



Power of Reciprocity in Service

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The Principle Of Reciprocity



The next time you receive excellent service, notice how it creates a feeling of obligation to return the favor. The ways consumers reciprocate a favor to a business is to return, purchase more, and then say good things about them.

Psychologists call this effect “reciprocity.” Reciprocity can also be a useful psychological tool when a customer complains — perhaps even more powerful than offering discounts for future services or reduced fees for past services.

I recently attended an international meeting and stayed in a Spanish-based hotel chain in Madrid. Not only was the material service of the hotel superb, but the personal service matched it in every way. Any small complaint was handled exceptionally well. Everyone in our group noticed the way we were treated. However, there was one non-smiling waitress who worked the breakfast shift. Our group decided to work at getting her to smile. We personally managed it on our last day in the hotel!

It occurred to me that, because of the good service we received from everyone else, we viewed this server's strikingly non-friendly service style as an opportunity for us to help her have a better day. It wasn't until we left the hotel that I realized how strange that was. What made us look upon this as our personal challenge rather than as an indication of bad service?

Clearly, great service was given to us throughout our stay, even more than we expected. Almost without exception, we got our complex needs more than met with attentive, speedy, out-of-the ordinary service delivery.

When we left the hotel, I mentioned to the woman at the front desk that their hotel was truly one of the nicest I have ever stayed in. The suites were spacious, extremely well designed, complete with evening turn-down service, and free wireless broadband hook ups for our computers in all the public areas of the hotel. Every room had ample storage closets and drawers. The rooms were insulated from any surrounding noise, and the public spaces were clustered to encourage group or small conversations. Nothing was overdone. The breakfast service — included in the room fee — was tasty, appropriate, and beautifully presented. All these many factors created both a sense of reciprocity on my part, and a willingness to be more than tolerant of the non-smiling waitress.



After I told the receptionist what a magnificent hotel this was, she asked me if I would be back. "Definitely," I heard myself say without thinking about it. And there's no doubt that, when I next return to Madrid, I will select this hotel. I feel as if I owe it something because of the superb treatment. This is reciprocity as it is played out in the everyday business of enhancing a brand.

Reciprocity works well with service that is outstanding. It works particularly well when a customer complains and the situation is handled quickly, fairly, and with something that might be considered a little extra.

On our way back from Madrid, we transited through Charles DeGaulle airport. The CDG airport is notorious for making passengers go back to their airline ticket counters for special tags to be placed on weighed hand-carried luggage. True to form, that is what happened. This meant we had to go back to the United check-in desk and then wait, again, in a long line before we could proceed to the departure gate. Now I had a complaint. Why hadn't the agent at the United gate tell us we were likely to face a problem with our carry-on luggage?

We found a United ticket agent, whom we told what had happened, and that was making it difficult to get through to the plane's departure on time. Now I am a high-level flyer in United, she told us what to do and that if we had any problems, she would accompany us to make sure we got through security on time. Sensing our nervousness, she even said, "I'll tell you what, I'll walk over there with you and see that you get through right away." My complaint vanished! That's reciprocity on her part for my business with United.

As we walked, she cleared traffic the whole way and smiled a lot at the security guards, who opened a special gate for us and waved us through.

As we got on one of the CDG's hill-like, rolling moving sidewalks, we talked about the treatment we had just received. My comment was simple. "United Airlines. It's why I fly them. They always come through at just the right moment to be especially helpful when there's any kind of problem. I feel indebted to them."

How could anyone not want to positively "pay back" problem solving that is totally outside normal standards and offered with such grace and care? United Airlines could send me dozens of flyers, invite me to look at their new television advertising campaign, or put their name on billboards and buildings around the world to increase brand awareness; but, none of this would be as powerful as a single UA representative doing something personal for me — especially when I faced a problem.

Think about it. Talk with your team and invite them to think of ways they could surprise customers with something extra and unexpected and complain. The only way for customers to repay such levels of problem solving is by returning as a customer. When this happens, a simple, "Thank you," from the customer will never be enough. Take advantage when the customer is facing a problem, even if you didn't cause it. Reciprocity works particularly well then!

