

When your Supplier calls you the Customer From Hell

I heard via a third party last week that my Web site designer called me his Customer from Hell. For years, I've written about these creatures, and all of a sudden I was one! When I look in the mirror, I don't see a dragon breathing fire and venom... I see an assertive, charismatic female wearing a compassionate smile. But what has my supplier been seeing?

The story begins two years ago when we initiated conversations about what my website should look like. Let's get the context straight. I (customer) was an experienced entrepreneur while he (supplier) was a third-year university student. Let's eavesdrop into each party's thoughts during that fateful first meeting in 2002:

THOUGHTS BEFORE PHONE MEETING #1

Website Supplier (let's call him Fred):

- "She's important, she's successful, and she's traveled the world. She's picked me to design her website. Boy, this is my first big chance to work with someone in the business world. 'The customer is always right', so I'll do everything she asks and then I can collect my money."

Website Customer (Cheryl)

- "I haven't a clue what a website should contain, I just know I need a more vibrant, provocative one. My 1997 version is looking pretty dated. Well, Fred is cheap, and he should know what a corporate website should look like."

PHONE MEETING #1

- ACTUAL CONVERSATION

Fred: "What would you like the website to contain?"

Cheryl: " I don't know....the usual stuff you see in business websites."

Fred: "Have you seen any that you really liked?"

Cheryl: " I haven't had a lot of time to look, business is really busy, and I probably won't be able to surf the Net for a while. Why don't you just put together something and we'll get started that way?"

Fred: "Ah, well, what do you want it to say about your company? I need something to get started."

Cheryl: "Oh, I have this old brochure that was written about me when I did a

presentation. I'll fax it to you, and you can pull some stuff from it."

Fred: "Well, usually I charge \$xxx to do website design."

Cheryl: "Whatever."

Both: "Goodbye."

THE 1ST ANALYSIS

Anybody notice any red flags on that path? Sounds like a busy customer was unconsciously intimidating our young university student, and there was lots he wanted to say but didn't.

THE NEXT STEP

Fred created a first draft, including bits and pieces of the faxed promo material, and sent it to the customer.

THOUGHTS BEFORE PHONE MEETING #2

Cheryl: "This is horrible. The buttons don't make sense. The typeface looks like a high school term paper, it's too wide and hard to read. The photo is in the wrong place. I can't figure out how to get from one screen to the next. Oh no...what have I done? I need somebody who can tell me what I should include."

Fred: "She gave me nothing...is this what successful business people are like? How do I know what she wants? At least she could tell me certain web sites that she likes and what she likes about them. Maybe this isn't going to be as easy as I thought."

PHONE MEETING #2

- ACTUAL CONVERSATION

Cheryl: "Ah, Fred, this isn't exactly what I was looking for."

Fred: "What specifically don't you like?"

Cheryl, "Well, all of it. Can you start over? It looks amateurish."

Fred: "Ah, well, OK."

Cheryl: "I'll be in Japan and Singapore this month, but you can reach me on the 10th. Take a look at more professional companies' sites and do what they do. I'll fax you my customer lists, references, and course content. Just get creative. I'm sure you can do it."

Fred: "Ah....."

Cheryl: "Gotta run. Bye"

THE 2ND ANALYSIS

It doesn't take an MBA graduate to see that this project is heading south! Over the next 24 months, it progressed down to the South Pole! Eventually Fred was making voodoo dolls of Cheryl and vicariously puncturing them with cocktail spears... and Cheryl was angry that the site wasn't finished and living a recurrent dream she couldn't awaken from. Where's the blame? That's a question that unfortunately is irrelevant and unhelpful. Did the customer contribute to this mess? Absolutely! However, it's the service provider's responsibility to recognize the red flags, and stop the progress of the out-of-control locomotive.

THE LESSONS

When service providers are facing a time bomb, here are some words of wisdom:

#1 – The customer is not always right, but the customer is always the customer. Most customers don't wake up in the morning and say, "how can I tick off my supplier today?" It comes out of internal confusion.

#2 – Customers don't always know what they want. Your job is to help them get clarity.

#3 – If you give customers what they're asking for, you're not really doing your job. Your job is to make them successful in spite of their requests.

#4– Every agreement needs to contain specific conditions of satisfaction and time lines, as well as costs.

#5 – When your customer is unable to give you specific conditions, it's the server's job to help them develop those conditions.

#6 – When the customer brushes you off, pleads excuses and heightens the smoke screen...even if it's not done intentionally..., the server needs to stand firm and push back. It takes courage to be an excellent server. Obedience and saying, "yes ma'am, no ma'am" and hoping that a miracle of comprehension will occur isn't going to receive good Vegas odds for successful project completion.

#7 – A feeling of intimidation needs to be supplanted with a strong sense of self. Don't allow the "she's a strong lady" to override your self message of "you're the expert in this, and she's coming to you. Stand firm."

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KEN ELSEY, VICE-PRESIDENT, ELECTRO FEDERATION CANADA

Leave it to CE Biz to ask the difficult questions... From a manufacturer's perspective, competition and harmonization with the U.S. on technical standards is important. It creates new business opportunities and encourages growth in the industry. A good example of this is CEMC's recent GMRS project, which retuned users of licensed frequencies – in order to harmonize with the U.S. The results - new markets were opened and sales and profits for both manufacturers and retailers.

Opening up satellite signals to Canadians would have the same affect... sales of product would increase. And I believe there is a lot of support for such a decision. But unlike products like GMRS (which does not have a content issue)... satellite radio and television both have Heritage Canada looking over their shoulder. Their mandate is to protect and encourage Canadian culture as well as Canadian content. The Quebec Supreme Court is likely correct in their decision – but I'm sure this will be objected to by groups representing artists.

CRTC regulations mandating Canadian Content on radio has no doubt done a great deal to foster the growth of Canadian talent – but maybe the time has come to have Canadians stand alone on their own merit or should I say talent. After all... as soon as they achieve success they move to the U.S.



MICHAEL McEWEN, PRESIDENT, CDTV

In my view and in the view of most if not all the players in the production, broadcast and distribution industry in this truly is a disaster for the Canadian system both culturally and economically.

The Canadian Broadcast system is fragile when it must compete with the US system. Just for a start the US population base is 10 times Canada. This means in simple economics ten times the commercial revenue, ten times the resources for creative television production and 10 times the subscription base for satellite and cable distributors.

We have put some rules in place that create a Canadian market and allow for the expression of Canadian programs and ideas. Canadian satellite and cable distributors contribute economically to this content creation, as do the broadcasters and the governments. To my knowledge no American distributor is contributing to the Canadian system because of the grey market.

The Canadian industry stakeholders have been urging the Federal Government to get off their backsides and toughen the legislation for years now. Timing is everything: Now would be a good time.

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TV without borders

Americans are using the same tactics to get Canadian programming.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission says Americans regularly steal Canadian satellite signals, possibly to get a broader perspective on events outside the U.S. That includes both more coverage of world events and coverage providing a foreign perspective on events. For example, U.S. sports fans have been quoted as saying they obtained grey market Canadian satellite signals for more balanced and event-oriented Olympic coverage. The point here is that there is some

revenue being generated for Canadian Satellite companies from non-domestic subscribers! It would be interesting to know how many American subscribers there are as compared to Canadian subscribers for U.S. services.

It is clear that Ottawa dislikes Canadians watching U.S. grey market signals because it can't control things such as Canadian content. Thus, Canadian grey market piracy adversely affects Canadian culture, something traditionally protected by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and Heritage Canada. In the end, the motivation for grey market satellite viewers in any country is simple. They want to view

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Customer from Hell

#8 – When breakdowns in the projects occur, communicate them immediately to the customer along with your plan. When the customer is causing the breakdown, it's even more important to assertively and non-threateningly bring it to their attention. State what you need from them if the project is to survive.

#9 – Customers will respect your strength if you show them your interest is in their success.

THE SUGGESTED APPROACH

At the first hint of the barreling locomotive, Fred should have said: "Cheryl, I think we need to pause right now. You're not clear on what you want, and that's not surprising. This is new to you. My job is to create a Web site that shows the world what a powerhouse trainer you are. For me to be able to promote you, I need much more than what you're currently giving me. I realize you're busy and traveling. So, here is my suggestion. Wait until you're back from Asia and schedule a date to meet. At that meeting we will look at web sites together and you will tell me what you like and don't like. We'll carve out a plan and a style. I think this initial meeting will require 3 hours. If we don't do this, I can guarantee that we will both be on a path to frustration. Let's also hold off on our price discussion until you're clear on what you want to include. Does that sound like something you can commit to?"

There is a way for strong service providers to turn a potential Customer from Hell into a Client with Class.

their TV without controls, whether it's government control over content and/or channels, or the control of limited points of view by broadcasters from similar cultures with inherent points of view or biases. The grey market satellite situation is founded on the encryption of the original signal by the original service provider. The viewer must pay for the decryption of that signal, or it is theft. At issue is whether or not that signal can cross the border for paying customers.

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