

Home » Must Read » Your Call Is (Not That) Important to Us

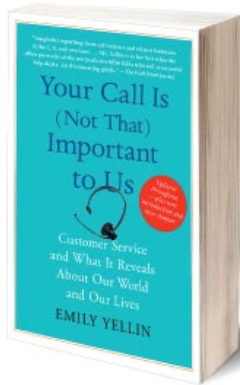
Print | Share

MUST READ

AUGUST, 2010

Your Call Is (Not That) Important to Us

Emily Yellin - emilyyellin.com



Chapter 1: Random Acts of Rudeness

As the twenty-first century dawned, most people were feeling fed up. A public opinion poll in 2001 reported that 80 percent of Americans believed the constant coarseness, disrespect, and lack of consideration they encountered in society was such a “serious, pervasive problem” that it affected them “on a personal, gut level” and had grown into “a daily assault on their sensibilities and the quality of their lives.” At the same time, it seemed people didn’t believe they had much power to change things, so they simply resigned themselves to all the insidious incivility they encountered.

The Pew Charitable Trusts sponsored the poll, called “Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America.” Public Agenda, a national policy research group, conducted it. And in their introduction, the authors made sure to justify their examination of how we get along with each other in public every day: “At first, it might seem that conducting a survey on courtesy and rudeness is less serious or important than exploring citizens’ views on, say, health care or education or retirement policy. Yet how people treat each other in their daily interactions — whether they take steps to be respectful of one another, whether they are willing to moderate their own desires and comfort to accommodate the needs of others — seems to us to be profoundly important and indeed central to the definition of a ‘civilized’ society.”

The report immediately zeroed in on one area of society that most respondents agreed offers perhaps the ripest examples of rude and infuriating public behavior. “Americans say that the way they are treated by business and customer service employees is frequently exasperating, and sometimes even insulting.” One particular customer service channel came under the heaviest fire. “When it goes wrong, perhaps nothing embodies greater exasperation than customer service by phone.”

According to the survey, 67 percent of Americans sometimes have to “make a fuss to get a problem resolved.” And nearly everyone — 94 percent — finds it “very frustrating to call a company and get a recording instead of a human being.” Even if callers do finally speak to a live customer service agent, the irritation doesn’t always end. In a Florida focus group, one man said, “Half the time they have no idea what they’re talking about. And they don’t care. They’ll tell you anything just to get you off the phone.”

To be fair, the report also notes that “it seems the rudeness cuts both ways. Disgruntled customers bring frayed nerves, previous frustrations, and their own personal shortcomings when they deal with those responsible for helping them.” A Connecticut customer service representative told her focus group, “They think you’re at their beck and call. They may want something, and they’re not getting it as rapidly as they think they should. I answer the phone, and they just immediately go off

Our Departments

LET’S GO / Contributing editor April White brings a surprise cover story each month.

THE GIST / Business insight from Harvard Business Review, The Look (new products you’ll want), and blogs from the savviest writers around.

INTERACT / Put your knowledge to the test with crossword puzzles and a multiple-choice quiz.

MUST READ / A compelling excerpt from a book just now hitting the shelves, selected by the editors.

THE BUZZ / Smart, funny — sometimes surprising — comments that make you think, from sources you know.

IN BRIEF / A monthly update from the editor’s desk, plus recommended sites and blogs from the staff and readers.

CEO LETTER / Insight and the latest airline news from Doug Parker, CEO of US Airways.

Our Contributors

CONTRIBUTORS / The experts at Harvard Business Review, bloggers in the know, and more.

Sweepstakes

WIN A TRIP FOR TWO TO PARIS LAS VEGAS!

Archived Issues

AUGUST, 2010

JULY, 2010

JUNE, 2010

on me.”

It probably doesn't take a scientifically conducted public opinion poll to find evidence of the contempt most Americans harbor toward bad customer service or to elicit testimony about the effects of that kind of antipathy in their lives. Merely bringing up the subject at any gathering will generate at least one horror story from just about everyone. But in the years since that survey officially highlighted and validated the displeasure bubbling just under the surface of our everyday dealings with customer service, a few of those tensions have boiled over in very public ways. The news media, in tandem with various websites and social media, have played increasingly larger roles in amplifying them. Just ask Comcast, for example.

Trouble for the nation's largest cable television and broadband provider started in earnest with the story of LaChania Govan, a mother of two in her mid-twenties who inadvertently became a public symbol of mistreated customers everywhere. Govan lives in suburban Chicago. She goes to work all week and attends church every Sunday. She has a pleasant and welcoming voice. She also has a strong sense of fairness.

In July 2005, Govan's digital video recorder wouldn't work. She called Comcast's customer service line in Chicago but couldn't get through. During the course of four weeks, she called more than forty times. She was repeatedly disconnected, put on hold, or transferred to inept or inert representatives and technicians. One customer service representative transferred her to the Spanish-speaking line. Govan knows only English. She just wanted someone to resolve her seemingly simple case.

She says she never raised her voice, but she was resolute. "Calling Comcast became my second job," Govan said. "I had to ensure the cordless phone was fully charged and the kids were content. And I sat and called. I cooked and called. I cleaned and called, and just called." Almost every day, Govan prodded the big company's customer service department as best she could. Finally, she found a rep who heard her out and took her case in hand. A technician was sent to replace her cable box at no charge, and she was credited with a free month of service. Govan's perseverance paid off. Her headaches seemed to be over.

Then Govan's August cable bill arrived. Her name did not appear on the bill. Instead it was addressed to "Bitch Dog." Someone at Comcast had changed her account name. Govan said, "I was so mad I couldn't even cuss."

Instead of becoming just another unnoticed casualty in the adversarial relationship between many companies and their customers, Govan went public. The Chicago Tribune ran her story. Within days, the mainstream news media, bloggers, and consumer advocates from everywhere were spreading her tale of woe. She appeared as the number-one story on MSNBC's Countdown with Keith Olbermann. A Comcast executive left an apology on Govan's home voice mail. The company claimed it identified and fired two employees responsible for changing the name on Govan's bill. She was offered all sorts of free service, which she refused. She wanted nothing more to do with Comcast.

Govan, who also happens to be a customer service representative for a major credit card company, is studying criminal justice with plans to go to law school one day. Eventually, she says, she hopes to become a judge. Her inherent sense of justice is what drove her to persevere. So she was speaking with conviction when she told the Washington Post that she believes customer service means "being friendly, helpful, and respectful. I know how it feels to be a customer service rep and a consumer on the other end. You do not have to settle for less, and you do not have to be mistreated."

In 2006, Comcast was dealing with another public display of customer service missteps. A subscriber in the Washington, D.C., area found the technician that Comcast sent to fix his cable system had fallen asleep on his couch. The worker was kept on hold for so long by his own company when he called for help that he dozed off. The customer shot video of the napping technician and posted it on the Internet, where it went viral. Comcast issued another apology and again said the worker in question had been fired.

Then in August 2007, Comcast suffered what was perhaps its worst embarrassment to date when seventy-six-year-old Mona Shaw took her outrage with its customer service a few steps further than any disgruntled customer had done before. As she has told the story, it started when a technician scheduled to come out to her suburban Washington, D.C., home on a Monday didn't show up. Comcast was supposed to install what it calls its triple-play service, which included the company's new telephone service, along with its traditional Internet and cable television connection, all for under \$100 per month. Shaw, a retired military nurse and secretary of her local AARP, as well as a square dancer who fosters stray dogs until they can be adopted, waited all day Monday. When Comcast finally arrived two days later, the technician left the job half done and never came back. On Friday, the company cut off what service Mona and her husband, Don, still had.

Without phone service, the Shaws couldn't call to get help, so they drove over to their local Comcast office in Manassas, Virginia. They asked for a manager and were told to wait outside in the August heat.

MAY, 2010

City Profiles



PORTLAND MAINE / Where the south's famed beaches yield to Maine's rockbound peninsulas, that's where you'll find Portland.

They say they sat on a bench for two hours, until the same woman who had asked them to wait leaned out the door, told them the manager had gone home for the day, and thanked them for coming. Shaw told the *Washington Post*, “They thought just because we’re old enough to get Social Security that we lack both brains and backbone.”

By Monday, after a weekend with no phone, TV, or Internet, Shaw was so angry that she took matters into her own hands, literally. She got her husband’s hammer, and they went back to the local Comcast office. This is how Washington Post reporter Neely Tucker described Shaw’s account of what happened next:

Hammer time: Shaw storms into the company’s office. BAM! She whacks the keyboard of the customer service rep. BAM! Down goes the monitor. BAM! She totals the telephone. People scatter, scream, cops show up and what does she do? POW! A parting shot to the phone!

“They cuffed me right then,” she says.

Her take on Comcast: “What a bunch of sub-moronic imbeciles.”

Being a responsible newspaper, we must note that this is a misdemeanor, a crime, a completely inappropriate way of handling a business dispute.

Noted.

Who among us has not longed for a hammer in this age of incompetent “customer service representatives,” of nimrods reading from a script at some 800-number location, of crumbs-in-their-beards plumbing installation people who tell you they’ll grace you with their presence between 12 and 3, only never to show? And you’ll call and call and finally some outsourced representative slings a dart at a calendar and tells you another guy will come back between 10 and 2 next Thursday? And when this guy comes, pants halfway down his behind, he’ll tell you he brought the wrong part?

And there is nothing, nothing you can do.

Until there! On the horizon! It’s Hammer Woman, avenger of oppressed cable subscribers everywhere! (Cue galloping *Lone Ranger* theme.)

“It had never occurred to me to take a hammer to a phone company before, but I was just so upset,” Mona Shaw told the paper. “After I hit the keyboard, I turned to this blonde who had been there the previous Friday, the one who told me to wait for the manager, and I said, ‘Now do I have your attention?’” Shaw, who has a heart condition, said during the incident her blood pressure rose and she started hyperventilating. In addition to calling the police, someone called an ambulance. By the end, she was fined \$345 and given a three-month suspended sentence for disorderly conduct, as well as a one-year restraining order prohibiting her from going anywhere near the Manassas Comcast office.

For months afterward, Shaw was a television and Internet celebrity of sorts, appearing on *Good Morning America*, *Nightline*, and *Dr. Phil*. A Mona Shaw fan club formed with a Web site, and she was hailed as a folk hero on numerous blogs, as well as on ComcastMustDie.com.

That Web site was initiated in fall 2007, two months after Shaw’s Comcast encounter, by Bob Garfield, Advertising Age columnist, author, and cohost of National Public Radio’s *On the Media*, who had his own customer service dust-up with Comcast. Garfield describes the ComcastMustDie mission on his site’s home page: “Actually, I have no death wish for Comcast, or any other gigantic, blundering, greedy, arrogant corporate monstrosity. What I do have is the earnest desire for such companies to change their ways. This site offers an opportunity — for you to vent your grievances (civily, please) and for Comcast to pay close attention.”

In conversation, it isn’t hard to get Garfield to air some of his own frustration. “I don’t know about anybody else, but already, as I’m dialing 1-800-COMCAST, my blood pressure is 180/140, because I know what’s going to happen. I try to start on an even keel, but my worst fears are realized within the first few minutes. And then, you can’t really sob on the phone — that’s unmanly. But I’ve tried everything else. I’ve tried begging, I’ve tried reasoning, I’ve tried threatening. I’ve tried it all. Nothing works. You just hope the gods align on your side.

“I’ve had real tragedy in my life — really painful stuff, the stuff of real life. But I have never been as close to blowing an aneurysm as I was on the phone with Comcast. It is just so frustrating and so infuriating — the combination of rage and the sense of absolute impotence. It’s not a happy feeling. It gets back to the golden rule. You would never treat somebody this way yourself. It’s against everything we’ve ever learned, from the time we were ambulatory. The experience we have is antithetical to everything that we ever have been told about what constitutes the way to get along with others.”

Garfield believes Comcast and other companies ignore a changing business landscape at their own peril, a landscape in which the Internet is giving new power to customers. “Now we can aggregate to have our voices heard and to put pressure on these people. Customer service and customer relations management is going to be so critical to all corporate futures. Marketing, as we have

known it, is all about customer relations in the future. I mean, forget advertising. It is over. We are seeing the last dregs of advertising being the prime marketing tool. It's going to be all about cultivating, exploiting, and collaborating with consumers. And you can't do that if they hate you."

Hundreds of customers posted their complaints on ComcastMustDie right away. Many then reported online about getting a personal call from a Comcast customer service worker who was monitoring the site and made sure to solve their problems. Garfield was happy with that but thought the company should go further. "It's not just servicing the customer; it is befriending, exploiting, collaborating. And they have to create a technical infrastructure and also empower employees to deal with customer complaints in a logical, honest, straightforward manner. They are very far from being there."

On the site, Garfield told Comcast, "You must recognize that none of this is a PR move you have to make through gritted teeth. It is a golden opportunity to exploit the unprecedented potential of a connected world." Garfield pointed out that ever since the founding of Comcast in Tupelo, Mississippi, in the 1960s, it has been laying the wiring for what has become the Internet. "Yet you don't even realize you have created the very conditions for all of us to band together against you. At this moment it must seem like Frankenstein's monster, but take our word for it: It's Comcastic," he wrote, using the company's own advertising slogan to mock it.

While all this public turmoil was taking place on the customer side of Comcast, the shareholders were getting restless and squeezing the company from their end as well. Heretofore in the cable television and broadband Internet industry, only one of a handful of companies provided service in any local market. But those local monopolies started to face serious competition from the dominant national players in the telecommunications industry, such as Verizon and AT&T. Those companies began offering broadband Internet access and television just as Comcast was breaking into the telephone business. Comcast lost some customers, but it also poached some from its new competitors. By the end of 2007, apparently due to pessimism about the company's ability to compete, share prices for Comcast had fallen 35 percent despite the fact that revenues were up and the company was still profitable.

In a speech in early January 2008 at a major Las Vegas consumer electronics show, Brian Roberts, Comcast's CEO and the son of the company's retired octogenarian founder, said Comcast's "customer service has got to continue to reach new levels of excellence."

A few days later, a high-level conflict that had been brewing for months came to a head when a major institutional investor in Comcast, Glenn Greenberg of Chieftain Capital Management, wrote a scathing letter to the board calling for the ouster of Roberts. Greenberg, son of baseball great Hank Greenberg, noted the falling stock prices and called the management of the company a "comcastrophe." As examples, he pointed to slow response to competition; large management bonuses; a multimillion-dollar, five-year death benefit for Roberts's father; and what he saw as too much emphasis on acquiring other companies while ignoring investors.

In a blog for *BusinessWeek* magazine a few days after the letter, reporter Jena McGregor also spoke about the customers who were feeling ignored and expressing their discontent on the Web. McGregor wondered: "When will investors focus on customer service as an issue they should address?"

By Valentine's Day 2008, Comcast was making moves to stem some of the most immediate shareholder criticism. They did away with the founder's death benefit, reduced executive bonuses, and announced that they would reinstate a shareholder dividend they had not paid since 1999. Roberts assured investors that rumored plans to acquire Sprint or Yahoo! were untrue. At least temporarily, stock prices rallied, and an investor uprising was quelled.

But a Fortune.com news brief about the Comcast shareholder initiatives garnered some representative public comments that again highlighted the company's customer problems. One Fortune reader said, "Returning profits to their shareholders is good, in the short term, but Comcast needs to invest some of that profit in improving their extremely poor customer service." Another Fortune reader said, "This week my wife and I have talked to a total of 9 individuals at their customer service center, including 4 supervisors, and they have yet to resolve our current issue. Unfortunately I'm starting to see that horrible customer service is actually the norm these days in EVERY industry here in the states. As a people we have no desire to properly serve others."

Rick Germano, the senior vice president of customer operations for Comcast, was charged with the huge responsibility of taking on these issues. By early 2008, he had begun a listening tour of Comcast cities. In an open letter to customers on Comcast's Web site, he announced the company's new commitment to customer service. "We are putting a tremendous amount of resources into making it easier for you to do business with us. This is part of a company-wide effort to improve service that will continue for several years." He then listed some of the first changes, including the hiring of 12,000 new customer service agents and technicians in the two previous years, opening six more call centers, weekend appointments for service so it is more convenient for customers, and shorter windows for appointment times so that customers aren't spending entire days waiting for service.

Germano is humble, and surprisingly frank, when discussing his role. "I would look like a corporate

suit,” he says, “trying to bury a problem if I said we have no problems. We do have problems.” He has been at Comcast since 1986, first in the corporate office in Philadelphia and then managing the West Coast region. In that time, he has seen the company grow and evolve as it expanded from cable television into new markets and industries, such as providing high-speed Internet and, now, telephone service. “Telecommunications has become quite competitive, and that’s new for us. Cable was a monopoly for all intents and purposes up until very recently. If you don’t have any competition, you’re the only game in town. People really aren’t going to leave you. They’re beholden to you.

“Now they have a lot of choices. And we went from not being in the phone business to being the fourth largest telephone company in the United States in less than three years. And I think we took our eye off of the customer service ball. There were other, more important priorities, like rapid growth, product innovation, integration of acquired properties. We grew way too quickly, and now customer service is playing catch-up. We weren’t always big. When I first started, we were tiny, and nobody cared what we did. So I think, in some cases, we’re a victim of our own success. But the critical piece is: How do we handle it moving forward? Now we’re going up against some of the largest corporations on Earth. And it’s fascinating to me to watch AT&T and Verizon, two very large, well-respected corporations, get into the television business. They are learning the hard way, just like we’re learning the hard way in the telephone business. And customer service is a key differentiator. It has become much more important. So we have to go back and fix customer service, and it has to be sooner rather than later.”

Germano says to do that, the company will continue to adjust to its new competitive landscape, where fast change is inevitable and where employing the tools of the marketplace to keep their corporate eyes and ears open is key. “Customers have higher expectations. They want what they want, and they want it now. Companies have to listen, they have to understand — particularly larger companies. Social networking and blogs are very, very powerful. One unhappy customer in any company can become a national sensation in less than twenty-four hours. In our case, we’ve had a couple. And our reputation has been harmed. I think we accept that fact. A company can’t hide its problems anymore. But now we’re trying to go out and listen to people, listen to our customers, listen to our employees, and say, ‘Okay, what do we need to do to get our reputation back?’ ”

○ ○ ○

When Claes Fornell enlisted for mandatory military service in his native country, Sweden, during the late 1960s, he was given aptitude tests to determine the job for which he would be best suited. “Apparently, I tested well for putting patterns together that nobody else can see.” He was sent to work in cryptology, or code breaking. “I started trying to figure out what was crawling under the surface of the Baltic Sea. We had some very murky pictures from the bottom of the sea.” They also had sonar readings that indicated something was there. But nothing was self-evident. By making connections between the incomplete measures and other data they had, Fornell and his colleagues were able to come up with a plausible theory, even if they never found a conclusive answer. “We figured out there was a strong likelihood that it was Russian submarines, unmanned submarines.”

Well after his Swedish soldier days, Fornell would go on to develop his skill at determining “what something is even though I can’t see it” as a professor of business at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. And now, instead of trying to pinpoint suspected Soviet subs, he has turned his expertise toward measurement of a less subversive but equally elusive enigma: how well companies are doing at keeping their customers happy. Fornell is the founder Satisfaction Index, the ACSI, which is now considered a national standard in the United States. Through 65,000 customer interviews each year, Fornell and his staff come up with scores, on a scale of 0 to 100, for more than two hundred major U.S. companies and government agencies. They segment the results into forty-three industries and ten economic sectors and calculate scores for them as well. The numbers have reflected customers’ satisfaction with the leading goods and services in the American economy since 1994, when the ACSI started.

“The modern economy has changed so much more than its measurement,” Fornell says, “particularly in the United States. This country had a great economic model in terms of producing more with less. And that worked well in manufacturing. But if you apply the same economic model and the same types of measurements to the service sector, it’s much more difficult. We were trying to run companies that are mostly service oriented as if they were manufacturing companies, and I just don’t think that is healthy. So I thought not only should we look at the quantity of economic output, but we should measure the quality. Because you can easily increase quantity, and quality suffers. And vice versa. They need to be better balanced. It’s something that has been neglected in economics, primarily because quality is a bit more difficult to measure.”

And measuring it from the consumer’s point of view is what Fornell says is unusual about the ACSI. “Traditional accounting leaves customer relationships off the balance sheet. It produces a distorted view of how a company makes money. With ACSI, we are able to capture a much better understanding of a company’s current condition and its future capacity to produce wealth.” Fornell says this is partly because “spending to improve customer service is usually treated as a cost center rather than an investment.” Returns on an investment in one quarter might not come back in the

next quarter, or even in the next year, after the initial investment. And when they do come back, Fornell says, they aren't necessarily seen as relating to the initial investment and are often credited to other factors. He is convinced, based on about fifteen years' worth of data, that customer satisfaction is a leading indicator of a company's long-term market value and financial health.

The exception, he says, is in businesses where the customer has no real choice. "In the cable TV industry, forget it." Comcast has had one of the lowest ACSI scores (59 in 2009) in the already low-scoring cable and satellite TV industry as a whole (63 in 2009). Fornell blames that in part on the fact that Comcast has had a monopoly in many cities. Customers had few, if any, other options. So the company, and the industry, did not have the incentive "to treat their customers well. And they still have made a lot of money. Now recently, if you look at the return to investors, it hasn't been that great. But as long as we have a system, or a particular part of a system, where there's not punishment for being bad, then you can make a lot of money by actually treating your customers like dirt.

The airline industry is another interesting example. But it's a little different. We're not treated very well there either, but airlines are not making money."

The airline industry as a whole had an average ACSI score of only 64 in 2009, down 11.1 percent from 1995, the first year it was measured. By contrast, one of the highest-scoring industries is Internet retail, which scored an average of 82. The leader in that industry is Amazon.com with a score of 86, up 2.4 percent from its score of 84 the first year it was measured in 2000.

Fornell believes that as the way we measure our economy grows more nuanced, customer service will improve. "Maybe I'm too optimistic, but I think it will be much more difficult in the future for companies to hide from the power of the buyer." Increasingly, he says, the rule will be, "If you have consumer anger directed at your company, you better do something about it." He is not much for cliches like "the customer is always right," because, he says, "that is obviously not true. But what I do think is true is another saying: 'Take care of your customer, or somebody else will.' "

O O O

Scott Broetzmann has been paying attention to angry customers for much of his career. He majored in psychology and communication science at the University of Wisconsin, and went on to work for the Better Business Bureau, first in his native Milwaukee and later nationally in Washington, D.C. A husband and father in his mid-forties, Broetzmann (pronounced Brets-man) is friendly, smart, and levelheaded — just the kind of guy most people would trust to analyze problems fairly and solve them humanely. After he left the Better Business Bureau, Broetzmann became a consultant on what the industry calls "the customer experience." He collects data on it, analyzes it, and helps companies see the value of investing intelligently in their own customer service.

A few years ago, Broetzmann was reading a Washington Post article about store owners who were having a hard time holding on to staff because working in retail was so low paying and high stress. Broetzmann remembers the article depicting customers as "a bunch of jerks." It immediately reminded him of actor Michael Douglas's wry portrayal of an aggrieved customer gone wrong in the 1993 film *Falling Down*.

Douglas's character, Bill Foster, is a man broken by the stresses of commuting, crime, job loss, divorce, and the cynicism of the everyday world. He reaches a breaking point in a fast food restaurant where he asks for breakfast at 11:32 one morning. The guy behind the counter says, "We stopped serving breakfast at 11:30." Foster appeals to him to help anyway. The worker refuses. Out of patience, Foster looks the guy in the eye and says, "Have you ever heard the expression, 'The customer is always right'?" The worker says, "Yeah." Foster then says, "Yeah? Well, here I am, the customer." Driven by what he interprets as continued disregard by the worker, Foster pulls out a machine gun and waves it around the restaurant until he gets his way. He continues his armed tirade against bad service across Los Angeles. After ransacking a convenience store where he felt mistreated, he tells the frightened owner, "I'm just standing up for my rights as a consumer."

Broetzmann also believes that customers often get a raw deal these days. But his motives and tactics for combating that are nothing like those of Michael Douglas's character. Broetzmann prefers to mediate between aggrieved customers and companies gone astray. He takes care always to approach both with understanding and a goal of helping each to see the other's point of view.

That is why he felt a need to counter what he saw as growing hype about irrational customers. He started his quest with an Internet search of the word *rage* and got a smorgasbord of terms: *road rage*, *air rage*, *retail rage*, *computer rage*, *travel*, and *leisure rage*. But he saw little on the justified indignation of reasonable people, which he had a feeling was more common than indicated in the sensational accounts he found. "Rage was being positioned in the marketplace," Broetzmann says, "maybe unfairly, maybe fairly, as a bunch of crazy people who did wacky things. It just didn't seem right to me."

Then the social scientist in him took over. His company, Customer Care Measurement and Consulting, based in northern Virginia, teamed up with Arizona State University's business school to gather some hard evidence on the phenomenon he was sensing. They created the Customer Rage Study and reported their first results in 2003. The study was based on a telephone survey of a

random sample of national households in which respondents who had trouble with a product or service during the past twelve months answered a series of questions about the problem they considered most serious. The study showed that approximately 68 percent said they were either extremely or very upset about their problem. Broetzmann and fellow researchers identified those people as experiencing “customer rage.” Another 28 percent were somewhat or a bit upset. Just 3 percent were not at all upset.

But the study went on. It asked those who were found to have “rage” to answer questions about the various ways they might have expressed their displeasure. Ninety percent said they shared their maddening story with other people, and 77 percent complained to the company that caused the problem. Of those who complained, customers reacted in one or more of the following ways to the company’s handling of their complaint: 57 percent decided never to do business with the company again, 28 percent yelled or raised their voice at a company employee, 8 percent cursed, and another 8 percent threatened legal action.

The Customer Rage Study came out again in 2004, 2005, and 2007, and not much had changed from 2003. The percentage of people with a complaint who reported experiencing rage rose or held steady each year, never again dipping below 70 percent. But in 2007, 44 percent reported being “extremely upset,” as compared with an average of 41 percent in previous years. Each year the study became more detailed. Perhaps in homage to Michael Douglas’s movie character, or maybe just to make sure rage wasn’t about to get out of hand as it did in that movie, the 2004 study began asking about revenge. Each year since, on average, 15 percent of respondents have wanted revenge on the company they felt had wronged them. Only 1 percent reported getting it. The study didn’t specify how, but Mona Shaw’s hammer and Bob Garfield’s ComcastMustDie Web site come to mind.

○ ○ ○

A few years ago, Junius Harris was moving into a newly renovated apartment in New York City. He had been a star elementary school teacher in Los Angeles and New York since the late 1980s. His friends say patience, forgiveness, integrity, and a wry humor seem to be embedded in Harris’s DNA. But the customer service at AT&T and Verizon pushed him past his limits during his move.

Harris and his partner, David Lebow, were set to move in on August 15. On July 15, Harris called to switch their current Verizon landline number to the new place. Moving it didn’t cost anything; he just had to get it done early so the line would be working when they moved in. But Verizon told him the previous tenants had not cancelled their account with AT&T, so the new apartment’s phone lines were still live. Before his phone service could be established, the previous phone service had to be cancelled. The Verizon customer service agent told Harris they could not cancel an AT&T customer’s account. He would have to get AT&T to do that. Verizon knew the account holder’s name and the phone number but couldn’t tell Harris, so he would have to cancel the account without any of the information or authority he needed. Harris called his new landlord for help, only to find he was in Greece for the month. Harris called Verizon one more time just to see if there was any other way. The agent told him they could install new lines into the apartment, but that would cost \$300. Harris decided to go ahead with it. The agent immediately made the appointment for Saturday, August 15, move-in day.

Then Harris called AT&T, on his Verizon phone, to see if he could get anywhere with them. He couldn’t proceed too far into the voice response system because he didn’t have an account number (an AT&T phone number). When the system asked if he was a customer, he said yes, just to get through. He was asked again for his account number. Finally, he shouted “agent” and “operator” at the voice response system. At first it told him it did not understand his response. But he just kept shouting “agent” repeatedly. Eventually it connected him to a live customer service agent, in India. Harris explained the situation. But when she asked him for the number of the line in the apartment, he couldn’t tell her. When she asked for the name of the customer, he didn’t know. Finally, she told him that all she could do was report it as an abandoned line. She would file the form, but it would take two weeks to turn off the line. So by the beginning of August, the line should be free to set up his Verizon service. He was skeptical and asked her to give him a number he could call to check on it. She assured him the old phone line would be disconnected and gave him a confirmation number instead. He asked again for a phone number to check on it. She wouldn’t give in. Harris hung up, warily.

Then he called Verizon back to cancel the appointment to put in new lines. They transferred him to the maintenance line. The technicians advised him not to cancel the appointment unless he was positive the line was free, because then he might be left in the lurch. He agreed, and so they transferred him back to the agent. She told Harris that if the line was free when they came out and they didn’t have to install new wires, the service call would cost only \$80. Then without really saying it, the Verizon agent mentioned that one way to get around this was to call AT&T and pretend to be somebody who could get the line cancelled. Harris understood her point, but lying was not really in his nature.

Three weeks later, about five days before moving day, Harris and Lebow were at the apartment cleaning it. Harris called AT&T again from his cell phone to see if the line had been cancelled. He somehow maneuvered himself to something called AT&T Local. The agent was in the United States

this time. Harris told his story, replete with the confirmation number. The agent told him that the line had not been cancelled. No form had been filed. She said the confirmation number he had meant nothing. It was a fake. They didn't issue those kinds of numbers. She said the only way to cancel the account was to have the person who owns the building or the account holder do it. Then she asked, "Who are you again?" Before the call, Lebow had run down to the mailboxes for the apartment and gotten the two names of the previous tenants off it — a male name and a female name. So Harris didn't lie, but answered that the account holder was one of the two names. The agent told him it was the woman he mentioned. That helped. At least he had the name now. But the AT&T agent said all she could do was try to expedite a new order to cancel the abandoned line. She wouldn't promise it would be done by Saturday, but he was welcome to call back and check then.

On Saturday morning, a few hours before Verizon was due to arrive, Lebow was unpacking, and Harris went in the back room to call AT&T one more time. He now knew which buttons to press and which prompts to use to get where he needed to be. As he waited on hold, he planned what he would say.

Harris was born and grew up in Jamaica, Queens, in New York City. His father was a bus driver and his mother a nurse. He had gone to Columbia University, the first in his family to make it to the Ivy League. Sitting on hold that morning in his new apartment, Harris says something clicked. "I realized they weren't going to give me a straight answer." Then he thought of the woman at Verizon who seemed to be nudging him to do what he was about to do.

When the AT&T operator came on the line, he found himself yelling into the phone in a Greek accent. "Yes, hello. My name is Stavros Papadopoulos," the name of his landlord. "It all came together," says Harris. "It was such a big lie, and it just felt so weird because everybody had been saying that they were taking care of this, and they weren't." He went on impersonating his landlord. The agent told him the line was not cancelled yet. He did a whole riff on how he was a very busy man and had no time to deal with their incompetence. "What kind of business are you running?" he asked, his Greek accent holding strong. "I need this to end now." Suddenly, the agent was very apologetic. "But I blustered on," says Harris.

Lebow had heard the yelling and wondered what was going on. He came to the door but didn't go in. He heard Harris bellowing into the phone in a Greek accent. Thinking he might ruin it for laughing, he stepped away. "Tell me who to call. I want names and numbers. My tenant needs to move in. What kind of people say they will do something and then don't do it?" In the end, the woman said she would take care of it right away and that the line should be free in minutes. She apologized profusely and thanked him for calling AT&T. Harris said, "Thank you. I apologize for yelling. It was nothing against you. How do you say — you seem like a very nice lady." When Verizon came an hour later, it was done. Harris felt a little guilty but says, "It was so frustrating. They make you do things you wouldn't normally do."

In that 2001 rudeness survey by Public Agenda, 69 percent of respondents said they believed the problem of a lack of consideration and courtesy in our society was getting worse. And 52 percent of respondents said the residue from these infuriating incidents stayed with them for a long time afterward. But one point in the study raised a question that is debatable: 73 percent of respondents said they believe Americans used to treat people with more respect and courtesy in the past, while 21 percent believe that is simply nostalgia for a past that never existed.

A look back at how customer service has evolved (or devolved) in this country, especially customer service by telephone, not only confirms the merit of both those opinions about the past in the rudeness study, but also shows how we got to where we are today.

[RSS](#) [Healthy Travel](#) [Inflight Information](#) [Special Sections](#) [USAirways](#)

[In This Issue](#) [Our Contributors](#) [Sweepstakes](#) [City Profiles](#) [Contact](#) [Newsletter](#) [Our Advertisers](#) [Privacy Policy](#)