

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 managing 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.

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

The first story is about call centre agent who went beyond the problem to ensure that a door for future business was left open. Having decided to terminate my Multichoice subscription, I called to start the process. To my surprise, the very tactful, informal conversation lead to the agent advising me to replace my ancient decoder for a new Explora – before the insurance was also terminated (for free).

The sceptic in me kept wondering what the catch was, as I had actually just cancelled my contract: why on earth would the agent propose this? I was motivated enough to drive to the customer center in Randburg to replace the decoder and was amazed at the service: from the extremely professional and friendly security guard, receptionist and agent, this experience went down so surprisingly well, 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 cancelling my subscription.

I walked out with a brand-new decoder under my arm, which was, to my further surprise, installed by a contracted supplier for Multichoice within a day – all with no cost to myself.

The wrong way: 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 current service provider, VOX, to terminate my subscription (their equivalent option was too expensive).

Still basking in the great experience with Mutichoice, I was caught off guard by the completely opposite experience with the call centre agent. The termination process was cumbersome and clearly the customer's problem: after the call which included various levels of authentication and recorded conversations, I still needed to send an email to confirm the cancellation.

After the lackluster and disinterested conversation, I asked to speak to a supervisor, as I thought he or she may be interested in the feedback or the lost opportunity to retain my business (at three times the current value). She supervisor completely missed the point with her programmed response: "I will train all my agents again". I was referring to only 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. They told me it will take another 2 weeks to activate the new fibre, 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?

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 you understand the reasons for termination. Agents managing the process should be trained to ask questions with real interest. This information will not only be invaluable to understanding 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 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 for ending business relationships are cumbersome, complex and tedious. Subscriptions for example rely on these to deter customers from terminating the relationship. Think about automatic renewal of online subscriptions: customers don't always receive notification of the end of a subscription period. In fact, many businesses rely on the fact that it will automatically renew before the consumer realizes the date. Case-in-point is a smartphone app *Fitradio's* 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 exit processes carefully and remove any 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. It's 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

Designing the end of a relationship is like signing an ante-nuptial agreement when you are in love. You can't imagine 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 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 - they're 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 fond footprints in customers' hearts.

The Consumer Psychology Lab is a [customer experience consultancy](#) with extensive know-how of measuring emotion. Our highly skilled psychologists interview customers about their experience and provide our clients with deep insights into consumers' experience and behaviour. We are also passionate about equipping companies with the most suitable CX tools and skills.