

SMART MARKETING:

The Wise Trolls Under the Bridge, Part 1

by Scott Hornstein

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management

I don't get it, but there seems to be a line of thinking that customer care is just about the call center. You know, the trolls who sit under the bridge—the lowest-paid employees who spend the most time with customers.

Each professional troll is trained, measured, and rewarded for delivering a process of customer care. Right? Just send me the reports.

As Dion once said about Sue: People, let me put you wise...

There's a big universe out there. How are customers going to tell the difference between competitors? It might be because of price, but then we're all commodities. I prefer they distinguish on the basis of value—how well your product or service actually meets the customer's need.

Being a customer myself, a good measure of that is how I am treated. Customer care has the potential to become, and to be wielded as, a powerful competitive differentiator.

To do so requires that customer care become and be implemented as a strategic product. Everyone, from the C-suite to the cafeteria must see this as their mission, and in return, enjoy both measurement and reward. Or it falls short. Let's start with an example, followed by some recommendations.

In articles, books, and speeches, I have held as best of breed a large insurance company dedicated to servicing the armed forces. Why? Because their strategies are consistent with a focus on lifetime value—on viewing the customer not as a series of lines and transactions, but as a human living their life, with jobs, homes, family, and the attendant messes. I am a 25-year customer.

One day, I received a sharply written form letter telling me, in no uncertain terms, the company was

not renewing a line of insurance for my family. It also told me I had no recourse, not for all the tea in China.

My immediate reactions:

Betrayal. How could a company I have trusted for so long talk to me like that? I was a member yesterday. Today you're kicking me out?

I am at risk. Suddenly the umbrella of protection over my family was (seemingly) gushing.

I called the person who sent me the letter and he quickly got back to me. Here's essentially what he said: "Nope, no mistake. Sorry the letter seemed harsh; the state makes us do it. And by the way, you should feel good—I'm a senior underwriter, and most companies wouldn't ever let you talk to me."

I wrote a letter to the president.

Almost four weeks later I received a call from another senior underwriter. "So what did you want to talk to [the company] about?" she asked.

I asked if she was responding to my letter. "I didn't know there was a letter," she replied."

That was the highlight of the conversation.

The point of all this is that neither of these highly placed executives did the three basic things that any self-respecting troll should know and do, because the latter group is trained, measured, and rewarded for these exact behaviors.

1. **Take action.** There is a school of thought that says let the irate cool off. Time will ease the emotions. I think that's a lot of crap. Instant gratification works best—that's direct marketing 101. And don't forget Internet 101: Negative reviews are fun to send to all your friends, and are usually passed on.

2. **Set reasonable objectives.** My guess is both of these execs had some hazy idea they could convince

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me that they had made a good and righteous decision.

Perhaps an important objective might have been to salvage something of the relationship. If not business, at least good will. Why not offer to help me figure out what I need to do now to repair the hole in the umbrella? That would fit my specific need exactly at the right moment, and from a senior executive, no less.

3. Engage in pre-call planning. If you know you're calling an irate, how can you not read the file before you dial? It's like lighting a match to see how much gas is in the tank.

Please, think through the call. What are the possible paths the call could take? How will you defuse an escalating situation and stay in control? What should you be listening for? What resources might you need?

Both the company and the customer got short-changed because the tools of customer care implementation were never passed around: "Somebody else does that job." I don't think so.

Otherwise, toss 'em back to the trolls. I bet they do a great job. ■



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