

# Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

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## Why you shouldn't hire an ostrich to do customer service

When an ostrich feels threatened it buries its head in the sand. The ostrich believes, so the theory goes, that if it can't see you, then you don't exist. Danger averted. This is one of the primary reasons we don't hire ostriches for customer service jobs. Simply ignoring a customer will not alleviate their problem nor will it make them go away. It may come as a surprise then how many customer service professionals seem to have been trained by ostriches.

Just a few days ago, I walked up to a counter at the airport to ask the gate agent a quick and simple question. I saw she was on the phone as I approached and expected to wait a minute or two. As she saw me approach she averted her eyes down and away. I stood and waited patiently.

Standing right next to her, I could hear her call. It was about something work related but it included a lot of he-said-she-said also. I only had a quick question; she wouldn't even need to look anything up on her computer or even end her conversation. I politely interrupted, "I'm sorry, can you tell me where the B terminal is please?" Instead of asking whoever was on the other end of the line to hold on a second so she could quickly answer my question, she actually turned away from me even more, not even acknowledging that I existed. Like an ostrich, she thought that if she couldn't see me, then I don't exist or at least I'd go away.

I didn't go away. Instead, I seethed.

I tend not to be the seething sort, so it fascinated me why I seethed. Was it because I want all the attention and I expect to be listened to and heard on my terms, when I wanted it, especially by someone who is supposed to be in a customer service role?

I could have easily walked away and asked someone else. I probably could have found a sign if I looked around a little more. Damn her, she's a customer service agent and I'm a customer!

Nope. It was none of those things.

A few days later, I was in a hotel and wanted to know which way the conference center was. Again, a simple question that wouldn't require anyone to do any work,

look anything up on a computer or even stop what they were doing. Just like a few days before, I approached the concierge counter and the concierge was on the phone. Like a few days before, she was talking about something work related but there was clearly a little extra friendly banter. Like a few days before, she didn't interrupt her call to help me. She continued to talk on the phone leaving me standing there to wait for her. But she did one simple thing completely different. She looked over the phone, held up her finger and mouthed the words, "I'll be right with you..."

I didn't go away this time either...but this time, I felt fine.

No seething. No anger. No incensed customer demanding immediate attention.

So often, companies forget that 100% of customers are people. And people are human. And humans are a sensitive sort. A delicate mix of caffeine, sleep-deprivation, hormones, uncertainty, social awkwardness, stubbornness and a dash of the-world-revolves-around-me-because-I'm-the-customer. Though we think we want answers and immediate attention, in reality we just want to be acknowledged. We just want someone to show us, in some way, that they recognize that we exist. If we don't get that, we demand even more than we really need and act like a buffoon until we do. In contrast, if our existence is acknowledged, we show remarkable patience and generosity.

More than one of my friends have complained to me that when they come over to my apartment, I just scream out come in. They will walk in while I'm finishing an email and, without looking up, I'll just shout out, "hey." The first time I heard the complaint I pushed back, "I've known you for years, you've been here thousands of times, just give me a minute and I'll give you all my attention." Then I added the kicker, "why so selfish?" But my friends are human (for the most part) and are, like me, a sensitive lot. So after more than one person told me it was rude, I tried taking my head out of the ground.

Now, when my friends come over, I hear the same knock and, even if the door is unlocked, I get up and let them in. "Hey," I say, "come in, I'm just finishing an email, give me a minute and I'll be right with you." They say, "don't worry, take as long as you want." I get more time to finish what I need to and no one feels uncomfortable.

Perhaps we should change the term "customer service representative" to "people service representative" just to remind everyone that customers are people too.

p.s. no need to send me an email telling me that ostriches don't actually bury their heads in the sand. I know they don't. But that doesn't change the fact that too many customer service representatives do.

