

Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

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You shouldn't need to wield a gun to get customer service

Time Warner Cable is almost universally hated by their customers in New York City. And for good reason. With a relative monopoly on cable television, there is not much of an incentive for them to offer much more than the minimum. Yes, there is RCN and there is satellite, but in New York City, satellite is not a great option and you can only get RCN if the building agrees to carry it.

For years I've had issues with my cable TV - my DVR often records entire programs completely pixilated. My picture will often freeze while I'm watching something live. And the features it's supposed to offer, like pausing live TV or rewinding live TV, are great except after I un-pause my program it continues to play without sound. I've gone through three cable boxes, I've had multiple cablemen come to my apartment to fix, rewire or attempt to fix the problem. Each one, and I'm not exaggerating, has told me that whatever the cableman before him did was, and I quote, "idiotic" before he proceeds to do something completely different. But at the end of the day, nothing really works that much better. Oh yeah, and my internet sucks too. If I'm in a very nostalgic mood it will take me back to the days of a 14.4 dial-up modem...but I'm not that nostalgic that often.

This past week has been a particularly frustrating week. The internet has been so painfully slow. For the record, I'm not looking to stream HD movies, all I want is for twitter to open in less than 30 seconds. Or to be able to use Facebook without having to wait a full 60 seconds every time I click on any link.

I have called Time Warner for help in the past. They usually make me plug and unplug things and have me run some diagnostics. Inevitably, they will report to me that my levels are "within the acceptable range" (a level they determine, not me), which means that they can't (or won't) help or that the problem lies somewhere else like with my computer or my building.

But the last time I called them was different. This time when I called I wasn't my usually polite, laid-back-I-know-you're-just-doing-your-job-can-you-help-me-solve-a-problem self. This time I was mad. This time I was fed up. This time I started threatening to end my entire business relationship with them. "I'm gonna get faster internet with you or without you," I told the agent, "so you can either help me or not, but

if you don't you lose it all - TV, phone and internet and I'm going to Verizon."

And guess what happened?

They reacted. They were wonderful, in fact. They escalated my call immediately. They gave me a specialist who ran me through tests and asked questions no TimeWarner Cable agent has ever asked me. We were evaluating IP addresses, even. It was amazing. He was, and I mean this, really great.

My question is, why do I have to hold a proverbial gun to a company's head before I get a decent level of service. That's not good customer service. I got off the phone with a much clearer sense of the problem and how to fix it and it occurred to me that's how most customer service works. Only when a company is afraid to lose the business do they act to keep it.

Customer service is when a company works everyday to keep your business so that they never face a threat of losing it. It is the difference between a company that acts proactively and a company that simply reacts. Ultimately, both strategies may work, but the latter - the norm - is painful and stressful for all involved. Customers don't want to call and yell and agents don't want to be yelled at.

I admire companies with the foresight to prevent complaints not the ones with the systems to deal with them.