A Tale of Communication and Customer Service

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I don’t know about anyone else, but I grow exceedingly tired of poor customer service. Perhaps I am old-fashioned (yes, I do find myself sounding like my parents every once in a while), but I don’t think it is too much to ask to speak to a human and, then when you do, to have that person actually have a conversation with you, try to help you, or provide direction towards whatever solution you are seeking. Can you tell I’ve had a frustrating week trying to talk to people that are in customer service? Again, at the risk of sounding old-fashioned, I think good customer service has been lost somewhere along the line, and I would argue that if you can provide good service to your customers/clients, you will stand out as brilliant among your peers in what has become a lost concern and/or mediocre practice at best.

I am not trying to imply that everyone’s customer service is bad or needs improvement, but I do find that good service to customers has become the exception rather than the norm. Perhaps it is our reliance on computers and cutting the costs of employing people to answer the phones. The sad thing to me is that many people seem to accept it, even as they complain about it. Have we really lost the expectation of good customer service? In this fast-paced world, do customers/clients still want and need a high level of service? I would argue that yes, they do, and that they do recognize and appreciate it. When I first started in consulting, I worked for an engineering firm who instilled basic business practices (or rules) within me that I still hold as important today—and this is 22 years later. These practices are not just consultant specific, and I have tried to follow them no matter where I have been employed. I think on some level these “rules” are intuitive, but when we deal with clients (clients include customers, students, or anyone looking for our time), it doesn’t hurt to remind ourselves that providing competent service that lets those we interact with know we are listening is very important. It is a practice that will be appreciated and can pay back in terms of professional respect and additional work.

Key Points to Remember in Interacting with Clients

There are three major points that I try to keep in mind when interacting with clients:

1. be responsive;
2. be polite, professional, and care about the client; and
3. take the initiative to follow up.

Let me explain what I mean by each.

1. Be Responsive

The engineering firm that I first worked for was run very strictly in terms of customer service. We were expected to make communication with clients a priority. I was taught that all phone calls were to be returned within 24 hours. It didn’t matter if you had answers for the client or not, the phone call had to be returned to let the client know that you were working on their project. (I should point out that email wasn’t the major way of communicating at this time since it was just beginning to be used, and yes, I just dated myself.)

I still try to live by this rule even now when email or texting tends to be the way we talk to each other. I don’t like when I don’t receive some acknowledgement of a phone call or email, so I try not to do that to others. If someone took the time to contact you, then you should take the time to respond to them in a timely manner. You should respond even if it is to say that you don’t have the answer(s) yet, but you are working on it and will get back with them within “X” amount of time. It is also important to remember to get back to them when “X” amount of time has expired. Do not make them call you again by being late!