

More than a Feeling: Using Empathy to Maximize Customer Experience

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It all starts with smiles, handshakes, and congratulations. The honeymoon period continues for a few weeks. Then, something happens. The car doesn't start. The internet stops working. The phone misplaces all five hundred of your contacts. Your contact center's phone rings, and the next move by your agent could make a fan for life, or could stir a virtual hornet's nest of tweets and yelps.

How do you secure that coveted four-star review or the #thanks?

In that customer's eyes, solving a problem is the baseline, the bare minimum. A solution is the reason she picked up the phone. To win her heart today and her business tomorrow, your agent must show that she cares about what's at stake for the customer. What did she miss out on because of this problem? What is she upset about—the product or service not working, or is it something more? Maybe it was being embarrassed at a family gathering or missing her son's first football game.

Your agents need to understand empathy, and they need to practice it, if you want your customers to say that your company gets them. And getting your customers is critical to keeping them and attracting new ones.

Empathy or Sympathy?

How often do your agents say, "I'm sorry"?

On a call to a customer relations department, "I'm sorry" means a little less each time it's said. That's sympathy. It's an imprecise tool and it often does more to destroy than build. Sharing in the customer's feelings and responding appropriately is empathy. It takes more work, but it's worth it.

If your agents don't take the time to understand the customer's feelings about the situation, there's no way to show empathy. Researcher Brene Brown states that "[empathy](#) drives connection and sympathy drives disconnection." And she's right.

Customers Never Share Without a Reason

"I was so scared. I thought my kids' lives were in danger."

"I just got divorced, and I need to update my billing address."

"We just had a baby, so this credit account has really come in handy."

These statements are not problems to be solved. They are feelings to be acknowledged. Sure, customers don't just call to chat most of the time. But if they share feelings and those feelings aren't acknowledged by the agent, customers tend to come to one of two conclusions—your

agent (and thereby your company) isn't listening or he (and thereby your company) doesn't care about my experience.

Good agents will say they're good problem-solvers, and that's true. But the ones who get that the personal connection with customers become great. And that personal connection is built by listening and responding before problem-solving.