



## **6 Critical Lessons in Customer Service**

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Last month, my wife and I decided to celebrate our wedding anniversary in a way reminiscent of when we first got married—by taking week long driving trip with no plan. We knew we would need to start by driving somewhere, so we decided to go to Betty’s Pies, North of Duluth, MN, and then choose the next step from there. Big decisions are always easier on a stomach filled with pie!

Three adventure-filled days later, we arrived in Bayfield, WI where we needed a place to stay for two nights. After trying a couple of places that were already booked, we walked into Greunke’s—a place that promised food and lodging. We told the tall, lanky guy with the man-bun that we needed a room for two nights. He seemed confused and somewhat agitated about finding a room for both nights, but eventually, after looking at his paperwork explaining several options, offered their Studio room.

The room was a large, sprawling space that, though a bit tired-looking, would work just fine for two nights. I handed him the credit card, he booked the room, and we headed off to dinner. We were excited to be staying just across the street from the shuttle boat to Madeline Island, where we intended to spend the whole next day on rented bikes.

After a picture-perfect day on the island, we came back to our hotel room tired and needing a shower. We headed straight up to our room. The door was unlocked when we opened it, but everything looked like it had been straightened up and cleaned. Upon closer inspection, we realized that it was too clean—ALL of our stuff was gone, including suitcases, hanging clothes, and my guitar. The room had been stripped of our belongings!

I quickly made my way downstairs to the same guy in the man-bun standing behind the counter and blurted out to him that the door had been left open by the cleaners, and that all our stuff had been stolen! He gave me that same confused look I had seen the night before, and then, instead of offering apologies, accused me of leaving our stuff in the room that he had made VERY CLEAR was available for only ONE night! His staff had been forced to empty all of our stuff from the room when we failed to check out on time.

The ensuing conversation was civil and without expletives, but also without any admission on their part that they might have made a mistake or miscommunicated when booking us. He kept saying, “But, the receipt says it was for ONE night, and it was NOT available for the second night, so I could NOT have rented it to you!” After about 10 minutes of continued one-way dialogues that involved his mother (the owner or manager, I assumed), the man-bun guy, and a wait staff person, I decided it was time to retrieve our stuff and find a different lodging with better customer service orientation.

That’s when I discovered ‘the straw’ that pushed me over the edge. When removed from the room, our belongings had been literally stuffed into one large black trash bag—personal pillows, hanging clothes (that had been dry cleaned and pressed), toiletries, and snacks all balled up together. I was furious! I confronted man-bun’s mother about it, and she simply said, “Well, we had guests coming in and you folks had not checked out by 11, so we had to get everything out of the room.” I asked why no one had called my cell number that was on the registration form to determine why we had not checked out, and I got another of those blank stares I had become

accustomed to from her and her son. No apology, no offer to compensate me in some way for the inconvenience or miscommunication. We drove away.

So, what did I learn from this adventure in Bayfield that can be helpful to you as you try to manage or influence customer service in your organization? Here are six critical lessons that form the foundation of great customer experiences (hint: they are the opposite of what I experienced at Greunke's):

- **Understand the need fully.** Listen deeply, ask clarifying questions, and summarize what you think you have heard to insure that you, in fact, understand the customer's needs completely. My wife and I needed a room for two nights, and that need did not change from when we first expressed it.
- **Assert your limitations clearly.** Let the customer know how your internal policies, lack of resources, etc. create boundaries on what you can and cannot provide to meet the needs expressed. Make certain that the customer understands and accepts these limits. In our case, the management of Greunke's never said in our first interaction, "I'm sorry, but we do not have a room for two nights."
- **Communicate problems quickly.** At about 10:45 the next morning, when it was clear that my wife and I were not intending to be out of the room by 11, the front desk could have called my cell and talked to me or left a message to communicate the dilemma they faced in getting the room ready for a guest who had reserved the room in advance. The sooner we were informed about the issue, the more help we could have provided in resolving it.
- **Assume positive intentions initially.** This is crucial, and it is the point at which the Greunke experience began to really unravel. From my interaction with them later when we returned from the island, it was clear that they assumed: *we had purposely NOT checked out, when we knew that we were supposed to check out; we had intentionally stuck them with handling our stuff, which was totally inconsiderate on our part.* This apparent assumption on their part colored every action they subsequently took, including throwing our pressed, hanging clothes into a garbage bag and dumping everything on a dirty storage closet floor.
- **Accept responsibility readily.** From their perspective, the only responsibility they had was to fill out the room form correctly, charge the credit card, and get our stuff out of the room before 11 a.m. They apparently accepted no obligation to listen to what we wanted, assert their inability to fulfill our request, communicate with us when they identified a problem, assume positive intention on our part, or accept a share of the responsibility for the miscommunication. They did offer to call around to help us find other lodging, but at that point, it was too little, too late.
- **Compensate for inconvenience generously.** After we had phoned a nearby bed and breakfast to stay the second night and had moved our stuff into the car, I went back to the counter to return my room key (which they had not requested from me) and to see if, perhaps, they would offer some compensation for our inconvenience. Nope, the owner/manager just took the key and looked away, in a clear non-verbal signal that we were done.

Stuff happens all the time in customer interactions, but these critical lessons should help you resolve things in a way that keeps customers coming back. The one question that underlies all customer interactions is this one, "What can I do to make sure this customer interaction goes well?" Asking this question at every stage of customer communication leads you to each of these six critical lessons.