deeply analyzed; most concur that the Internet wins over consumers due to convenience, cost, availability of goods, and the unsaid... they don’t have to deal with the “cold shoulder” of customer care. Or do they?

The “cold shoulder” of customer care is not the sole bastion of retailers; e-commerce can give a pretty cool “cold shoulder” while performing its own customer care. So like it or lump it, consumers can still encounter the “cold shoulder”—be it from a retailer or an e-commerce contact center operation.

I will draw from my recent experiences to pose the question of how we manage to allow this “cold shoulder” to occur. Especially during the holiday season, I like to support small and independent retailers who, for the most part, engage and respond positively to their consumers. I had a couple of recent experiences in this small retailer world that I would characterize as NOT delivering on the promise, but on the “cold shoulder”... the shunning indifference.

There is a farm here in New Hampshire that was featured on a local news broadcast one evening because they are a family owned grass-fed beef farm. The entire segment showed scenes of this joyful, authentic, fun place to go and buy some “healthy” steak. So we did and it wasn’t fun! For all the hoopla on the local TV segment, we were met with a

very “cold shoulder.” When we entered the shop, the young woman on duty was decidedly disengaged. (She must have had to really work hard at ignoring us; we were the only ones in the shop! I suppose that the silent treatment is one popular “cold shoulder” approach.) We attempted to engage and were met with some guttural, sub-vocal responses. I asked myself, “Is this the same place I saw on TV?” Same building, but not the same place by a long shot! We left empty-handed and not likely to return, as the experience was that unpleasant. So much for the marketing benefit of the TV broadcast. Cold Shoulder 1, Marketing 0. And just for the record, this situation illustrated a management oversight. Either the clerk didn’t know, didn’t care or whatever. No matter the reason, she was allowed to damage the company brand due to no training, no oversight or both.

In another example, I recently returned several vases to a local florist shop. The owner is a “true artist” and a pleasure to do business with. She uses only quality flowers, is a talented designer, and gets truly excited about her customers’ needs. The owner shares customer “moments,” showing sorrow if the flowers are for a funeral and joy if for weddings.

On this day, the owner was not in and the young woman left in the shop was “uninspired” to say the least. She fumbled with taking back the vases. I assured her that I had spoken with the owner and she wanted them. It was as if picking up the box of vases and organizing them was going to be too much for her. Then I apparently had the nerve to order flowers for a dinner party; instead of engaging, the clerk just took the order in rote fashion. I could have screamed! What is wrong with people, especially small-business owners? The “experi-

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ence” must be the “feature” if you plan to stay in business. Business owners, like managers, must be brand-focused and focus anyone who works for them on the positive aspects of the brand. Critical focus areas include expected behaviors, empathy and rapport, and positive communication; these must be contextualized within actual activities and realistic scenarios.

The “cold shoulder” phenomenon also exists in e-commerce. As Internet sales continue to explode, contact centers must be able to support the things that go wrong... wrong sizes, colors, quality, delivery, etc. The list is long and, while many companies have very slick and easy methods for returning items, not so easy are wrong stuff, short ships, never delivered, wrong credit card charge, discount not applied, etc. Customers with these more complex issues dial into the contact center for resolution.

Contact center staff can’t exactly “ignore” the consumer as can the clerk in the shop. However, some are expert in giving the contact center “cold shoulder” via deliberate coldness or disregard.

I recently spent nearly three hours on the phone with a cable TV provider to help a friend navigate the transfer of service from his old house to the new house. You would think this to be a very common event supported by an effective process. We encountered first a massive failure in the voice recognition software which simply did not route properly. We were repeatedly routed to business sales whose staff were nice enough to transfer us. (Each time, we were transferred to the wrong location, but they tried!) During this tedious experience, we were handled by a number of different staff, some of whom actually wanted to help us. But most wanted to know, “How did you get me?” They acted quickly to blindly send us elsewhere.

This encounter illustrates the “cold shoulder” facilitated by organizational design. When a call is misrouted, many humans are more invested in what is NOT their job than in helping resolve a customer issue. It is no wonder consumers start screaming. As in any utility company, the cable TV consumer is pretty much held “hostage” to whatever processes and procedures are in place. What is bad for the consumer is also bad for the company; misdirected traffic interrupts various business units. This is ineffective, inefficient, unnecessary, and sadly, under-reported. The process issue is difficult to resolve in the siloed halls of such enterprises and results in a breeding ground for the “cold shoulder.”

As we’ve seen, the customer care “cold shoulder” manifests in face-to-face retail situations, contact center (multichannel) interactions, and in companies with organizational issues. For the contact center, what organizational or operational obstacles impede customer care? For example, does an agent have to reach out to another department due to system access

issues, lack of training or general bureaucracy? If so, find a solution and fix the problem! Is it really necessary for agents to escalate consumers for resolution to a problem? If not, stop it! Do agents have to navigate multiple systems with varying time-outs and password resets all on a single monitor, with annoying system latency, and squandering the interaction due to transactional complexity? If so, fix it!

Sometimes, the “cold shoulder” relates to a negative communication style that we must “coach our staff out of.” Contact center communication must be more about empathy and less about apathy and disengagement. When observing calls, listen

for what is NOT said. I have the great privilege of observing calls in multiple industries; I can safely say there is a lot of room for improvement when it comes to empathy. If we don’t get empathy right we might as well prepare to manage a bunch of “chat bots.” Artificial intelligence (AI) looks to make great inroads in customer care by providing bots to handle issues because (let’s face it) AI won’t be programmed with the skill to deliver the “cold shoulder.”

It is a sad fact that when paid humans behave in a way to damage the brand and the business, AI options of robots and automation begin to gain traction. There are many emerging technologies that allow for interactions to occur without any human to facilitate. If staff are indifferent, hostile or snub your consumers, how much worse can a robot be?

Artificial intelligence is on the horizon; we as consumers are being indoctrinated into accepting it. Think Siri, Cortana, Google Now, Echo, cameras in our cars, and talking alerts from our Nest. We are in the adoption stage, getting comfortable doing business with and being supported by “machines.” AI-based machines also “learn” needs and preferences that are part of our personal profile; actually, an algorithm is being built to service your personal needs. Keep in mind that machines don’t have empathy. But I can program them to offer condolences when a consumer states they have just had a death in the family... unlike recent human experiences I have had.

The customer care “cold shoulder” is a hazard for your brand regardless of the size of your business. Large or small, face-to-face or e-commerce... every consumer interaction offers the opportunity to engage and provide positive, empathetic and human responses. Adopt behaviors and nurture human skills that will diminish the likelihood of being replaced by bots! ●

“Customers may forget what you said but they’ll never forget how you made them feel.”

—UNKNOWN



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