

How Making it Easy can Hurt Your Customers

By David Brewster

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About a decade ago, cereal company Kelloggs advertised their 'Corn Flakes' product with the tag "The Simple Things in Life are often the Best". The slogan rang so true that it became part of our language. But we do need to be careful. Simplifying the wrong things can have negative effects on our customers.

For me, one of life's simple pleasures is a really good espresso coffee. Intense aroma, strong - but not bitter - flavour and a pleasant lingering aftertaste. Heaven! In too many cafés, unfortunately, the simple experience I am looking for is replaced by a bitter, distasteful one.

Recently, in order to better understand the secrets of the 'perfect' espresso, I did a short course on coffee making. I was amazed at how many things need to go right in order to produce that perfect cup.

Even before the coffee beans reach the café, their quality can be affected by the way were grown, harvested, cleaned, blended, roasted, packed, transported or stored.

At the café, the beans need to be ground, to just the right size. For each cup, 6.5 grams of grounds are needed. No more, no less. The coffee needs to be made using a clean machine with which water, at just the right temperature, is forced through the grounds under pressure. The cup or glass should have been pre-warmed on top of the machine.

On top of all of these things, according to my teacher, a café can only serve great coffee consistently if it has properly trained staff who are passionate about what they are doing.

Clearly, producing a really good coffee is no simple task! There are so many opportunities for things to go wrong, any one of which can change a simple pleasure into a bitter experience.

Wouldn't it be better for a café to simplify the process and reduce the risk of mistakes? It can be done, of course. They could use an automatic machine. They could forgo the fancy espresso machine and just use one of the various filtering methods instead. They could use pre-ground beans. They could even use instant coffee.

But removing complexity from the process in this case creates a new problem. The more simple the process, the less the product resembles a 'perfect coffee'. Instant coffee might be more consistent, but it also bears few of the hallmarks of a good espresso.

Coffee is a classic example of a simple customer experience which requires a level of complexity on the part of the producer. But it is not the only one. When making efforts to simplify our work, we all need to keep in mind the impact on our customers.

Albert Einstein once said: "Things should be made as simple as possible - but not simpler". Smart cafés don't try to reduce the complexity of the coffee-making process. Rather, they try to simplify their management of the process. In that way, simplification doesn't take away from the experience of their customers.

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