

Customer Service Lessons from Tony Soprano

By Cathy Goodwin

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Whether you work one-to-one or deal with customers in groups, you identify a target market of customers most likely to value what you can offer. You develop processes that work best with those clients. You learn to anticipate their responses and help them feel pampered.

Ideally, you recruit new customers who fit your target customer profile, but sometimes you attract a customer who doesn't belong. These customer misfits can drain your energy, alienate other customers and fail to recognize the value you provide through your service.

A lesson from Tony Soprano

For an extreme example of what happens when you accept a "different" type of client, watch a few episodes of *The Sopranos*, an HBO mega-hit. You can rent videotapes of the first two seasons.

Almost every episode includes scenes between mob boss Tony Soprano and his psychiatrist, Janet Melfi. These scenes are so realistic that professional psychotherapy associations have included them in training programs.

From a customer service perspective, the psychiatrist seems overwhelmed by her notorious client. She can't resist hinting at his identity during a dinner party.

And Tony in turn is dangerous to his therapist. His curiosity about her background goes well beyond the average client's harmless fantasy, as he orders a wayward cop to follow her around for a few days.

Tony means well. When the therapist's car breaks down, her patient simply "borrows" the car and arranges for a repair at one of the "family" garages. He brushes away the therapist's concern about boundaries.

Your client will most likely be less connected, less violent and less persistent. But you may find yourself dealing with someone who is equally determined not to play by your rules.

A lesson from Club Med

The wrong customer can harm everyone and experienced service companies know it. Suppose you signed up for Club Med with the idea that you were going on a retreat, where the "wild night out" would be a fireside poetry reading. As soon as you realize your mistake, Club Med will fly you back home and refund all your money. Bad attitudes are contagious.

You may not be as focused as Club Med, but your process will most likely work best with a certain type of client. A cynical client will challenge your value. A client who trusts without questions will easily feel betrayed.

In summary

Service businesses thrive on established processes and systems to serve clients, rather than relying on ad hoc "whatever happens" policies. The "wrong client" drains energy and can drive away "right" clients. By staying focused you can direct energy to building relationships with customers who enjoy each other's company and help you find others who, like them, will value what you offer.

Cathy Goodwin, Ph.D., is an author (Making the Big Move, New Harbinger 1999), speaker and career coach. She works with midlife professionals who want to make a fast move to career freedom. Free ezine:

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