



Kathleen Peterson

PowerHouse
Consulting

“TO MAKE A LONG STORY SHORT” is an idiom that dates back to the 1800s. In 1857, Henry David Thoreau penned these words in a letter: “Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long time to make it short.” Ah... such true words.

I don’t know about you, but in my experience when someone says something like, “Well, to make a long story short,” the story has already gone on too long! Some folks have no edit function whatsoever; they feel the need to drag along every detail of a story and lose every listener in the process! This is true in all forms of communication—personal, professional, written and spoken! Thoreau points out in his writing how difficult it is to be succinct when sharing information.

The contact center is, for all intents and purposes, an *information portal*. It is one that utilizes multiple channels within an environment where efficient and effective communication skills pay off big time. This is true not only in contact duration but in achieving key drivers of customer satisfaction. According to Marcus Buckingham, author of *First, Break All the Rules*, these are: availability, accuracy, partnership and advice. **Availability** wins when efficiency is present by allowing each agent to be more productive. **Accuracy** wins with first-call resolution—doing it right the first time means not having to do it over! **Partnership** occurs when the agent manages the contact and takes the caller through a clear and orderly path. The agent keeps the caller informed and uses information previously gathered to take the caller to the ultimate customer experience of **advice**. Think about it. *Without a feeling of partnership why would anyone take your advice?* Availability, accuracy, partnership and advice are best executed on a platform of communication efficiency.

Teach your agents to understand call flow and to recognize how to transition from one point to the next while confirming understanding and controlling the call. Call flow provides structure for the agent and for the caller. Many frontline agents in contact centers complain about long-winded callers. Try capturing ANY and ALL recordings where the phrase “to make a long story short” is heard. Listen carefully to discover where the call control was lost ... and if your agent is speaking these words, it is time for some remedial training.

We live in a world of “snippet” communication with posts from Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites. One has to wonder whether this phenomenon has crippled the human ability to communicate clearly beyond 140 characters. Regardless of today’s social communication structure, customer care remains a hot bed of *over-communicators* on both sides of the connection. It seems that the ability to communicate any form of complex information in a succinct manner has been forever compromised.

Frontline agents are often as guilty of over-communicating as callers. They confuse the caller, move at a pace only they understand, and jump from one topic to another. Some are unable or unwilling to listen to or confirm understanding of what the caller really needs or wants. This is exacerbated by the frontline’s adoption of the *Three Enemies of Communication* (according to Tony Robbins)... distortion, deletion and generalization. These communication enemies are socially learned behaviors.

In an effort to be efficient, and to perhaps meet any associated guidelines management has established, information is **distorted** from lack of listening. It is **deleted** based on what the agent believes to be important, and **generalized** based on what has occurred when handling other

**“NOT THAT THE STORY NEED BE LONG,
BUT IT WILL TAKE A LONG TIME TO MAKE IT SHORT.”**


—Henry David Thoreau

contacts. The crazy thing is that we may read these words and ask, “Isn’t a form of distortion, deletion and generalization actually a path toward efficiency?” The answer is NO! Efficiency is gained by using common knowledge and past experience to refine treatment of an individual caller’s needs. Efficiency is grounded in call-flow control that leads to partnership and advice. Deletion, distortion and generalization more likely lead to confusion and frustration.

“To make a long story short” also applies to coaching and management. Coaching must be specific and short-winded. If a coach ever uses this idiom, they ought to stop themselves in their tracks and regroup. Calibration exercises would better serve the front line if the coaches calibrated the best way to communicate coaching tips rather than simply calibrating scores.

As for management, efficient communication in reports and presentations is critical if you want to enjoy exposure at the executive level. Get to the point, provide supporting materials, frame the content in a context meaningful to your executive audience, and then... SHUT UP! If while in an executive meeting, you hear yourself say, “To make a long story short,” it will be a short stay and a long time until you are asked back!

And in off hours, if you hear yourself saying, “To make a long story short,” think about your audience. They may be thinking about ways to escape from you before your story is finished. I know... I have had the opportunity to be around people who simply cannot tell a story. They drift into details and often develop an entire substory before ever getting to their point. As I get older, I often hear my peers (and myself) “veering” off a story and not being able to find the way back. I guess that could be a blessing in a way.

“What was I talking about?” Oh yeah, to make a long story short... ugh! 

Kathleen Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm.

✉ kpeterson@powerhouse1.com

☎ (800) 449-9904
