

Simon Says... "I would like..."

By Cheryl Crumb

I'm continually reminded that service is a game. Unfortunately, the problem is that most people don't know the rules of the game, let alone that they're playing a game. A game always needs to have a purpose, like "to make the experience a richer one for everyone involved". Richer can include tangibles and intangibles, money, goods, enjoyment, laughter, greater possibilities for the future....

Once we understand the game's objective, we need to understand the rules. Children are great at this. They know they can't take three steps forward until Simon Says So; they know that when their token lands on the snake, they slither backwards; they know that when they are tagged they are out. We adults, on the other hand, have forgotten the concept of rules. We think that we can march ahead regardless of Simon's instructions or claim the game board no matter what the role of the dice. Let's look at our adult expectations in the game of selling and buying. Earlier this week my husband contacted my computer guru because our printer decided it didn't like the computer's instructions any more. Let's eavesdrop in on their Friday, 11 a.m. phone conversation:

Rob (husband): "So, Rick, my computer needs your tender-loving-care. The printer won't work. Can you come over?"

Rick (guru): "I'm in Mississauga now, but I'll try to get right over after I finish here."

Rob: "Great, see you then."

Stop action. Do any observers out there see any potential problems? What do you think Rob's expectations are? What do you think Rick thought he was committing to?

Resume action. Rob had wanted to leave the house to do the food shopping, but he didn't want to miss Rick. So, he waited and waited. A mathematical formula applies in service: anger and anxiety are in direct proportion to the length of time a customer is out of contact with his or her service provider. 1 p.m. 2 p.m. 3 p.m. 4 p.m. At 4:30 p.m., there's a knock at the door. Who greeted our traveling computer guru?

Not my normally at-ease, friendly husband. Instead there was a raving savage wearing Rob's clothing and sporting his goatee that pounced on the unsuspecting technician.

So, what happened? Both players were unaware of the game and rules. Rob thought he was making a request, but he didn't know that a request is a linguistic act, and there are three cardinal rules about making requests. Rick thought he was making a response, but he didn't understand the expectations behind the request and his response fell outside of the rules of responding.

Let's start with a request. For it to be "valid", "legal", and within the rules, it must do the following: (1) state the "conditions of satisfaction"; (2) share the background behind the request; and (3) state the time and the rationale behind the time. If the request had existed as a "legal linguistic move", the conversations might have sounded like:

Rob (husband):

"Rick, I would like you to come over to the house today to look at the interface between my computer and my printer. For the past two days, I haven't been able to print. I have a big project due by Monday at noon that requires me to be able to print a 50-page report. Right now it's 11 a.m. Cheryl and I are going out tonight at 6:30 p.m. and we'll be away for the weekend.

I also have to do some grocery shopping and hit the beer store today. I'd like the computer to be operable before we leave tonight. So, can you get here by noon?"

Stop action again. The above request is now legal. It doesn't have to be reasonable or possible, it just has to contain the conditions, background and time. It is the beginning of expectation-setting and the beginning of negotiating.

Rick's job as service provider is to first ensure that he understands the request completely. If he feels he doesn't, he should ask questions to gain more clarity. In refining the request, Rick might have asked, "What changed between when it was working and when it wasn't?" "Is Cheryl's computer able to print with that printer?" "How much time will

you need to shop this afternoon?" "Do you want me in the house while you're out shopping?" "When will you be returning?"

Next in our service board game is the "response". There are only four valid or legal responses that a provider can give: (1) a promise to do everything asked in the specified time frame; (2) a commit-to-commitment with a time given when a reply will be forthcoming; (3) a counter-offer; or (4) a decline, which is a promise to not do something. A decline is to be treated as the response of last resort. Let's examine the multitude of illegal, against-the-rules responses: "I'll try....I'll do my best....Hopefully, I'll be able to do it....If I don't run into problems, I'll do it....(Silence)....Maybe....." These latter weasel-words are guaranteed to cause problems, because they cause an imbalance in the customer-provider perception. Customers judge us on the results; we judge ourselves on our intent.

So, if Rick couldn't commit with integrity to being here at noon, he could have utilized the following legal responses:

Commit-to-commitment: Let me call Sean and see what his schedule is. I'll call you back in 15 minutes so we can talk further.

Counter-offer "A": I have to be in Mississauga until at least 3:30 p.m. Why don't you go shopping now, get the beer chilling in the fridge and I'll see you at 4:30 p.m. You can leave the key with me, I'll lock up, and leave it with your neighbour.

Counter-offer "B": Sean can be here at 2 p.m. You can go out shopping before or after he arrives. He and I can be in phone contact if we have to be.

Counter-offer "C": I can come over to your place on Sunday at 1 p.m., but I will have to leave by 5 p.m.

If Rob wouldn't accept any of his counter-offers (which is what negotiation is), Rick could have then declined.

Unfortunately, Friday's adventure didn't go by the rules, so the customer was unhappy because his unstated expectations weren't met. The service provider felt the anger, having missed his opportunity to set expectations.

Most customers don't know they're in a game, and they're unaware that requests and responses have rules. Service providers manage expectations. If you keep the rules front and center, you have a much better chance of winning the game!

