

Wiping out and getting in touch with good customer service

It might not seem like a near-death experience can teach you a lesson on the value great customer service can bring to long-term business success, but hear me out.



Editor's
Notebook

Alexis
Muellner

On Labor Day, I was driving toward Tampa from Miami in my 1995 BMW 318 north of Fort Myers on I-75 in light rain. At the base of the Caloosahatchee River bridge, I began to hydroplane, lost control of the car into a spin, hit one guard rail with the front end, and the other with the back end, popped in the air and landed facing southbound traffic — narrowly avoiding a trip over the guardrail into a mangrove swamp.

The car was a complete loss but I'm still here, thankful to be alive. I found another old BMW but needed an expert to evaluate it, and make sure it didn't have any major hidden problems. To start, the AC wasn't up to par.

But finding a mechanic you know won't rip you off and will provide good service is a crapshoot, especially for a newcomer like me.

GOOGLE TO THE RESCUE

Using the term "independent BMW mechanic Tampa," I did a Google search and found a message board for BMW enthusiasts. On it were three anonymous

recommendations to call a place called Cars & Concepts and to talk to Thomas or Steve. A second posting reiterated the first testimonial that told of a good customer-service experience.

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Leonard L.
Berry
Marketing professor
Texas A&M

ing program's series of roundtable discussions.

"Value is not price," Berry said. If price were the same thing as value, there wouldn't be a Ritz, or first-class seating or Starbucks.

"You can't advertise customer service.

I called late in the day and reached Thomas Boylan, who was willing to see me quickly. The shop quickly gained my trust by talking straight, not overcharging (or undercharging either) and doing a good job. It's not science, but Cars & Concepts is a textbook success story.

"There's no business that's not a service business," said Leonard L. Berry, an author and professor of marketing at Texas A&M University.

Berry spoke in Tampa this week about a lifetime of research on customer-service issues as part of the University of South Florida market-

MOST COMMON CUSTOMER-SERVICE COMPLAINTS

According to Texas A&M author and marketing professor Leonard L. Berry, below are 95 percent of what goes wrong with customer service. Each is linked to disrespect.

- **True lies.** Blatant dishonesty or unfairness such as unnecessary upselling
- **Red alert.** Providers who assume customers are stupid or dishonest and treat them harshly.
- **Broken promises.** Service providers who don't show up as promised.
- **I just work here.** Powerless employees who lack the authority — or the desire — to solve basic customer problems.
- **The big wait.** Waiting in line because some checkout lines are closed.
- **Automatic pilot.** Impersonal, emotionless, no-eye-contact service.
- **Suffering in silence.** Employees who don't bother to communicate with customers who are anxious to hear how a service problem will be resolved.
- **Don't ask.** Employees unwilling to make any extra effort to help customers or who seem put out by requests for assistance.
- **Lights on, no one home.** Clueless employees who do not know the answers to customers' complaints.
- **Misplaced priorities.** Employees who visit with each other rather than attend to a waiting customer.

SOURCE: Service research program, Texas A&M University/USF Roundtable

You need to deliver it and let customers deliver the message," he said at the roundtable event hosted by AAA Auto Club South at its Tampa headquarters.

Cars & Concepts' Boylan had no idea nice things were being said about him on Internet message boards. But because he

treated me well, fixed my air conditioning and then called the next day to see how it was running he's got my business for the life of the car.



Berry

Like Starbucks, he and partner Steve Johnson don't advertise their 10-year-old business. They are plenty busy using word of mouth.

They created Cars & Concepts after working for a shop that "was doing some unethical things," Boylan said.

They believe in not intimidating customers. They show customer what they are doing and go so far as getting under the hood with them to demystify the service provided.

IT STARTS WITH EMPLOYEES

"We're looking at something to give us confidence as a consumer," Berry said. That comes from building a humane organization, where employees deliver that message and strengthen internal and external branding.

Among Berry's lessons for all businesses: every organization's future depends on the quality of its service; disrespect pervades service failure; creating a service brand is everyone's responsibility.

"Mediocrity is boring and it burns us out as employees and as customers," he said.

Reach Alexis Muellner at amuellner@bizjournals.com or 813.342.2472.