

Obedience...Not all it's cracked up to be

By Cheryl Crumb

"Do you promise to love, honour and obey?"
 "I promise to obey the Girl (Boy) Scout laws."
 "Obey your parents."
 "Obey your teachers."
 "Do what you're told."

We've had a strong background in obedience. It's not a bad thing, for it has shaped our growth. It has helped us become social beings. However, bringing the mantras from the past into our working life as sales or service providers isn't necessarily the answer. This article is not a cry for anarchy, either, but rather an examination of what "obedience" causes us to miss.

I believe there are myths abounding about customers. For example, *the customer is always right*. Anyone who has ever dealt with customers knows that to be a falsehood. The reality is **"the customer is always the customer"**. Another myth: *the customer knows what he wants*. The reality: when the customer asks for something, he doesn't always ask for what would be the best solution. His request comes out of a void. Something is missing for him. A request is a cry for help. If we gave the customer exactly what he asked for (obedience), we might not be doing him a favour.

Let's look at an example of this. A friend of mine wanted a digital camera. Not being a photography bug, she asked for the same model that I have. Mine was a year old, which in the land of technology was eons ago. The retail salesperson, an obedient provider, brought out the camera and rang it up. Did he do his job? Well, it depends what we mean by "doing your job". He got a sale. He operated from the premises (which we're challenging) that the customer was right and she knew what she wanted, so he gave her what she asked for. It's hard to be faulted for that unless we set a context for what "sales" is.

Let's modify the role of a salesperson from one of obedience to one of helping customers be more successful. Let's switch the focus of the job to one where salespeople are allies and consultants rather than order-takers. In this framework, a skilled salesperson upon hearing Ms. Customer's request for X brand/model would clarify with questions such as:

- "What is most important to you in a camera?"
- "Help me understand the circumstances in which you're most likely going to use the

camera."

- "Help me see the next few months where you're using this camera...what do you think you'll be doing?"
- "If you could have a camera do just about anything, what might it be?"
- "Who else might be using this camera? What's important to them?"
- "What do you want to do with the images?"
- "What types of images do you want to take?"
- "What do you already know about digital photography?"
- "How much research have you done?"
- "What size images will you want?"
- "What were you thinking of spending for the complete package?"

A conventional part of you might be saying, "are you crazy?" to my above suggestions. You're thinking, "we've got a live one...get the money and run before she changes her mind." If that thought has slithered into your brain, consider that you're coming from a place of self-centered revenue generation rather than a customer-focused place of helpfulness.

In the real-life story, my friend got the camera she asked for. Within three months she was disappointed. Why? She got what she asked for, not what she needed.

Had the salesperson asked the above questions, he might have learned:

- She was embarking on a one-month, once-in-a-lifetime trip to central Africa two months from now.
- She was writing a series of articles for a charitable organization.
- She was going to be living with a tribe of natives for stretches of time.
- She had never used a digital camera before.
- She would be photographing natives in costume, in various dances and athletic events.
- She wanted to capture the wildness of the central African landscape.

In other words, answers to his questions might have caused him to provide her with the following:

- References to books and websites to learn more about her options
- Website information on photography tips and techniques
- References to upcoming short courses on digital photography

- Advice on the correct megapixel camera.
- Advice on the accessories she might need.
- Software
- Rechargeable lithium battery pack
- Optical zoom
- Longer focal zoom range
- Image stabilization
- Removable storage media/memory cards including some with higher storage capacity
- Card reader/adaptor for the computer
- Information on audio recording and the ability to create a short movie
- Recommendation on the type of bag to take for airline carry-over restrictions
- Discussion on how her budget would accommodate her choices
- Tips on the kinds of things she should practice on before the great trip
- The ergonomics of buying a camera (comfort in the hands, weight, accessibility of controls)

Most of us need help discovering what we need. Questions help us surface what we know, what we don't know, and what we don't know that we don't know. A salesperson's fundamental role is to aid us in getting clarity around what we want.

Armed with what she would learn from her helpful non-obedient salesperson, Ms. Customer likely wouldn't have bought the camera that day. She would have taken his advice and done some more research, but when she was ready to buy, she would have gone back to him. In her mind, he wasn't a seller, he was her ally.

All of that, because he refused to be obedient.

