

# Communication - Tell 'em often and tell 'em straight

By Cheryl Crumb

There are an infinite number of opportunities for service providers to get into trouble with their customers... not listening, making assumptions, failing to meet promises, mishandling breakdowns, getting defensive... The list goes on and on and on.

This article addresses the mistake we make when we don't design and follow a proactive communication strategy as part of our execution plan with our customers.

Let's consider the following. You're a sales representative for the XYZ Company. You're working with your customer, Mr. Green. You've been masterful. You've conveyed genuine respect and caring, identified what your customer is looking for, offered information and alternatives, and made a commitment of some action. You've left Mr. Green with an expectation of what he will receive when the solution is in place. This expectation includes the quality of the product and the quality of the service.

Your agreed-upon solution is one that is not available at the moment. It might be out of stock or require customization or be located in another shop.

The above is a bear trap Moment of Truth. Our natural server tendency is to move on to another customer situation and let Mr. Green move off our radar screen. Let's look at it from Mr. Green's perspective. A promise has been made to him. Weeks go by without hearing from his erstwhile service provider. Mr. Green, who has been the victim of past broken promises from other suppliers, becomes anxious with the lack of contact. His imagination goes wild, and he concocts nightmarish endings. Frantically he starts to barrage the XYZ Company: "How's it going?" "Will it be ready?" Already, the positive feelings he had of the sales experience are shifting, not because of what the sales rep did, but because of what the sales rep did not do.

**HE DID NOT INITIATE FREQUENT COMMUNICATION WITH THE CUSTOMER.**

Remember the equation: the longer the customer is without information, the higher his level of anxiety. The greater the level of customer anxiety, the more likely he will be to increase his level of micromanagement of the service provider.

How does the service provider prevent this anxiety, micromanagement and resulting

distrust? By keeping Mr. Green on the radar screen and in the loop.

Let's talk about what we customers need to hear to maintain a healthy blood pressure reading. Call it the magic of 3's. Tell your customer on a regular basis:

1. The status of the promise.
2. The breakdowns
3. The actions you're taking to deal with those breakdowns

Let's look at each one in depth.

Factor #1 - There are three possible answers to "How is this project going?". It's either on schedule, ahead of target, or behind. Life throws enough curveballs at us, that option 3 occurs far too frequently. Dealers miss their commitments, borders are closed, paperwork gets lost. The temptation is to hide the bad news from the customer... and cross our fingers that the plan will eventually come together. Bad idea!

That leads us to factor #2 - share breakdowns. Let's think of a breakdown as a



problem that puts the original promise in jeopardy. Contrary to the typical closed kimono approach, excellent service providers share breakdowns with their customers, those that have actually happened, and ones they anticipate could happen. Why would we beg for trouble? Honesty is a key ingredient of trust, and if customers later find out that we were withholding information, their crankiness converts to switching suppliers.

Even when they do share breakdowns, most service providers stop here. The result is that a breakdown, left hanging and dangling, sounds suspiciously like an excuse. And nothing tops the customer's hate list like an excuse. An excuse conveys the metamessage:

"It's not my fault, and I'm not responsible".

This leaves us to communicating factor #3 - actions. By sharing actions we've taken to overcome the breakdown as well as actions we plan to take, we're conveying that we have the situation under control.

Nobody likes to receive bad news. What's worse is no news! So, proactively keep your customer updated no matter what.

Let's listen to a communication update from a superstar: "Mr. Green, this is Fred from the XYZ Company. I'm calling to give you an update on the projection TV that you ordered. We promised that you would have it by the end of May in time for your wife's surprise 40th birthday party. While that date is still feasible, we've experienced several breakdowns that I want to share with you. The manufacturer has temporarily stopped distribution of this model because of a performance issue with the digital convergence chip set, which may deteriorate over time. Rather than wait for complaints to come from the marketplace, the manufacturer

is voluntarily recalling the model and upgrading the components. I'd like to tell you what I'm doing. I'm in daily contact with the manufacturing site, and they tell me that they expect to be back in production by the end of next week. If this occurs as per the plan, we will have no trouble for our end of May delivery. If they encounter unforeseen problems, I see two options that we can pursue. First, I can get you a display model of this TV from another dealer that you can use for the actual party. Because it will have the questionable part, we will replace the TV when the

new version is available. Another possibility is to offer you a comparable product from another manufacturer. While it has a slightly higher price, I will provide it to you at our already-agreed-upon price. You don't have to make a decision yet, but I would like you to consider these options. I'm faxing to you the details of several other brands. I will call you weekly with more status updates. What day of the week works best for you? I'm sorry, Mr. Green, that you're feeling this anxiety. These actions will get us the TV you need in time for the big event. Is there anything else you would like me to do in the meantime?"

Keep your promises, be in action, and be proactive. When you keep communicating you'll keep your customer.