

So You Want To “Automate” Personalized Service? (Part I) *Better Set Your Standards High – By Learning from my Mom’s Local Butcher!*

“Automated” personalized service. Let’s be frank. Sounds a lot like an oxymoron. But the simple truth is that many companies (new and old) are attempting to deploy the latest in communication automation, data-mining algorithms, and artificial business intelligence to propel their sales, service and fulfilment programs. We get it. With every new technology, there’s a temptation to test equally new tactical approaches to customer sales and service. And the incessant drive to improve the bottom-line means that management is beholden to investigate scalable, cost-saving measures at every turn. But attempts to automate the human exchange still seem to fall flat, most especially on the service side. For sure, some of these newer technological approaches are still in their infancy and will likely improve. But in many instances, we suspect even mature companies neglect to establish measurable benchmarks for gold standards in basic, personalized, customer service. Or fail to understand when “automation” might even be working against the bottom-line.

“Automation” can mean many things, and be introduced at all stages of customer engagement and fulfilment. Some back-end automation (e.g. manufacturing, warehousing, logistics, and delivery services) makes a great deal of sense and can vastly improve a company’s ability to fulfill its service obligations in a timely and price-sensitive manner. No one would question the incredible success of companies like Amazon.com or FedEx on that front. But we’d still suggest that a truly successful showcase for automating on-going, front-end customer service – the human exchange – is hard to find. Specifically, we’re talking about two scenarios:

- 1) Servicing Unique Customer Needs / Interests
- 2) Addressing Unique Customer Problems

What Does the Gold Standard in Personalized Service Look Like to You?

If you represent a company looking to “automate” personalized service, we would caution you to begin by first defining what you feel the Gold Standards for excellence in customer service should even look like. Make yourself accountable to a set of measurable service benchmarks – ones that you would want to experience as a customer of your own company. And be sure to test them on a regular basis using customer satisfaction surveys, customer feedback forums, secret-shopper programs, periodic focus groups, and third-party interviews. Most important of all, don’t ever forget there is a unique human being behind every single transaction – an individual who wants to be treated as such. And so the closer you get to the mark of authentic and genuine personalized service, the more likely you are to increase customer retention and maintain healthy revenues.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MY MOM’S LOCAL BUTCHER

We could provide a rote list of best practices in customer service. But the simple truth is that each of us knows exactly what exceptional service looks and *feels* like. Because we’ve all encountered it somewhere in our travels as a customer. And so we’re going to make our point with a simple illustration - using my Mom’s local butcher.

Growing up, our family of four used to summer in a small community called “Martin’s River.” And at the head of that river, there was an all-purpose convenience store, with a butcher at the back - **Raymond’s** convenience store. Easily eight months would pass every year between when we shuttered the cottage for the winter, and when we returned the following spring for another run of weekends on the water. And always we’d have a BBQ dinner with fresh T-bone steaks, mashed potatoes, and a garden salad every Saturday night. Raymond was the purveyor of those tasty steaks. I remember trailing alongside my mother every Saturday afternoon for our regular weekend shop at that riverside convenience store to get our supplies for our summer stays. And it was at Raymond’s butcher counter that I regularly witnessed my first lessons in seamless, soft-sell, personalized service. Because the conversations invariably went something like this:

- Why good afternoon, Mrs. Stairs. And how are you, today?
Just fine thanks. Just fine. Lovely day.

Indeed it is. And nice to see you again. How can I help you, today?

Well, we're having our usual Saturday night BBQ.

Right – So T-Bone steaks again?

Yes – please.

And is your husband down from the city as well? Will it be four I'll be getting you?

Yes, please. Four T-Bones, thank you very much.

Four T-Bones it is. And one extra large for your husband.

[While Raymond makes the order...]

Now are you just here for the weekend? Or are you staying for the full week?

The kids and I are planning to stay the full week. Denis has to go back to town to work for some of it.

So is there anything else I can get you today for your stay? We have some pork chops on special.

Yes. Three pork chops would be nice. After that, you'll see us again, I'm sure.

Three pork chops it is.

[While packing the second order]

By the way, Mrs. Stairs, I saw the Mahone Bay market has some fresh corn. It would go well with the steaks.

Oh, great. We need to get some strawberries while we're at it. Good to know.

Well here you are Mrs. Stairs. Enjoy your time down the Shore.

Thank you, Raymond.

And see you later, little fella, [Raymond would say to me.]

See ya!

The sad truth is that this kind of simple, friendly, easy-going, personalized service is extremely hard to come-by. Maybe it's even starting to disappear from living memory in this hyped-up era of all-things technological. Which makes it pure gold if you can find a way to replicate it in your own service operation.

THE ESSENCE OF “PERSONALIZED” GOLD SERVICE STANDARDS

Personalized service is about many things, quite a few of which are intangible. Good customer service ultimately taps into personal values and specific personal needs. Which makes it very difficult (if not impossible) to “automate.” Nonetheless, business realities often dictate that we create systems and procedures to guarantee a consistent level of service speed and delivery, and rightfully so. But what are the intangibles we're trying to replicate and automate? Make certain you know:

**Awareness. Friendliness. Relevance. Personal Fit. Competence. Knowledge.
Authenticity. Gifting. Selflessness. Empathy. Trust.**

That typical exchange between Raymond and my mother captured just about every one of these intangibles. Raymond was friendly and knowledgeable. He had clearly taken the time to learn who we were, our family routines, our favourite cuts, and how we liked them. He knew our basic needs and how best to meet them. He made additional suggestions, but only where they were clearly relevant and would “fit the bill.” He even offered service tips that had no bearing on his own bottom-line. And he acknowledged every stakeholder in the transaction, from the absentee husband to the snot-nosed kid; not simply the lady with the purse strings.

In short, if you want to “automate” any form of personalized customer service, you need to remember what you're trying to accomplish, what your customers truly value in an exchange, and what you're being compared against. Approaches to “automation,” as they are right now, have a long way to go to catch up with Raymond. I wager his kind can still teach us a thing or two. Nonetheless, automation can play a critical role in your service model. Let's explore the options and opportunity costs in **So You Want to Automate Personalized Service? – Part II.**

Good luck! And let us know how we can help. Contact www.canadastartup.com for your mission critical needs.

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