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customer service: what I learned when I bought my new computer

by Roger Neugebauer

We all have stories to share of the deterioration of customer service . . .

- You call the 800 number to ask a question about your health insurance and end up in a phone tree marathon that never leads to a live human.
- You go to a check-out counter to pay for your purchases, only to have to wait for the cashier to finish her personal conversation.
- You are consulting with a nurse about your child's cold when her cell phone rings and, in mid-sentence, she stops talking to you, and takes the call.

I had the opportunity to experience poor customer service when I bought my new computer. With the new computer came, I was happy to learn, the latest version of a widely used spreadsheet program. With a new version I expected to be even more efficient in my work. I was wrong.

The new version of the spreadsheet program did not simply incorporate some tweaks and additions to the old program, it was a total overhaul — an old dependable workhorse of a program given a high-tech makeover. Not a bad goal, just poor execution.

Unfortunately, they captured the latest and greatest technological thinking, but they shut out the voice of the average consumer — people like me who have been bumbling along using only the most basic functions, and being quite happy with doing so.

The company probably did customer surveys before making the changes, and believed that all the changes were in the customers' best interests. A technologically savvy friend assures me that, over time, I will learn to love it — especially the pivot tables function.

Implications for early childhood

So why should you care about my techno troubles? After all, I can hear you saying, we are in the people business, not the technology business — taking care of people is what we do. Let me tell you a story.

When Bonnie and I had our first child, Amy, we asked all our friends for a recommendation on a good preschool program, and we signed Amy up for one that commanded lots of respect. What we discovered on Amy's first day of school is that parents were not allowed into the classroom. You dropped your child off outside the door in the morning and waited outside the door to pick your child up at the end of the day. The reason for this, we were told, is that they wanted to limit the distractions in the classrooms.

What we learned over time was that they also didn't want parents looking over their shoulders and questioning their techniques. Their attitude was, "We are the experts, all you can do is trust us." We never developed any loyalty to this program. In fact, we felt rather disrespected.

Times have changed. Three decades later, centers have become much more attuned to customer service and satisfaction. Over nine in ten preschool programs in the U.S. depend on parent fees to survive. Therefore, the last thing centers want are unhappy parents.

But as I visit centers and talk to directors, teachers, and family child care providers, I still encounter remnants of the 'customers know least' attitude. Early childhood professionals tend to have strong, often emotional, attachments to their approaches to caring for children. Though they may agree in principle that child care is a partnership between providers and parents, they may, in real life, find it difficult to appreciate a parent's perspective.

Here are some examples of scenarios where a center will be challenged to demonstrate that it truly wants to understand a parent's point of view:

- A center has a policy banning violent toys, yet a child brings into class his favorite toy — a plastic gun.
- In talking to a parent about his child's out-of-control moments in the classroom, the parent says, "You should spank him. That's what I do at home, and it always works."
- A center subscribes to a play-based focus on learning and a parent demands that the center prepare her child for kindergarten with more academic instruction.
- A parent expresses concern that his child's experience in the classroom will

be negatively impacted now that the center has enrolled a new child who requires a wheelchair.

- A parent going through hard times asks for relief with the fees.
- A parent often fails to feed her child breakfast before bringing her.
- A parent gets angry when her daughter's new clothes are dirty from playing outdoors.

In each of these situations, there is a great potential for you, the director, teacher, or family child care provider, to view the parent's position or behavior as naïve. And, there is great potential for your response to the parent to expose this viewpoint — to give the parent the impression that you view her perspective as uninformed.

The technicians on the program design team certainly have decades of training, and are highly qualified from a technical perspective. But my many years as a customer make me highly qualified from the end-user perspective. I am offended when my perspective seemingly is not valued enough to be considered.

Likewise, an early childhood professional who has years of training in child development and early childhood education will, of course, have a different perspective than a parent who has none of this experience. However, a parent's behavior is shaped by a lifetime of experiences and by deeply felt fears and dreams for his child. This experience is no more or less valid than an educator's experience, it is simply a different perspective. When you treat the parent's perspective as unworthy, this is not good customer service.

In the retail world, a common maxim is 'the customer is always right.' In the early childhood world, situations arise where what the customer asks for is something the center simply cannot deliver for reasons of school policies, licensing requirements, or fairness to other families. What is important in such situations is not who wins and who loses, but how the parent feels about the process.

- Does she feel that the center ever really understood the reasons behind her behavior or her request, or even tried to understand her reasons?
- Does the parent feel belittled or does she feel respected?
- Does she walk away from the interaction understanding, if not agreeing with, the center's point of view?

Alba DiBello of A Child's Place in New Jersey makes this observation about the importance of truly listening to parents:

"My experience of over 30 years has taught me that what parents really want is to be seen, respected, listened to, and be given an identity in the school community. . . . When we provide opportunities to hear parents' stories, opportunities for parents to reveal their gifts in new ways, and to partner in the learning, the parents find they are growing themselves and they become deeply connected to the community that facilitated that growth — the children, of course, prosper as a result!"