The secret to keeping your sanity in customer service

Business, Marketing

When I first began my design agency, I couldn't fall asleep without thinking about the first hour of the next morning.

Being a growing agency while trying to manage safe team growth and internal administrative work meant that we were solely focused on giving our clients the very best service and getting their projects delivered on time, every time.

Doing these things was standard operating procedure.

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After all, those are the things you have to do to continue trading successfully over the long-term as a service provider.

It's why we have an agency today at all.

These weren't the reasons that I couldn't sleep at night though. Nor was it the reasons that I dreaded the first hour of every single morning.

The reason that I worried about that first hour was simple. I was anxious beyond belief about the customer service requests that would inevitably have filled my inbox overnight.

Each morning I woke up to around 90 new emails, compounded by 30 more arriving between 8 a. m. and 10 a. m. each day.

Thinking back, it wasn't anything to be concerned about. It was just follow-up requests, bug fixes and additions to project scopes following a launch.

The problem was that I'd placed unreasonable sanctions on myslef for dealing with customer service requests like these.

I assumed that if I didn't get it done instantly then customers would look elsewhere or be unhappy with the service.

Honestly, I ran myself into a burnout largely because of it in 2012.

Since then, I've gone on to build other businesses outside of the agency as well as host a globally successful - all without having the same kind of burnout and while sleeping better than I have ever before.

So, what changed?

I didn't realize it, but for a long time, I was just like the business people that I didn't understand at the time.

I was the guy staying late at the studio, getting things done. I was the one doing favors for clients because I was afraid of them leaving.

And you guessed it, I was the one frustratingfamilyand friends by not being able to switch off.

Yet the demands kept rolling in. I couldn't understand why it wouldn't stop. I was staying on top of it and barely treading water.

The impact that had on my business was that I didn't have the time to work on the development of it, instead I was simply allowing clients to dictate how my days were run and what I worked on at any given time.

Then something changed.

For the first time in a long time, I came across the famous Albert Einstein quote - " The definition of insanity is doing something over and over again and expecting a different result."

After that, I starting measuring my time more closely and realized that sure enough, I was spending all of my time firefighting, and it was the fear of what I was going to have to deal with the next day that caused me to dread showing up to my own business.

After that, something startling happened to me - I realized what I was missing.

Empathy.

I was treating contact from my valued clients, the very same clients who I was so afraid of losing, as issues that I simply had to get through.

Worse, I was blaming those clients for my inability to empathize with them, and look at these requests for what they were - people asking for help.

Customer service 101, and I was failing at it, despite being so worried about failing at it.

If my new approach to empathizing was the catalyst for change, the tactics that I implemented were equally simplistic in approach.

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What I realized was that if I was reaching out to a company for support myself, it was because I was frustrated.

I was either frustrated about not knowing something, frustrated about not being able to do something or frustrated about a perceived mistreatment at the hands of this company.

Either way, I was purely and simply frustrated in that moment.

Taking that a step further, I looked inward and realized that a lot of the dread around facing all of these customer service enquiries each and every morning stemmed from me assuming that everyone has the same level of knowledge as I do in my field.

I was being *so* naive and the more I looked at it, the more I began to identify that the never ending customer service emails were actually all grouped into a very small number of categories - support, new work and perceived complaints.

And usually, the latter category of perceived complaints was rarely that. It was actually just a frustrated customer looking for support and firing off that email in a fit of desperation.

I think we've all done that.

At this point, I had another realisation. I was assuming that unless I reacted or responded immediately to someone with a resolution, they would be

unhappy - or even angry at me and my company -- causing them to look elsewhere.

Forcing myself to think like a customer, I began to understand how irrational I was being.

After all, when was the last time that I left a company because they didn't instantly respond to me and more so, respond to me instantly with a resolution.

What we all actually value as customers is acknowledgement -- being heard.

These days, when discussing customer service with my teams, I often use the analogy of a team member taking their car into the repair shop for some work carrying out.

If I take my car to the repair shop, and I'm told that the car will be back to me today, I expect it to be back today. But the unexpected happens and often, a part isn't available immediately, resulting in my car being in the shop overnight.

Consider, if the mechanic ignored this, chose to close up for the day and headed home for the evening without telling me. Well, then I'd be extremely frustrated. I'd then call up saying that I needed my car, and this wasn't acceptable.

But imagine that the mechanic puts himself in my position and calls me up ahead of time. He explains that the part required isn't available until the

next day and asks whether it is alright for my car be ready by the following day at lunch time.

Would I still need the car? Would I still be frustrated? No, it's highly doubtful that I would.

Customer service is about the customer maintaining a level of control.

In the mechanic example, by ignoring and not informing about the delays, the implied control lies with the mechanic, which will frustrate any customer.

In the example, where the mechanic puts herself in the customer's position, and even though the outcome is the same, the implied control is with the customer. After all, the mechanic asked whether it'd be ok or not, even though the part isn't available regardless.

By understanding that control factor, I was able to begin placing focus on the right kind ofcommunicationto remove the dread of turning up to support requests every morning. Applying the control factor logic and being uber clear with communications, specifically that very first response to a customer request resulted in me being able to plan customer service into my schedule.

The best part? Both my customers and I are happier now.

Remember, we all just want to be heard and to know that we're being cared for.

Related:

People rarely need a resolution immediately.

As a solopreneur, you will inevitably need to deal with some kind of customer support - after all, it's what keeps the relationship alive -- but equally, you need to make sure that it doesn't rule your day or dictate your week.

Take control by giving your customers the control that they want. Be clear, empathetic, timely, and set realistic expectations with your first response. And get some sleep.