

FACE THE MUSIC... CALL YOURSELF!

Does your music on hold reflect the company brand or the personal taste of the selector?

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According to TheFreeDictionary.com, “face the music” means to “confront unpleasantness, especially the consequences of one’s errors.” The precise origin of this idiom has been lost. Most references believe it “refers to a theater’s pit orchestra which an actor must face when he faces what can be a hostile audience.”

Well, the music I would like contact center leaders to face is their music on hold selections (announcements, messages, configurations, etc.) A recent encounter has made me realize that, in some cases, this particular element of the customer experience has become a real problem.

And speaking of hostile audiences, isn’t that what contact centers are often confronted with today? Does it help to take a potentially hostile consumer and “entertain” them with awful music? Hold music is intended to soothe and calm the caller and NOT be a reflection of the taste of the person who chose the music! Consumers today are often irritated that they have to call you at all, never mind be subjected to hold music and announcements that take the frustration of having to call you and escalate it to a level of hostility. It may be time to “face the music” that the consequence of poor choices in this arena is damage to the customer experience and the brand.

Here’s what happened to me recently to make me think more about this. I had to send a suitcase back to the manufacturer for repair; my wheel fell off! The company’s



website navigation was a pain in the butt so I called, hoping there would be a solution for shipping this good-sized roller bag. The short version is of my story is that the process was fraught with confusion and misinformation. I was told, “NO, you cannot have the outlet store handle the return (I learned later that this was untrue), and NO, we have no record of your repair order (also untrue).” It went on and on.

I was told that I would have to call consumer relations to try to figure out what happened to my repair order. I called and was treated to quite possibly the WORST hold experience I have ever had. And that is saying something.

What was so bad about it? Simple... the music! It was loud, grinding, rough rock ‘n’ roll, which sounded as if someone had put a teeny bopper’s play list on hold! It was a steady two minutes of hell... until finally the music was interrupted by the “Your call is important to us” message. In this case, it was a welcome 20-second relief from the awful music. I was subjected to two more rounds of this torture. Quite honestly, I was stunned by how inappropriate this selection of music was for this company’s brand.

The company is known as a “luxury brand.” It peddles very expensive suitcases, satchels and briefcases, all at a hefty price for a very well-made and durable product. I believed that the customers of this brand could not possibly appreciate this music and the agent I spoke with confirmed it!

When I commented on the music on hold as being the “worst I’ve ever heard,” she laughed and said, “Oh yes, we HEAR THAT ALL THE TIME.” When I asked whether the agent had told anyone, she responded with, “Oh yes, THEY know!” I wonder if the “THEY” includes the senior executives—those folks who craft strategic plans for providing customer experience excellence. I doubt it, because executives often remove themselves from anything as “operational” as the music on hold selection. This is just one more example of how the union of strategy and tactics in the contact center requires looking at ALL points of contact. The greetings, the music and the messaging on hold are at the entrance to your organization and shape your customer’s first impressions. While decisions around these elements appear to be tactical in nature, they are also strategic since they represent initial contact with the company’s brand.

Well that did it... THEY KNOW! They actually know and continue to subject callers to music they KNOW is an irritation. It is time for these folks to “face the music” and realize that this is a bad decision with consequences...

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a brand-damaging experience. Interestingly enough, the music on hold for this company's customer service department is classical. So somewhere someone knows that a more appropriate selection exists. I guess that, if you have to escalate to consumer relations, you have to "earn your way in" via tolerance for a lengthy delay and horrid music... something that turned six minutes on hold into an article!

Music is a known mood influencer. The process of choosing music needs to be contextualized within the customer experience elements and the brand with an understanding that this is actually NOT entertainment. Rather, it is an attempt to make the delay appear shorter so that callers will hang on longer. By playing soothing and "easy listening" music it is believed that caller tolerance for hold will increase and abandons will be reduced. It is often recommended that music on hold be instrumental; songs with words should be avoided. Just this morning, I called my doctor's office and the music on hold song was Macy Gray's version of "Why Didn't You Call Me." This is a great song, but just a bit

night-clubby for the music on hold at the doctor's office at 9 a.m. It appeared to be more a reflection of whoever made the selection than a reflection of the brand.

Contact centers today largely handle complex issues that require problem-solving. They deal with issues and problems too complex (or complicated) to be resolved without basic human interaction. The website couldn't fix it, the chat interaction couldn't fix it, the email communication couldn't fix it, etc. This may be one of the reasons the contact center audience is sometimes hostile; many consumers today resent the entire concept of having to call at all. So... it might be a good idea that when they do have to call... not to torture them while on hold! It is time to "face the music."

Call yourself. Listen to the music and the messaging. Is it a match to the brand and the customer experience? Keep in mind that this loop of music and your messages need attention. If you use marketing messages on hold, please don't let the system installers interrupt those well-crafted and professional messages with another message stating, "Your

call is important to us, etc." There is no need; callers KNOW they are still on hold. And finally, if you are using marketing messages, have the loop end at five to seven minutes and then "go to music." Once a caller has been on hold for more than five minutes, your marketing messages are falling on deaf ears.

Let me add one last comment about my poor repair order experience: It all could have been avoided and I never would have heard the awful hold music. If the website worked better, if processes were better architected, and if people had the information the caller needs, I would never have had to repeatedly call. So, "face the music," confront the unpleasantness and fix the situations that do damage to the experience and the brand.

Finally, your music shouldn't be an irritant; that is borderline negligent and definitely not a well-thought-out strategy. ☉



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