

Breaking up is hard to do, but does not have to end in tears



Losing business.. how to ensure customers never forget you



Previously I wrote about how to manage service recovery by doing the right thing in an extraordinary way. But two recent experiences, made me think about how brands manage customers who opt to terminate the relationship.

You don't love me anymore, but let me help you to make it less painful to say goodbye

The first story is an example of a call centre agent, who was able to go beyond the problem presented, and ensure that a door for future business was left open. Having decided to terminate my Mulitchoice subscription, I duly called to activate the process. To my surprise, very tactfully, the informal conversation lead to being advised to replace my ancient decoder for a new Explora, before the insurance was also terminated (for free!). Being a sceptic, I kept wondering what the catch is, as I actually just cancelled my contract... why on earth would the agent propose this? It turns out that I was motivated enough to drive to the customer center in Randburg to replace the decoder and was amazed at the service experienced! From the utmost professional and friendly security guard, receptionist and agent, this experience went down so surprisingly great that it has become a regular conversation point for me as a customer experience professional! I was spoken

to with the utmost respect, despite the fact that I was going about this exchange after having just canceled my subscription. The outcome was that I walked out with a brand-new decoder under my arm, and, to my further surprise, was installed by a contracted supplier for Multichoice within a day... all with no cost to myself.

You don't love us anymore... so let's make it difficult for you

Another story (in the same week) presented quite the opposite experience. I also decided to upgrade my fibre speed and called my service provider, VOX, to terminate my subscription (the equivalent option I was interested in, was too expensive). And still basking in the great experience with Multichoice, I was caught off guard by the complete opposite experience with the call centre agent. The absolute lack of luster and disinterested conversation prompted me to request to speak to a supervisor, as I thought s/he may be interested in the feedback or the lost opportunity to retain my business (at three times the current value). In order to terminate, you also need to send an email to confirm the cancellation, despite having made the call, gone through various levels of authentication and conversations being recorded, the effort to execute my decision, was my problem! Again, the programmed response by the supervisor, "I will train all my agents again", completely missed the point. I was referring to one agent and, sadly, the supervisor also missed the opportunity to try to retain my business! Eventually she promised to get a senior sales person to call me, who followed his "script" to the "t"! After being told that their instruction to the fibre infrastructure providers will take a further two weeks to activate, I was even more sure that I made the right decision to end my relationship. Surely a new subscriber does not have to wait two weeks... yet in my case, even with all the infrastructure already in place, it requires 2 weeks to send a request upgrade my service?

Thinking about these two very different scenarios, the following lessons around managing the end of customers' relationships, may be of value.

Lessons taken from broken human relationships

Harvard Business Review reported that acquiring a new customer is anywhere from five to 25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one, depending on which study you believe, and what industry you're in.

Lesson 1. Seek understanding

The best way to explore ways to retain a customer, is to make sure that the reasons for termination are understood. Agents managing the process should be trained to ask, with real interest. This information will not only be invaluable to understand the main drivers of lost business, it also demonstrates care and concern about lost business

Lesson 2. Show regret

The slightest hint of regret or sadness to lose a customer, leaves a feeling that business was

valued. Many online brands manage to do this very well by messages, albeit automated responses, such as “sorry to see you go”.

Lesson 3. Try to retain your customer

“Is there anything we can do to change your mind?” An agent who is trained to listen to the “real” reasons for ending the relationship, or who listens to understand, should be able to explore and offer alternatives to offer customers. Agents who are well versed in the brand’s product and price ranges or key people to manage grievances and procedures, are well placed to recommend alternatives or to direct to a resource who can potentially swing the customer

Lesson 4. Make it easy

Most processes are cumbersome, complex and tedious when exiting relationships. Subscriptions for example, rely on these to deter customers to terminate the relationship. Thinking about automatic renewal of online subscriptions.... Customers don’t always receive notification of the end of a subscription period. In fact, many rely on the fact that it will automatically renew before the consumer realizes the date. Case-in-point is a smartphone app, “Fitradio” response:

“We cannot cancel the purchase for you, it must be done through your account with Apple. Regarding refund, the subscription is non-refundable. Apple just doesn't give us an ability to perform them as much as we want to. Also, when you signed up for the plan, you have authorized automatic renewal which is a part of the confirmation process presented to you by your billing provider which means that if you don't want to continue, then, it must be cancelled prior to the billing date.”

Retaining customers because it is too difficult (or too late) to terminate, builds resentment and certainly not constitute loyalty.

Revisit the processes to exit carefully and remove any additional unnecessary obstacles. The ease with which one can terminate will contribute to a more favourable recollection of the brand and even ongoing endorsement of the brand. Similar to reminiscing about a first love... even though you know it was not meant to be, you still think fondly about them.

Lesson 5. Design the customer experience at termination

To design the ending of a relationship is like signing an ante-nuptial agreement, when you are in love. You can’t even think that it will end! However, when brands consider this part of the customer journey, not only can some business potentially be retained, but also, a foot can be left in the door for customers to return in the future. Another advantage is also that customers, like myself, will talk about their positive experience with a brand, even when ending the relationship, advocating the brand to others.

Customer relationships, are much like human relationship! Customers are human after all! We fall in love, we go through happy times, we go through tough times, feel disappointed, and sometimes we just can’t fix it... and have to end it.

Lessons from human relationships, where endings are dealt with understanding and care, will leave

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fond footprints in customers' hearts...

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