

# THE AGONIES OF LEWIS BLACK

Our customer-service curmudgeon Suffers for ALL of US—but NOT in Silence.

BY CHUCK SAITLER

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his could get ugly. It's 10 a.m. and Lewis Black needs coffee. He pops his head in the kitchen of the West Bank Café, a fixture on Manhattan's West Side (and his unofficial office). But the place is dead, so the only thing here that's bitter and steaming is Black himself.

"Perfect," he groans.

Heading back outside, he squints at the sun as if he wants to stub it out like a cigarette. Then he marches grimly into . . . Starbucks.

Starbucks actually inspired the title of one of Black's CDs: *The End of the Universe*. In Houston, he encountered two of them across the street from each other—a violation, apparently, of the natural order: "If there was a just and loving God, he wouldn't have allowed that kind of s--t to go down!"

Fortunately for the baristas, it's early. Black is still in lowercase mode, his voice a raspy, venomous rumble. Grande latte in hand, he shuffles back to the West Bank, leaving the Starbucks intact—for now.

In the world of stand-up comedy, Black is the reigning rage-a-holic. On Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and his HBO specials, his persona is Man on the Edge of an Aneurysm, a seething, gutter-mouthed, pop-eyed venter who's equally offended by duplicitous politicians, greedy CEOs, and endemic stupidity. You may have seen his spittle-spraying tirades, the way he STABS his WORDS into the EYE of the CAMERA, cursing as if he gets paid by the F-bomb. He's all spleen.

Black, 58, has established himself as a proxy for the rank-and-file citizen. He suffers—and explodes—so we don't have to. "My life," he says, "has boiled down to this: Get me there as soon as possible so I can start to bitch. It's sad."

But cathartic. After all, for every customer-service superstar, there remain a thousand (ten thousand? a million?) losers. Day-to-day service is a string of bad blind dates, an endless series of

humiliations; Black, who does 250 stand-up gigs a year, lives a life of canceled flights, long lines, and missed hotel wake-up calls. "Three dollars a minute for technical assistance for my computer? If I'm going to spend that kind of F-KING money, I'd just as soon have phone sex."

As he likes to say, "There's not enough deodorant for this conversation!"

But it's a conversation that clearly connects with the country. Black's rage is all the rage: His latest HBO special, "Red, White & Screwed," hit the airwaves in June, a month before the paperback version of his best-selling memoir, *Nothing's Sacred*, was published. Barry Levinson's *Man of the Year*, starring Robin Williams and costarring Black, opens in October, one of four movies he'll appear in this year.

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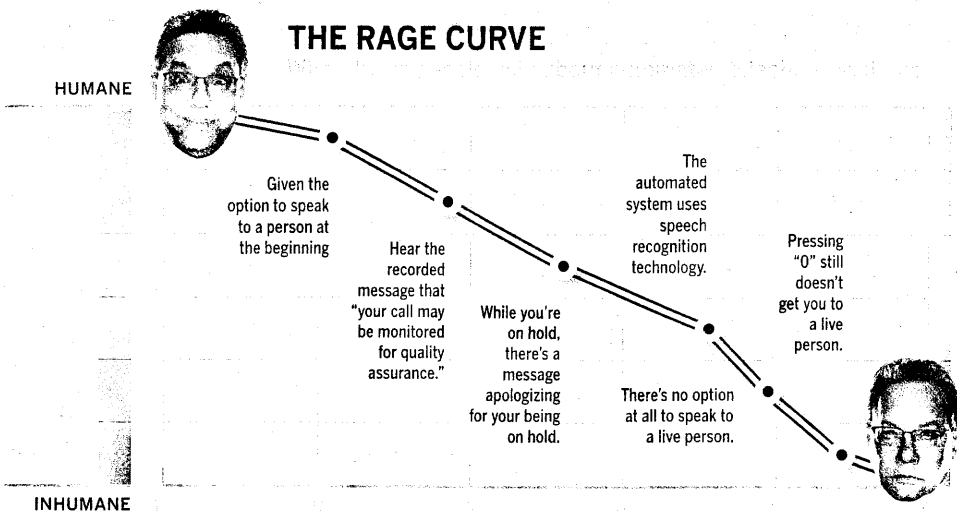
"THE BEGINNING OF THE END" of customer service, Black declares, "was when they took the simplest service of all—'Hi, I need a phone number'—and put a machine in. You're a phone company, F-KER! I mean, I'm really sorry they divided AT&T and all that, but C'MON! Just tell me, 'One of our representatives will be with ya in a minute.' Don't have this machine that you're refining and refining until it can guess every voice in America."

Black has given lousy service a lot of thought (back in the day he used to provide it—as a bartender who "didn't know how to bartend"). He jabs his meaty digit at the root of the problem. "From the time I was born, every waking moment in American business has been devoted to the bottom line. I don't think companies think about service as service. They're worrying about whether the company's growing at 9%. But a company can grow and—hey, Enron GREW, you f--king morons!"

Businesses bring down Black's wrath for the same reasons politicians do. Incompetence. Apathy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JILL GREENBERG

## THE RAGE CURVE



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Lying. He's angry with companies because the little guy isn't getting what he paid for. "I roll into the airport at 7 in the morning, and the airline goes, 'Oh, that plane is being serviced.' I go, 'Why didn't you tell me beforehand?' They say, 'We didn't know.' Not, 'We're sorry to inconvenience you.' And I go, 'The plane wasn't full! That's the reason—just say it! Don't lie to me!'"

Black's operatic dyspepsia is a balm to those of us unable to eviscerate on our own. "They say, 'Sir, you can't use that kind of language.' I say, 'Have you got language that works for this kind of INSANITY?'"

Insanity like the credit-card company that canceled his card while he was in Europe: "They say, 'You should have told us you were going.' I go, 'You're not my MOMMY!'"

Or the insanity that is cell-phone service: "When I was in Europe, using a phone to call the States, my carrier neglected to tell me that it doesn't consider Scandinavia to be in Europe. That was a \$1,500 mistake. But it was good for 10 days of screaming." Or the insanity of health-insurance companies wrangling for so long over which policy covered a bill that he finally just paid the doctor himself: "F-KERS!"

Black's not one to forgive easily. After, "Hi, it's Lewis," his answering-machine greeting offers this testy-mental: "Sorry the system has been screwed up. I was switching companies." The screwup, whatever it was, took place two years ago. At least.

So what makes Black happy? An honest answer. A warm reception. A little *humanity*. He has nothing but love for his travel agent, Brian, for example: The man's a miracle worker. And Black still talks about how some tender soul at Continental once ushered him into its Presidents Club lounge while solving a ticket problem (companies desperate to stay afloat give great service, he points out).

He concedes that service tends to improve at the "snot end of the spectrum," and now that he has money, Black sees it more often—a fact this

self-described "union guy" finds a little unsettling. "The closest the middle class can get to it is Nordstrom," he says. "I like to shop at Nordstrom—it's just my feminine side." Even when the store doesn't have the pants he wants (in, what else, black), "they go, 'I'll check to see if we can have another store ship them to you—I'll call you.' And then *they call!*"

ONSTAGE AND ON CAMERA, Black may look and sound perpetually bilious, the embodiment of AC/DC's "Back in Black" that introduces his *Daily Show* commentaries, but in person, he's a stand-up comedian who happens to be a stand-up guy. In the acknowledgments of his book, he thanks 177 people by name.

He started out as a playwright after graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and later attended the Yale School of Drama. After he turned to comedy, a buddy suggested he was funniest when riled. Audiences ate it up. Still, despite his hypercritical shtick, he's empathetic; he closed his act for years by instructing the audience to generously tip the waitresses. Of sales, he says, "That's the toughest f-king row to hoe. You're kind of reaching for people's wallets, because you really need it. And you're getting into their personal space and into their needs structure."

As a service provider himself, he has come a long way from the days when he'd tell bar-gagging patrons, "That's the way we make a Long Island iced tea here." When he emerges from a cab downtown later in the day, an attractive couple does a double-take.

Man: I never do this

Woman: We're huge fans.

Man: We just saw you two nights ago.

Woman: You were hilarious.

Black: Well, thank you.

Man: Sorry to bother you.

Black: You didn't.

The couple walks off beaming. "If people stop you and want to talk, unless you're really F-KED for time—and even then you have to be nice—you just have to. That's the deal. They're my customers. Without them, I'd be hoping People's Express came back."

Of course, Black the customer and Black the comedian have different needs. As much as the former craves smooth service, the latter needs the cold coffee, the snippy clerk, the fly in his soup. "People ask me, 'How do you get up for it every night?'" Black says of his act. "I say, I don't have to. Something will happen during the day, and that's what I'm yelling about. That's really where the stuff comes from.

"Unless it's Sunday," he adds, "and I watch *Meet the Press*—then it's not really a problem." ■

Chuck Salter ([csalter@fastcompany.com](mailto:csalter@fastcompany.com)) is a senior writer at FAST COMPANY.

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