

When Your Customers Complain, Give Up Your Need to be Right

Janelle Barlow. December 2022



I had an experience in a hotel that emphasized, yet again, how we can learn a great deal about customer service simply by observing what happens around us.

This experience was a minor example, but it made me look carefully at how the strong human need to be "right" can result in something less than excellent customer service. The need to be right is emotional. Service providers attempting to fulfill their personal emotional needs can negatively impact the customer. Even when you are right, proving you are correct is often felt by customers to be at their emotional expense.

I needed to quickly reach someone to obtain information about where a meeting would be held in the hotel. I knew that several people registered in the hotel had this information. So, I called the front desk and asked to be connected to one of their guest rooms. I was transferred from the operator to the front desk and only then to the person I needed to reach. However, since he was not in his room, I only got voice mail, which took time I didn't have.

To save me time, in case everyone else I knew who was staying in the hotel were also not in their rooms, I decided to go directly to the hotel lobby and ask for help at the front desk rather than be put through this slow process.

When I reached the front desk, all the clerks were occupied with guests. A bellman standing nearby asked me if he could help. I explained my situation, and he told me I could reach the front desk directly and be connected to a guest room without going through the operator. I explained that when I called the front desk, the operator answered the line and I was only then connected to the front desk clerk.

"You're wrong," said the bellman, going to the telephone at the front desk to "prove" that he could reach the front desk directly. He was a little red-faced when the phone rang directly to the operator.



The need to be right and then to prove it is a deeply seated human need. Perhaps, it emerges from our impulse to survive. However, the psychoanalyst, Karen Horney, identifies it as a "neurotic need." We can survive very well, whether or not this need is met. Whoever was right in this situation was not a significant issue for either my or the bellman's life. But, as a customer service statement, it set the wrong tone.

The important issue for this blog message is that this man felt compelled to demonstrate that his picture of reality was correct and mine was not. For whatever reason, his need to show me he was right became the paramount statement that was communicated.

How can service providers overcome this human, but neurotic need to prove they are right?

First, from the customer's point of view, any attempt on the service provider's part to prove themselves right will probably result in the customer feeling scolded because they were wrong.

Second, if service providers want to be able to control their need to be correct, they must work on checking this human tendency in other parts of their lives. Expecting to be able to turn off the competitive feeling of proving one's self right just at work is difficult.

How can you wean yourself away from the need to make yourself right at the expense of your client? Here are three simple recommendations:

1. Notice every situation, whether at work or home, where you feel the urge to prove that someone else is wrong. Every time this happens, ask yourself if acting on this urge will impact your relationship with that person.
2. Ask yourself whether it makes any difference as to who is right and who is wrong. It may be a complete non-issue. Focus on the benefits to be gained from seeing things from the customer's point of view.
3. If the situation is critical and the other person needs to be informed about something, ask yourself whether there is a constructive way to help the other person without demeaning them.

In my situation, how could the bellman have better handled himself when he walked to the phone to "prove" that he was correct? Here are some possibilities.

- He could have refrained from challenging my information and focused on helping meet my needs.
- He could have told me that this is not how the system is supposed to work but that he appreciated learning about it so he could fix it. He might then have asked me if it was okay if he checked it himself.
- At a minimum, if he desperately needed to demonstrate that his perception was correct, he could have waited until I left the area to check for himself.

The critical point to remember is that even if you are correct, you win few battles when you defeat your clients — when they complain.