

Lessons from nasty service with a nice smile

 By [Carmen Murray](#)

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Companies spend millions to improve their service design and train staff to offer friendlier service and handle complaints more efficiently. My question is this: How can you expect your staff to provide a nasty service with a nice smile? Isn't it easier just to solve the problem that is hindering your business growth? I like to refer to this as the 'Cremora effect'. It's not inside, it's on top. We refuse to go to the root of the problem. It's much safer to camouflage the problem and hope no one notices. The question is this? Are businesses allocating their budgets to the wrong problems?



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Punitive policies punish the customers and wrecks a business

How many companies have punitive policies in place that punish their customers and bully them into submission rather than being of service? Through my day to day interactions as a consumer, it is so evident that service blueprints are being followed and the unfortunate reality is that frontline staff receives the rant-and-rave of a furious customers due to a flawed product or service which somehow is the last avenue that businesses dare to face.

The right to redemption

As a former hotelier working at 5-star hotels, a Connected Marketer, and flourishing as a customer experience expert, I've always believed businesses have the right to redemption. Every business makes mistakes. It's more about how the business recovers from their failures and master the craft to turn an unhappy, angry and frustrated customer into a customer for life. Ultimately, it's up to the business how they manage their resources, values, and processes that will define whether a company deserves redemption.

I look at my personal experiences with products and services through a lens of compassion and understanding and try not to express my "emotional weather" and be more objective and logic.

Make no mistake, I don't miss a thing. After all, I am a customer experience auditor, and help businesses to find all their blind spots across all their business functions to empower businesses to fix what's broken. My attention to detail is thorough and highly accurate but I do believe there is merit to give businesses the benefit of the doubt...**until I reached that tipping point...**

My bad experience with a car manufacturer

After my husband and I got married, he bought me a beautiful brand new car. I felt empowered, successful and safe and well on my way and imagined all the experiences that await with this sexy ride of mine. About 8 months later, this experience took a u-turn with some serious, continues issues. Everything that could go wrong, happened. It was a "nightmare on Elm Street".

Overwhelmed by many tears of frustrations and feeling completely undermined and bullied by this brand, I started complaining and was completely dismissed and "mansplained" to. I recall the car breaking down in a very dangerous area and the unwillingness of the car dealership to help before 5 pm to tow the vehicle to the dealership. This was before Uber was well adopted here in South Africa. I complained over and over. I was told I should stop complaining because this vehicle is on a maintenance plan and they are replacing all the parts.

I recall asking them, but what if this car goes out of warranty? Someone will inherit this car and they would never know what lies ahead? They just shrugged. Incident after the incident happened and the permanent residence of my vehicle became the car dealership due to waiting for months for parts to arrive. The car dealership refused to acknowledge me until my husband got involved and we appointed a lawyer.

After weeks of meeting with the head office, the dealer principle and our legal-council, they agreed to replace the car with a better vehicle and negotiated a better price. Despite all the negative experiences, they managed to redeem my trust, and we continued the journey with this car brand.

After redemption, the wheels and the "feels" fell off

This car was amazing. So much that my husband and I swapped cars so he could enjoy the luxury of this vehicle. A year later the problems started, but we dismissed it as we refused to believe that the same thing could happen twice.

Who could ever be so unlucky?

Yip, it happened again. The car ended up having so many problems which included engine problems. The list goes on and on. The engine warning light came on all the time, and they could not get to the bottom of it and would keep the car with them for weeks to months at a time to await the parts and then they would change the diagnosis when they could not meet the deadline, and so the entire cycle repeated itself.

They then changed their policy to only import parts when they have big orders. The shipment of parts took months at a time and you can just imagine the extended delays after this new policy was introduced. They would then instruct us to drive with the engine warning light on until the parts arrived and assured us it won't harm the vehicle. They would repair it and then weeks later the engine warning light started flickering again.

We never complained because we liked the staff and we knew that they were just as frustrated with the broken system as we were. This has gone on for over 3 years. By this time, clients, friends and family noticed that we hardly have our

“beloved” car with us and we told them openly about our experience. Why? The trust was broken and we had no loyalty for a brand that believed in a one-sided relationship.

Conversations around the braai were all about why not to buy certain makes of cars and sharing their past experiences similar to ours. A few weeks ago, the car stopped working. They diagnosed the vehicle with faulty compressors that had to be replaced.

Weeks later, they come back and informed us, it's the pistons, which means the entire engine needs to be replaced and the warranty won't cover the R160,000 to replace it? *Frown* gradual realisation... wait you keep on diagnosing the vehicle incorrectly, let me see what is happening on google reviews and if I'm going insane? There it is! We are all experiencing the same problem, some just realise it much later in their journey than others.

We had enough.

We requested that the car dealership send us all the invoices, every bit of work they've done on the vehicle, the job cards, and how long the car has been with them each time. We recalled in the past year, they've had the car with them for 4-6 months out of 12 months. In order to proceed with legal recourse, these documents were required. Surprisingly, the head office and dealership refused that we receive this information and explained to us that its private information we can't access? Without boring you too much, we are now in legal proceedings with this car manufacturer.

Outcome? We will never buy this car brand and any car brand associated with this holding company or the country it's produced in.

Why am I sharing this experience?

This is not about brand shaming. This is, unfortunately, a reality for many consumers every single day being bullied by organisations. This type of experience is not isolated to the vehicle industry only. The ripple effect of these bad experiences is that customers don't turn to brands for advice, they turn to friends and the internet for advice. What many brands don't realise, is that their **competitors** failing at customer experiences, wreck the entire industry reputation too. Ultimately, the customer votes with their loyalty, trust and their wallets.

What can businesses, marketers and CX professionals learn from this experience?

1. You can advertise and make your branding and marketing as sexy as you please. If your product or service does not deliver, you will not gain or retain a customer. This will become one of the hardest conundrums to solve for businesses. There is no point in spending more money on advertising when the customer journey is broken. It leads to wastage, and there is too much on the line to ignore this with a tsunami of choice.

2. The results that marketers and stakeholders are seeing today, is not a result of recent incidents. It is a build-up of many good or bad moments over a period of time. As many experts will point out: your quarterly returns have nothing to do with what you did in the current quarter.

3. When your competitor fails its customers, it fails an entire industry.

4. Get back to the basics. Stop looking at the branches for your answers. Get to the deep-rooted issues and fix it today, no matter the cost. Many businesses suffer from myopia and chase money and pay little attention to the chaos happening throughout the entire business ecosystem and understanding the customer experience abyss.

5. Don't patronise your customers! How many businesses out there apply biases and judge a person at face value? Many companies seem to think their customers are not smart enough to know the difference and that “mansplaining” and “bamboozling” is accepted.

6. Pay attention to the customers you have and treat them like gold, instead of upselling them all the time. Maybe try and understand if you have been offering value for money and if they are fully satisfied with the product and service. (Avoid surveys and cold calling) get face to face with your customers if you want the truth. Get to the painstaking wounds of your existing customers before it becomes infected.

7. Integrate your systems and have one singular view of the customer. It is mind-boggling in this age that every business boasts about Omni channels, yet they have not mastered integration. It is deeply disappointing as we are at the doorstep of 2020. In this particular experience, if the car manufacturer had an integrated system, they would've been able to identify the past issues and connected the constant activity at their dealership, and they could've flagged it and resolved it. This was a perfect example of siloed departments, siloed experiences.

8. Don't punish your customers with punitive policies and procedures. Friction wrecks your business and turns your business into a charity. You donate your customers to your competitors one friction at a time. Competitors may also not be defined as the competitors you would necessarily recognise.

9. Customer experience is every single department's responsibility. Even if you have a dedicated CX team, it is a cohesive effort with one goal in mind. Be customer-obsessed, not customer focussed.

10. Get out of the boardroom and experience your customers' journeys. This is the only way to build empathy, compassion, and understanding.

11. Where there is smoke there is fire. If more than one customer is complaining about the same thing, that means 99% of others are not complaining about it. Get the extinguisher and get to the root of the problem.

ABOUT CARMEN MURRAY

Carmen Murray is one of the most influential modern marketers in South Africa. Her strong background in content, digital, mobile, innovation, and data analytics allows her to identify emerging trends and conceptualise disruptive communication strategies deployed with precision. The customer and their needs are always at the heart of her approach.

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