

Mad as Hell! A Revolution for Customer Service

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In the 1976 movie "Network," aging news anchor Howard Beale yells, "I'm Mad as Hell and I'm Not Going to Take It Anymore!" and begins a revolution in broadcast television. Beale urged the masses to throw open their windows and chant that mantra to signal to the network executives that a revolution was underway, and that people were reclaiming their lives from the media that took it away.

Today's revolution isn't about television. It's about customer service. Customers are tired of phone jail, waiting on hold, multiple transfers, entering and re-entering personal information, and of being blamed for asking for a reasonable level of service. They're mad as hell that they are less important than the interests of the corporation and they're not going to take it anymore!

The writing's on the wall

At first people joked about poor customer service and poked fun of awful IVR menus. Remember six or seven years ago, the National Discount Brokers' IVR menu option: "to hear a duck quack, press 7?" Interestingly, NDB calls spiked from around 5,000 to over 2 million a week as a result of the duck quack IVR option. Who today hasn't chuckled at the Citibank commercial where the hapless man's kitchen is burning down as he tries to maneuver his way through an unfriendly IVR system?

If you haven't seen the Saturday Night Live skit of "Julie" (a speech recognition customer service agent) on a blind date, check it out. And most recently, Paul English's "IVR Cheat Sheet" on his website gethuman.com has become a battle cry to revolt against poorly designed IVR systems by finding quick (and too often hidden) ways to reach a representative. So what gives? Why now?

It's just business – or is it?

Spurred on by the success of web self service, many companies sought other ways to save money – fewer agents, more menus, additional functions, added charges to the consumer, and outsourced cheaper labor. From a customer's perspective, this drive to reduce costs means that they have to work harder than the companies do, and that the burden to do business becomes theirs, not ours. They get stuck in IVR jail or transferred three times before reaching someone who can help. Calls come into the call center because customers can't figure out how to do what they want to do on the website.

Companies want consumers' business, but are perceived as providing less and less in return. How can we ensure that our customers don't feel like they've been given the shaft before we lose them for good? In today's world consumers have many choices, and studies show that one bad experience in one channel is all it takes for them to jump ship and go to a competitor.

Of course, we do value our customers. But how can we use our people, our processes, and our technologies in ways to make them feel valued?

Studies show (and customers agree) that when self-service works well, it's invisible and people will use it happily. When customers have a positive self service experience, they believe it takes less time for them to complete tasks than it actually does. We'd never consider taking away ATM machines or airport kiosks. It's when self service gets in the way, or is designed for anyone other than the customer, that it's a problem. How often do we hear our customers say, "Don't force me to listen to phone menus for over a minute, enter in four discrete pieces of information including my 16-digit account number and SSN, make me wait for a representative, and then have the rep ask me for all of that information again!"

So what can you do?

Fortunately, there is a lot you can do, and right now. Here are a few questions to ask and steps to take to get things moving in the right direction.

When was the last time you really talked to your customers about service? Not just surveys at the end of a phone menu or the perfunctory quarterly surveys that companies mail, but holding focus groups, web chats, or other opportunities for your customers to talk to you about what they'd like their experience to be when they contact you. Involve your front line representatives in these discussions too; they know better than anyone else in your company what your customers want. Unless call center processes and web and IVR applications are built around the customer from the ground up, you'll miss the mark every time.

Additionally, look at how you draw the customer experience from a strategic perspective:

- Do you have a customer service strategy that aligns with corporate goals?
- Is your self service strategy (including segmentation) clear?

A good (and often eye-opening) exercise is to call into your IVR or log onto your website, and evaluate your self service from your customer's perspective. Examine every point of contact to make sure that it's customer-centric and consistent. Ask these questions:

- Is it easy for our customers to reach us, or do they have to jump through hoops to do so?
- Does our website look and feel like our IVR? (It should.)
- Do we use the same language on our self service applications as our representatives do when they speak with our customers?
- Are our applications easy to navigate and use?
- Are our self service applications designed from our customers' point of view, or are they designed based on our internal organization, work silos, and skills groups?
- Are menus laden with legalese or jargon that only we understand?

Finally, look at what you're measuring. Is your emphasis on shaving seconds off talk times and IVR containment? How do these kinds of measurements trickle down to your customers' experience? Figure out what your strategy is and how you want your customers to feel. Then realign your metrics to measure progress toward those goals.

Make sure you're listening

These are a few first steps that will generate some quick hits and some longer term projects to help improve accessibility to your customers, increase customer loyalty, and enhance their experiences with you. With all of the noise generated by the "IVR Cheat Sheet" and other angry cries, now is a great time to put yourself in your customers' shoes to make their experiences better. Customers are mad as hell, and they're telling us what they want. Let's be sure to listen, and give it to them.

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