

Complaint Management

(aka Emotions Management)

I sat in (yet another) airport the other day and a gentleman was sitting next to me talking on his cell phone to an airline customer service representative. You can call this eavesdropping; but, more accurately, I would have had to move from my coveted seat with an electric outlet to avoid overhearing him. So, yes, I overheard everything he was saying.

It appears his departure gate was not the one printed on his boarding pass. Now, seasoned travelers know that one needs to check the airport monitors to see if the departure gate has changed. But, my seat mate apparently didn't know that. He missed his flight by waiting at the wrong gate. Now he was calling the airline to complain. His basic message: The airline should have had the correct information on his boarding pass.

The airline apparently was offering to put him on the next available flight, but that was not satisfying him. They also were offering him some vouchers (not sure whether for future flight discounts or in-flight services). But that was not satisfying him.

He kept asking to speak to someone in charge. That got him transferred to someone else. Guess what? He had to explain his situation all over again. And, this new representative was not saying or doing anything different than what the prior one did. He asked to speak to someone else in charge.

So, he was transferred to yet another supervisor, and he had to explain his story again. When he talked to this new representative, as well as the others, he kept saying, "That's not good enough!"

After listening to this drama for about 45 minutes, it dawned on me what he really wanted. He just wanted someone in authority to whom he could vent, and who could really empathize with him, to say how sorry they were and they knew how frustrating it must be in his situation. Having heard only half the conversation, I could only guess what the airline was saying. But there was nothing I heard that indicated he was getting that type of response. He was not a happy traveler.

Did the airline bear responsibility for the gate change? Probably not. Was it his responsibility to check the monitor? Probably so.

If this traveler had received a customer satisfaction survey from the airline and it asked him to rate his experience, he probably would have given the airline very low marks. But what would he be rating? From the airline's perspective, low marks would probably be seen as unfair – after all, they were offering to

place him on the next flight and offered vouchers of some sort, when in fact they had no or little blame for him missing his flight. What else could they have done? They may even have dismissed the situation as one where you can't please everyone.

So, would his rating be valid? Overall, of course it would. It doesn't matter whose fault it was. It doesn't matter that even he was to blame. The airline representatives just seemed to miss the point – that he wanted to vent and he wanted someone to empathize. He would not have used the word empathize, however. Likely he would have used words like "treated me like another human being," or "put themselves in my shoes," or "really cared about me." In other words, connected with him on an emotional level.

And I would ask you, how many times have you called a customer service rep, hung up after the call, and said to yourself, "Why did I bother? They don't care."

But let's look at the question again of whether the customer satisfaction survey would have been valid – that is, measuring what it is intended to measure. A lingering question is whether the airline customer satisfaction survey had any questions that would have addressed his needs for venting and someone to empathize. Would they have had questions that asked whether the rep cared about you, whether the rep treated you as a friend in need, or anything close? From all the CSat surveys I have seen, I would bet, "No." Without such questions, our airline passenger might have instead scored the service reps low on, e.g., "listened to my needs." In fact, the reps likely were listening, they just weren't getting it in terms of how they responded and managed the situation. And, the real customer feedback, the data from which the airline presumably acts upon, would be lost without the right questions having been asked.

All of the above points to the need for customer experience professionals to ensure that CSat surveys of any kind address emotions management in the complaint handling experience. You may be doing this. But, are you sure you are asking the right questions?

Hansa has honed capabilities in customer experience management and the design of customer surveys. We have proprietary techniques geared toward fully understanding the customer experience, the customer journey, and emotions mapping. If you would like to explore how your organization can uncover opportunities to enhance your customer experience, please contact us.

