

Consumers Three Biggest Complaints

By Tom Agee

Usually when I mention this column to people, they immediately have a horror story of their own for me. The supply is never ending. This month I want to focus on several topics that seem to matter the most. Issues that are no strangers to this column. It's about time serious marketers dealt with them.

Service, service, service! That's the common thread that runs through the majority of complaints. I certainly agree. Service makes up such an important part of any marketer's offering and the customer experience, that I never cease to be amazed at how poor it can be **and how little attention is given** to finding the root of the problems and dealing with them.

I suspect that those in management ultimately responsible for delivering quality service, have no idea what service customers value most, how to achieve it, or how to manage it. At the same time, they expect those at the coalface to deliver it. Sorry but, "And how's your day been?" just doesn't cut it.

In the past few years I've noticed less demand for papers or workshops on service marketing and or service management. Typically these cover the key aspects of quality service including strategy formulation, process improvement, empowerment, customer research, metrics, etc. These are all things that managers need to understand to build a service environment that could become an important competitive advantage.

Yet I'm often called on to speak at conferences and run seminars for lower level staff and team members on customer service. However, a service culture starts at the top instead of at the middle or the bottom. You've got to walk the talk, to let them know you're really serious about developing a service culture.

Using technology to cut costs and increase efficiency in the name of Customer Relationship Management is often contrary to delivering what customers really value most. One of the few exceptions is the check-in kiosk at airports that allow you to choose your seat and get a boarding pass without needing to queue. That's a seldom seen, win-win.

Closely related to poor service are constant complaints about lengthy waits, sometimes as long as a half hour or more, to get through to some help desks or service centres.

I know. Why spend money on staffing your contact centre for anticipated peak periods, when you can fob off your customers with, "We're experiencing unusually high traffic at this time. Perhaps you'd like to leave your number and we'll call you back (when it suits us)."

The comments I get are, "Don't they think my time is worth something?" "Isn't my business worth anything to them?" "Do they really care?" "I'd switch tomorrow, if it weren't so damned difficult," Hello telcos. Are you there?

Further, more and more firms seem to be opting for an automated solution. You phone them and they suggest "You'll find your answer on our website." Then you get FAQ (frequently asked questions) which deliver in my view FAA (f*** all answers) to my specific problem.

However, top marks to Auckland City's commitment to have a "live" person take my call, listen with empathy, and give me an intelligent answer to my question or else put me in touch with someone who can.

And speaking of help desks and call centres, most Kiwis really would like to speak to someone who can both speak and understand English well, whether the centre is located in Auckland or Mumbai.

So I end up doing the old phonetic spelling. "Agee, that's spelled A for apple, G for George, E for easy, E for easy." (Then I'd really like to add; "This is really C for Charlie, R for Roger, A for apple and P for Peter!")

And last but not least, the sorry state of so much television advertising, where 'more' often ends up being less for marketers as well as viewers. You may not be familiar with the term TMI, ie, too much information. Well I say it's TMA, too much advertising costing TMM, too much money with TLE, too little effect.

As recently as last week a reader's letter to the *New Zealand Herald* vented their frustration with ad breaks that lasted up to four minutes. Our ad minutes per hour, usually in excess of 25 percent, are one of the highest in the world. Zipping and zapping your commercials are the result.

Ten years ago I replicated overseas research on the effect of television clutter, i.e. the number of ads in a break, as well as the length of breaks. I presented the results as part of an advertising effectiveness forum run by ANZA as well as writing an article for the *Listener*.

It came as no surprise that as the number of messages in a break increases, recall goes down. The last message usually has the best chance of being remembered. Funny isn't it, that the last position is always used for channel promos which they claim don't count as ads in a break? Yeah, right.

Regardless of what TV rating reports say, you know that a lot of us switch off either mentally or electronically or worse, leave the room, during the break. A bunch of research from New Zealand and around the world puts the figure at probably about 30 to 40 percent, depending upon the type of programme. That means you should discount by perhaps a third the TARPS the agency says you're getting.

However, your chances do increase with better positions and better ads, particularly in dramatic shows where there may be less channel surfing when 'he' wants to check the sports channel but 'she' doesn't want to miss a bit of the show.

Then there's the quality issue, ie, the number of ads that viewers feel are stupid, irrelevant, or simply fail to communicate. Most recent example, I hate to say, is Air New Zealand's "Amazing journeys Every Day". As a 40-year-old friend and his wife - without prompting -expressed it: "What a wank!"

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