

**Service  
Rapport**



**VS.**

**Service  
Fairness**

No doubt about it, customer focus is important whether you are in the service business or the manufacturing business. But there are slightly different twists to how that customer focus works whether for a service or a manufacturing business.



**OUT OF  
STOCK**

We know, and the research confirms, that attitudes and behaviors of Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) are crucial and stand out in the service industry. The challenge for CSRs who handle product complaints is that the cause of the complaint may have little to do with the CSRs' behavior or attitudes. If the CSR is not empowered to handle a problem with a product, CSR behavior and attitudes may have limited impact on customer satisfaction.

I recently ordered a new outdoor sofa from a high-end furniture online catalog brand. While it was branded with their name, the sofa was produced by an external company. I ordered the sofa at an excellent price and was willing to put up with a two-month delay for delivery. When it didn't arrive, I called the company and asked when I could expect delivery. I was told that it was backordered and that I would have the sofa by late July, in another 4 months. No one had contacted me with this information.

The CSR offered to cancel my order. I didn't want that, especially after I had purchased an expensive outdoor cover for the sofa from the same catalog store — which had arrived. I also had given away my other outdoor sofa and chairs. And I had ordered a beautiful sun umbrella to match the new sofa. Again, ordered from the same online store.

I was given an apology for the "inconvenience" I had experienced. "So, what would you like to do?" queried the CSR. "Cancel, or wait?" I told the CSR that I found this offer unsatisfactory and I wanted to speak with someone else. Again, apologies were given, and she offered me a \$25 coupon to use the next time I purchased something. I have several of these \$25 to \$50 coupons and have never used them. The coupon deadlines for use make them very unfriendly, and I was transferred to a supervisor, where I had to go through the same explanation and receive the same apology.

The second supervisor offered me a \$50 coupon and suggested I talk with her manager.

The manager was more experienced at this type of situation. She checked records that the other two CSRs did not have access to and told me that the sofa was not available. It was sold out, not back ordered.

She offered me a \$75 coupon. At this point, I told her about my newly released book, *A Complaint Is a Gift*, which has been a best-seller. No one seemed to understand that we were almost at summertime when the new sofa would be used on my patio and, to make matters worse, my old sofa had been thrown out. The manager told me that they could never guarantee which items were still available. I checked and there is nothing on their web page indicating this.

She asked me what I would like her to do. I told her that I wanted to be made "whole." That is, I wanted a replacement sofa and I preferably I wanted it fast. She hesitated and asked me if I could give her another two days to check with someone else up the line about what they could do.

This is the other side of the service recovery story. The CSRs, all the way up to the manager, were not at fault in this situation. And apologies for inconvenience would not fix the issue hoping I would continue shopping with them. I love their products. Their outdoor furniture withstands just about any rain and freezing temperatures — for years. But to experience their durability, you must possess the product!

CSRs who handle these types of complaints are not responsible for committing the service failures. But customers, however, including me, will see them as representatives of their company. This is where the research on fairness raises its ugly head. Even if not their fault, and even if there is little that attitudes and behaviors can do to overcome a situation that is unfair, customers still expect fair treatment. Customers want not only positive service treatment, but they also want to be treated fairly. And being treated fairly becomes more important about the complaint handling process in such a situation as I experienced.

This type of research on fairness is called distributive justice. Did the customer receive a fair economic outcome after they complained? So far I haven't. What would it take in my situation?

Personally, I think they owe me another sofa. If the sofa they offer meets my needs, I would even pay for it in excess of what I paid for the original sofa. I know I won't get the one that was backordered unless a miracle happens. And they certainly can't substitute a poorer quality sofa even if they refund me the difference between my order and what they are offering.

To make me feel that I have received a fair economic outcome, they are going to have to live up their founding principles. This company is recognized as the leader of catalog shopping for homes of a high-level revenue. They focus on six founding principles; the two that are most relevant to my experience with them is to "engage in business practices that benefit everyone involved" and "provide our customers with long-term value in every product they purchase." I am sure that if the sofa arrived in bad shape, they would send a replacement product that was perfect. This wasn't my situation.

The question is whether I am willing to do business with them again. There is no doubt that their CSRs are mostly skilled professionals, but no one I spoke with wanted to make sure I was treated fairly given my circumstances. Certainly, I was treated politely. Let's see if I receive justice after my communication with them. If an organization does not take responsibility for selling more product than was available, blaming that outside company typically doesn't work in the customer's eyes. They were the ones, after all, advertising the sofa in their catalog.

What's the lesson in my example? If you want to retain your customers, note when they use the word "fair." Listen to them say, "I don't think this was fair." That's a very strong clue that you must do more than merely achieve rapport, be friendly, and engage in positive service behaviors. You must take the step to do what is necessary to make your customers feel they were treated fairly — if you want to keep them.

It's particularly true when the customer tells you she happens to have a best-selling book out on the market called, "A Complaint Is a Gift, How to Learn from Critical Feedback and Recover Customer Loyalty." Will it cost you a little bit? Probably, but then the customer will no doubt give you another chance as a customer.