

THE GREAT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

PRODUCED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

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122 Barnard Avenue
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The Great Customer Experience

Not long ago, the common working definition of “great support” was something like “the best we can do in the cheapest way possible.” That’s classic cost-center thinking, and for a lot of service businesses—think WalMart and discount airlines—it can be a pretty successful strategy. But for many technology companies, the growth of fee-based services and loyalty-based marketing have radically transformed this cost-focused approach. Increasingly, the goal for support organizations now is to stand out from the crowd, to deliver a knock-their-socks-off experience, to be “world class.”

Being proud of your service quality is always more fun than nickle-and-diming the customer, of course. And there are lots of examples in daily life that show high payoffs from extraordinary service. The fanatical helpfulness of a Nordstrom’s or a Ritz-Carlton, the legendary Avis “We Try Harder” campaign, FedEx’s near-perfect on-time delivery record, and the top-to-bottom friendliness of Southwest Airlines—have all helped turn commodity, cost-centric businesses into market leaders.

Despite these examples, however, when we look at the support world, it’s surprisingly hard to figure out who’s really offering “great” service. In fact, support managers themselves seem a little fuzzy about what it takes to be outstanding. We recently asked ASP members and other support professionals, “What makes your users feel they’ve encountered a ‘great customer experience’?” The answers were often fascinating and insightful, but the most common answer was a variation on this response:

“Someone who listens, gives a complete and accurate answer, in a timely fashion.”

In other words, *exceptional* support consists of answering the phone without too much delay, listening politely, and providing a correct answer. Ouch: If this is the standard for great support, it’s chilling to think what *average* support is like.

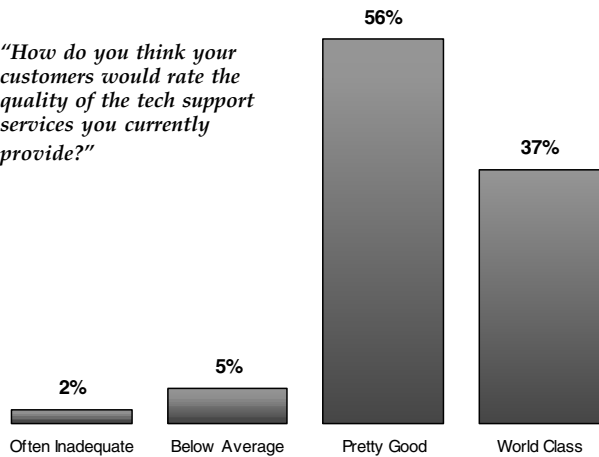
To be fair, average support these days tends to be pretty good and is often excellent, especially by comparison with the standards that prevailed 10-20 years ago. But a rise in standards is a two-edged sword: When most companies are delivering a reasonably high level of service, it becomes far harder to be truly distinctive. As customers begin to encounter good support everywhere, they ratchet up their own expectations. And they become far harder to impress.

That’s probably where we are now. Judging from our survey data (see facing page), more than a third of support managers now feel they’re delivering “world class” support. If that’s a realistic assessment, then being world-class has become pretty ordinary; for all practical purposes, world class now means little more than “above average.”

But there’s always an opportunity to dramatically exceed market standards and customer expectations. For that reason, we’ve assembled a series of short essays by support experts and in-the-trenches practitioners on the general theme of how to achieve a genuine Wow! experience in support delivery.* We hope these essays inspire some of our readers to look for new ways to delight and amaze their customers—and ultimately to move industry standards even higher.

Note that this report is a work in progress: We plan to add essays and other material whenever we run across interesting new contributions. If you’d like to share ideas with readers of future editions, please contact ASP executive director Jeffrey Tarter at jtarter@asponline.com.

"How do you think your customers would rate the quality of the tech support services you currently provide?"



Over-Achievers

In Garrison Keillor's beloved Lake Wobegon, "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Apparently, support organizations are equally talented: In a flash survey the ASP conducted recently, 93% of 142 respondents said their support quality was either "world class" or "pretty good," while only ten people described their quality as "below average" or "often inadequate." In fact, 37% ranked their support quality in the lofty "world class" range, which even Lake Wobegon's kids never manage to achieve.

Anticipation

A "wow" moment. Most of us have had that moment of delight, created by an encounter with a product or a service—a moment that caused a powerful surge of emotions that made us literally say out loud "Wow!" I certainly remember a moment that happened several years ago. I checked into a hotel after a very, very long day of slow check-in lines and delayed flights. Finally, I was at my destination, and all I was longing for was to drop my suitcase, get a glass of cold water, kick off my shoes, and stretch my legs. I opened the hotel door, walked into the room and looked at an ice bucket, dreading having to walk back a long hallway to get ice. Imagine my delight when I opened the bucket—and it was already full of ice! I literally said "wow" out loud. How did they know? How did they know that I needed those ice cubes in my glass?

But of course they knew—because they listened. They listened and observed their guests who were checking in after an exhausting day on the road. They observed the customers and thought about what would make a difference to them. And such a small, inexpensive thing made all the difference in the way I felt that day, and about the way I feel about that hotel to this day. I felt that they cared, because they bothered to think about making me comfortable.

This one event is a great illustration of how companies can make a difference and create a "wow" moment without spending millions of dollars on loyalty programs, reward points, or high-tech marketing. And it all comes down to making the customer feel that we care.

How can we create this feeling in our support environment? By understanding what problems the customers may experience, and then providing them with an answer before they even have a question. In a traditional support environment, we focus on answering questions, resolving problems one after another, solving the same problem over and over again. We help customers one by one, and only when they reach out to our support lines for help. We may even put the information about known issues on the Web, and allow the customers to search the knowledge base, even though often people don't even know how to describe their problem, what words or search terms to use.

But what if we anticipated a question a customer may encounter, and presented them with an answer before they reach for help? And we can do that, because we observe people ask the same questions in the same place over and over again. To prove to customers that we care, we need to stop and think about what they may need from us at each step of their

interaction with our product, and then deliver it to them before they ask. This is a powerful way of creating that unexpected “wow,” that elusive moment of delight.

Lala Mamedov, director of support and services, Intuit, 180 Jefferson Dr., Menlo Park, Calif. 94025; 650/944-6709. E-mail: lala_mamedov@intuit.com.

Great People, Great Support

Ask any customer or employee what distinguishes Blackbaud’s support and you’ll likely hear the same answer: the people. As one of our customers puts it, “They have become, for me, the yardstick by which all others will be judged. No software system can ever truly be perfect, but when you have really spectacular support people behind it, that just doesn’t matter.”

Building a “stellar” team like this doesn’t just happen by itself. We start with the recruiting process: potential support analysts must demonstrate an intrinsic customer focus and passion for helping others. Our hiring process consists of several interviews (which include role-plays such as “My car won’t start...”), analytical testing, and time observing analysts as they assist customers. Each part of the process sheds light on candidates’ troubleshooting abilities, time management skills, empathy, and customer focus. We look for technical skills, but we also insist that our candidates demonstrate a sincere desire to go the extra mile for our customers.

For the candidates we hire, we make sure our training and work environment create a positive experience. Since 2006, we’ve focused on increasing retention and have cut our attrition rate by more than 60%. One way we’ve achieved that is just by having fun. Our “Fun” committee initiates creative team-building activities, sparks friendly competition, and organizes surprise celebrations. Recognizing the rigor of the support environment, we publicly praise excellent service through monthly and quarterly performance awards, “Player of the Day” acknowledgments, MVP contests, monetary prizes, and food. And to help our employees explore new career opportunities within the company, we have advancement tracks that let them shadow other positions that might fit their skills and interests. The result is a degree of motivation and commitment that our customers feel is wonderful.

Carolyn Ferrell, manager of support information management, Blackbaud, 2000 Daniel Island Dr., Charleston, S.C. 29492; 843/216-6200. E-mail: carolyn.ferrell@blackbaud.com.

The Web 2.0 Era

One of Jakob Nielsen’s “laws” is that “users spend most of their time on other Web sites” than your own. I would add that so do all their friends and peers. And most likely there are hundreds—thousands even—of times more information about your products on other sites than yours. And those other Web sites, which may include semi-pro and consumer sites, are often updated a lot faster than your Web site.

Most likely any problems, concerns or ideas about *your* problems will pop up on these other sites. Your customers discuss your products in forums, they blog about them, they recommend or review them, they solve their problems (and help others solve theirs), they research and they buy them—all this happens without a single visit to your site.

You can’t fight this phenomenon. So join it.

Imagine, for example, that your customers start reporting a certain software bug in your

Speed Demons

There's one surprisingly simple way to astonish and delight customers: provide a lightning-fast answer. That's the advice that three ASP Forum participants gave in response to a question about whether there's any correlation between satisfaction scores and average speed of answer.

Jennifer Janik (mitchelj@alcatel-lucent.com) of Alcatel-Lucent reports that she analyzed two years of support ticket transaction data with the help of Bell Labs statisticians, and found that "the number-one most important variable is 'resolve duration.' The relationship is linear with satisfaction decreasing the longer the ticket takes to solve." The study also showed "that the linear relationship holds true regardless of the severity of the issue or regardless if the issue is a product defect or just a need for help."

Linda von der Heide (linda@handango.com) of Handango says she has tracked "our daily satisfaction rating" for support provided by e-mail, and found a similar "direct correlation with e-mail speed of response to satisfaction."

Rick Kilton (rkilton@rwkenterprises.com), a business process consultant, points out that specific response benchmarks are often less important than the response time the customer *expects*. "You don't need to overshoot the mark, once you find out where the mark is," he notes. A good way to find if you're living up to subjective expectations, Kilton adds, is to conduct a so-called "Gap Analysis" survey that measures how customers feel about the relative importance of response time vs. how they think you're actually performing in this area. If the scores for importance and performance are close, "you're probably wasting money on a non-issue."

product. They talk about it in forums. Some blog about it. Your call center starts to get calls about it. Marketing gets nervous about the impact on sales, support gets anxious about the lack of a solution, R&D gets busy. And hopefully top management keeps cool.

Often all this activity and discussion takes place in secrecy. No one will admit in public that there's a problem, at least until a software update or some other fix magically appears. In the meantime, customers get vague answers from call centers which they post on forums and try to figure out what will happen. Some of them start to shout louder, maybe start a private crusade just to get your attention. In the end the issue may be fixed, and people go "Finally! I can't imagine why it took so long."

Now that we've moved into the interactive Web 2.0 era, however, there are new ways to tackle this problem. For instance:

- Set up an alert system and an escalation process (maybe just somebody reading the top forums and blogs or else use automatic tools) so you'll hear about top issues immediately.
- If you have a support forum, make sure that whenever an issue comes up, it's addressed. Even a simple "Thank you—we're aware that some customers are experiencing this problem. We are investigating this issue and we will keep you updated."
- Address the issue in a corporate blog if it's really serious and fits your blog's scope. (If you don't have a blog, think about setting one up.)
- Post any updates that shed light on the problem on your Web site.
- Inform your users about the solution as soon as you have one.

You don't need to go to all those external blogs and forums to spread the word. Your customers will do that for you. They will go to these other sites and say, "Here's the latest info from the horse's mouth. They seem to know about this issue and they seem to be serious about it, so we don't need to worry about getting their attention anymore. Now let's let them fix it." So you buy yourself some time and make your customers feel a lot more relaxed.

Naturally, your corporate communications and legal departments need to be onboard and support this.

And when you eventually fix the issue and announce it, your customers will say, “They’ve fixed it now, just like they promised.” And even if the solution is not exactly the one people were expecting, they will still give you credit for your transparency.

My point: Make sure that your Web site conveys the message that you know what’s happening with your product *this minute*, and that you know what your customers are thinking. That will instantly create trust and your customers will feel that they’re being listened to and cared about.

Whenever a company succeeds with this approach, I would say it qualifies as a “great customer experience in the Web 2.0 era.”

Juha-Matti Heikkinen, manager, Social Web and Communities Care Online, Nokia, Box 4, Turku, Finland; +358 40 756 0517. E-mail: juha-matti.heikkinen@nokia.com.

Meeting and Exceeding Expectations

A fast service deli has a sign next to the door that reads, “If the line is long, please don’t leave. We move the line fairly fast and you will love the food.” Wouldn’t that help you to decide to stay, at least once?

A large home improvement center has a sign on the roof, “Lowest Prices, No Service.” There are no complaints about service.

Ever shop at Fry’s in California and Texas? They only advertise prices, never service. Their service stinks, but they do an incredible business, especially with the geeks who are their specific market.

When you eat at a fast food restaurant and the line and the wait is long, doesn’t that negate the whole concept of “fast food”?

When you call your utility or insurance company, and reach a random customer service rep, aren’t you surprised when the person actually listens to your concern, expresses some level of empathy, is pleasant, and provides a solution. Why? Because you started with such low expectations.

The most fundamental element of delivering great customer service is meeting expectations. When customers contact a vendor, they usually have certain expectations about what will happen. That’s true even when they have no actual history with the vendor, because expectations are usually established by many, many other factors—including the services experiences they have with other businesses, retail stores, government, hotels, airlines, and much more (this is why it’s not enough to benchmark yourself against just your immediate competitors). You have some ability to “set expectations,” but often the big-picture attitudes of your customers are out of your control.

So really all you can control is how well you **meet or exceed** existing expectations. And there’s a big difference here:

- Customers are **satisfied** when their expectations are **met**.
- Customers are **loyal** when their expectations are **exceeded**.

Many customers can be satisfied with a vendor when they get just what they expected. That's okay, but they'll still look at other vendors when they're ready to buy again.

The few customers who do have their expectations exceeded, however, behave differently. Typically, they become quite loyal because they feel the vendor **actually cares** about them and the relationship. Most people like to know that they're valued and cared for, even if the interaction is only a one-time event. The memory of the interaction creates a positive image and is influential when the customer is thinking about the next purchase of that product or service.

Well, then, how are expectations met or exceeded? One way is by treating customers as individuals. Most companies (and their employees) treat all customers the same, and they make little effort to learn what each customer expects of the company. Yes, it takes a little more effort to learn what individual customers expect, but that effort pays off whenever there's any kind of interaction with the customer.

It's also important to train customer representatives to listen for clues about individual expectations and to respond appropriately. The rep should recognize what the customer expects and either accept those expectations or (delicately) change them. When an untrained rep ignores expectations that can't be accomplished, the relationship is on a fast track to failure. A skillful rep deals with excessively high expectations by creating empathy, by listening for unspoken issues, by being generally helpful. Often meeting expectations is more a matter of *how* you say something, not *what* you say.

And the same approach is useful if your goal is to exceed customer expectations. Usually, it takes remarkably little effort to create a powerful sense of gratitude and loyalty—a little extra information during a support call, for instance, or an expedited delivery when a customer is in a bind. But you have to invest the extra effort it takes to find out why each customer's needs may be a little different.

When you exceed customer expectations, there's often a payoff beyond satisfaction and loyalty. Satisfied customers are also much, much easier to help. They're likely to be more cooperative, and the service interaction tends to be faster and more efficient. And if there's less conflict with customers, your own service reps will enjoy their jobs more. Who doesn't want that?

Rick Kilton, principal, RWK Enterprises, Box 1809, Lyons, Col. 80540; 303/823-6448. E-mail: rkilton@rwkenterprises.com.

'Wow' vs. 'Ow' Service

What's the difference between 'wow' and 'ow' (as in 'ouch') service? Willingness to check for understanding. It's doing the whole job, with the customer sensing your overriding wish for his or her well-being. When you check for understanding, the customer's woes dissolve, they appreciate your wisdom, and they deem your company worthy of wonderful word-of-mouth.

Check Your Understanding of the Customer's Plight: By the time customers contact a service professional, they've typically endured a substantial amount of time and frustration seeking a solution on their own. Scrutinize your systems, processes and habits to ensure they demonstrate you're on the customer's side. Verify your assumptions and avoid jumping to conclusions by checking for understanding:

- Minimize repetitive data requests of the customer.
- Listen carefully to the customer's problem.
- Find out what has been attempted so far.

- Record what you find out.
- Empathize with the customer's viewpoint.
- Double-check your understanding of the customer's situation: Are they a novice to this type of process or technology? Are they new to your company's way of doing business?
- Demonstrate patience and advocacy for the customer's plight.

Check Your Customer's Understanding of Your Solution: Whether your solution consists of setting up a new account, solving a technical problem, resolving a misunderstanding, educating the customer, or making arrangements on the customer's behalf, once your service call is over the customer must move forward with the solution you provided. Verify the customer's assumptions by checking for understanding:

- Does the customer know what to do next?
- Does the customer understand the duration of what's next?
- Would it help to walk the customer through the next steps?
- Is the customer interpreting jargon correctly?
- If there's another technology or entity involved in next steps, what advice do you have?

Worthy of Winning Repeat Business: When customers jump to conclusions—or when they've been served by a professional who jumped to conclusions—the result is 'ow' service. Their already emotionally-charged state may escalate to wild accusations or wrapping up their business with you altogether.

On the other hand, when assumptions are accepted as valid on both sides, the result is 'wow' service. Willingness to check for understanding gives your customer a secure feeling that you're his or her advocate. By doing the whole job, with patience and the customer's well-being as your uppermost goal, 'wow' service gives you wonderful wins in word-of-mouth and ongoing waves of revenue.

Lynn Hunsaker, principal, Clear Action, 1069 Cassia Way, Sunnyvale, Calif. 94085; 408/687-9700. E-mail: lynn@clearaction.biz.

Adaptivity and Empowerment

For many customers the most common support experience is searching a knowledgebase (KB) in the hope of solving a pressing, non-trivial computer problem. KBs typically contain many articles that guide the user in complex troubleshooting. Users, however, often find these KB articles to be intimidating, arduous, confusing, and not truly attuned to their goals. To achieve excellence, support professionals need to dramatically improve this user experience. Two important avenues for doing so are designing KBs to be both **adaptive** and **empowering**.

“Adaptive” means that the KB article includes decision points that re-direct the user within the article based on the outcomes of the user's actions. This saves the user time and effort and builds confidence in the capability of the KB article. “Empowering” means that users can choose solutions based on their personal priorities. Let me explain this more fully.

A KB article works best when the article, in conjunction with the user, correctly diagnoses the user's problem and then directs the user to the most appropriate resolution procedure within the multiple procedures that comprise the article's solution space. Whether the user has

diagnosed the problem or has merely identified a symptom of a problem, the user still expects the KB article to take the lead in proposing procedures (“treatments” for the problem). The article’s title and list of symptoms support the diagnosis function (along with the Search facility and other access/navigation mechanisms that brought the user to this KB article in the first place). Within the solution space, the individual procedures are linked with decision points, both sequential and adaptive.

Very often the procedures in a KB article are linked in a thoughtful but fixed sequence: Try procedure A, then try B, then try C. Furthermore, very often the diagnosis phase only directs the user to the first procedure in the sequence. In some instances, however, the same problem could have been more elegantly addressed with adaptive decision points. Here the diagnosis phase would help pinpoint the precise nature of the problem and would then direct the user to the *most appropriate* procedure in the solution space—not necessarily the first one in the default sequence.

For example, if the diagnosis reveals that the user’s problem matches Case B and if Procedure A is useless for Case B, the user should be sent directly to Procedure B. And an adaptive KB article should further redirect the user depending on the outcome of a procedure or a step within it. For example, a particular outcome of Step 3 in Procedure B may indicate that Procedure B should be aborted in favor of Procedure C. Users will recognize when they are being intelligently and productively redirected through a complex KB article, and it’s likely that they’ll feel a sense of delight.

Now let’s consider empowerment. Merely adequate KB articles describe a single standard procedure based on balancing such factors as likelihood of success, time required, risk of creating additional problems, and varying outcomes (e.g., saving just the text of the document vs. saving the text and formatting). Empowering KB articles respect the user’s individual priorities. For example, imagine that Sam has a corrupt word processor file and is desperately trying to save the text of his novel. Sam is willing to follow every possible procedure and will happily settle for recovering just the ASCII text. On the other hand, Carmen is trying to save a much shorter document that is elaborately formatted. Carmen only wants to invest a limited amount of time in saving the document, and wants very much to preserve the formatting. A lengthy solution path that only saves ASCII text is a bad investment for Carmen.

An empowering KB article not only provides adaptive decision points but also explains the tradeoffs, so that Sam and Carmen can each conduct their own cost-benefit analysis and then pursue their individualized solutions.

This approach requires a deep technical understanding of the computer problem and is not easy to achieve; in some ways, it resembles the way a doctor develops a preliminary diagnosis and then quickly adjusts treatments based on the patient’s evolving response to those treatments. But a knowledgebase that even comes close to this ideal is bound to be seen as dramatically more helpful at solving user problems than the “merely adequate” traditional approach.

Professor David K. Farkas, Professor, Department of Technical Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, Wash. E-mail: farkas@u.washington.edu.

Efficient and Consistent

Measured response is best; the Wow! factor is unnecessary for most customer support interactions. Only if a situation warrants it, should the customer service experience be delivered in a surprising way. For example, you walk in expecting a fight over a warranty claim; you explain the situation passionately, the store assistant grants you leeway and you get what

you wanted. By contrast, in a routine scenario, the measured response should be efficient and consistent. Overdoing the response seems wasteful and a bit like overbearing hosts who over-serve guests in their home. The guests may be unlikely to return. I am personally most impressed by efficiency and clarity coupled with thoughtful policy.

Occasionally you come across examples of innovation in customer service where there is a major step forward in both business and customer goals. Apple's move to allow returns through stores is a good example of this – Apple gets the opportunity to screen devices using Genius Bar staff before they get shipped to distant repair centers. This disambiguates software issues from hardware issues, reduces unnecessary shipping traffic and gives the customer a feeling that they are being dealt with by well-qualified staff. Apple lined up many stars to make such an innovation possible. Others can emulate this kind of retail experience using remote-control tools, self-service troubleshooters and clear policy.

Research on the topic of service recovery suggests that a customer is more likely to be dissatisfied with your company if you handle an escalation from a customer experience poorly, than if you did nothing at all. Despite the best will in the world, customers will have bad experiences when interacting with support and service; policies are utilitarian by nature and so exclude outlier scenarios. I believe the take-home from both Apple and the research on service recovery is the simple human need for connection with the company; if the product not only functions well but the company officers care enough to provide efficient customer service, then the customer may feel disposed to keep paying their salaries by buying another 'reliable' product. Reliability is not just about hardware. If your corporation operationally splits the cost of support, the cost of warranty and the cost of customer retention (and acquisition), then you should create alliances on the backend to ensure your internal groups are all investing in the customer relationship—in concert.

Great customer support experiences are like small clouds that pass thru the sky fleetingly – there and then gone. The direct product experience is the main show.

Dave Moloney, Palm, Director of Knowledge Management, Palm Inc., 950 W. Maude Ave., Sunnyvale, Calif. 94085; 408/617-7483. E-mail: dave.moloney@palm.com.

Other Thoughts...

As part of the ASP's flash survey on support quality, we asked our respondents, "What makes your users feel they've encountered a 'great customer experience'?" Here are some of their answers:

When I receive e-mails from customers who say they've received exceptional support, they usually mention at least two of these elements:

- The issue was resolved immediately with step-by-step instructions (customers typically refer to the technician as "an expert who understood the issue").
- The technician was patient and, even if he didn't know the answer, got right back to the customer with the correct solution.
- The technician not only resolved the problem, but also offered a few pointers or a shortcut that helped the customer avoid future problems.
- The technician "came right into my computer and fixed the problem" (using remote diagnostic tools).

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We sell forecasting and demand-planning software, and we find that customers really appreciate our support when a rep is willing to use the customer's actual data in formulating a solution. They're also grateful for the rep's patience when users have limited familiarity with the full capabilities of our software product.

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I think our customers feel like they've encountered a "great customer experience" when they know that we're going to do whatever is necessary to make them successful. We don't close the case if, say, they're having a problem with another software product that interfaces with ours. We may refer them to that company's support, but we keep the case open, check in with the customer, check in with the other software company if we have to, and are proactive about making sure the customer's issue is resolved.

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I encourage all my staff to be pleasant on the phone to customers at all times, no matter how worked up the person at the other end of the phone may be. I make sure that we follow up when we say we will and that we're honest with customers at all times. So long as customers can see that we're bleeding from the ears trying to resolve their issues when they themselves are in a similar situation, they're more likely to feel that we've done everything we can to help them. Any reasonable person can't expect much more than that.

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It can be distilled to this: "They understood me completely."

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A great customer experience is totally intuitive, self-empowering, and shows clear success parameters. Anything less than that can drastically impact their perceptions.

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Customers like to deal with technicians who follow through on expectations, but this isn't what makes an exceptional experience. A truly exceptional experience is when the technician:

- Recognizes a problem before the customer does and alerts them to the possibility of a problem (proactive personal communication).
- Calls the customer when a new error that might affect them occurs, or the technician realizes that this may affect this customer because they understand their environment very well.
- Builds a layer of trust and respect in every interaction with the customer.

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Some great customer experiences are outside the narrow definition of support:

- Being contacted or helped by a principal in a company,
- Getting something unexpectedly for "free" or as recognition of being valued, and
- Feeling appreciated.

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From a customer's perspective, great technical support is not about process, policy, toolsets, or technology. Rather, it's about the interaction between two human beings.