



## **Let's be honest: it's hard being 'human' in service**

*Empathy, trust and just plain talking to each other are keys not only to better human interactions, but also to great customer service – especially when things go wrong.*

The plane was packed. One hundred, tired people in a steel tube. The security line had been so long that the airport staff had taken pictures. And owing to a supply glitch, they didn't have enough food. One hundred, tired people flying for 4.5 hours need food. Particularly, I felt, sitting near the back of the plane, and feeling extremely selfish, me and my four kids.

The trolley kept getting closer. Inching, really; it had taken 90 minutes to crawl halfway down the plane towards us. Dwindling supplies of snacks being depleted. The kids kept looking at me with 'please feed me mummy' eyes. After a few minutes of this I couldn't take it any longer. I got up and walked to the trolley. I started speaking, with an edge to my voice, and asked when I could expect to get *any food for my children*.

The lead attendant stopped, and to my surprise, put his hand on my shoulder, saying:

"I know. I'm so sorry. I'm so embarrassed and I know everyone is so fed up."

This isn't in most manuals. You're not supposed to express weakness and failure like this.

But those few words completely turned my feelings around. It wasn't just that that I felt less angry, upset and frustrated. It was that I felt that he knew how I felt and I, at that moment, realised how he must have felt too. His words, gestures, and the way he engaged weren't rote. They weren't script. They weren't trained and polished. They were human. They were empathetic. They created a bond. And the bond worked both ways – because it was real.

There are human lessons in this – that we too often forget that people, whatever they're doing, whatever their relationship to us, whatever level of service they're providing, are people. They are fallible and weak and get tired and upset and have bad days. Because we're in our bubble, particularly when we're customers, we see everything outside that, as we rush around a store, try to book tickets online, even compare how estate agents' fees stack up – as Other. Nothing to do with us.

But there are also service lessons in it.

Of course, you wouldn't think that we need to be reminded that human engagement and empathy is central to customer service – because so many talk about it. We all know how critical empathy is to service – at least, that's what you get from the number of articles you see [on it](#). But on the ground, in real customer service design, you still see service by rote, driven by KPIs and scores, more than complete, engaged experiences.

There are exceptions. Most of the clients we work with increasingly respond to – and initiate – truly holistic strategies for service that look far beyond KPIs and seek a more enhanced, experiential, and complete human engagement. And so, we're designing programmes that deliver to this more complete, strategic service culture. But in my experience these are the exceptions. Why? Well there are a lot of reasons: here's a few.

- Bad mirroring. The customer may be in that 'bubble' – impatient, inward-focused. It's all too easy to mirror this; and the customer gets alienated.
- Training happens at scale. At scale, it's easy to teach KPIs and measures and scores, and hard to evolve holistic engagement and empathy. [Organisations like AirBnB learn how to do this their way](#).
- Modelling empathy is nuanced and hard. Creating a consistent and repeatable idea of what it means to see, understand, and respond to real customer need is complex. It's easy to write it off as 'soft'
- Fear is a massive driver. It's hard to 'put yourself out there' – easier to adhere to strict KPIs. Added to that, potential legal, compliance and PR nightmares make personnel pause.
- Efficiency can kill engagement. It takes time and focus to empathise. In actual fact of course, engagement is the *key* to efficiency – but some organisations fail to see this.
- Many organisations see 'service' as just part of the process – rather than the whole point of a customer-focused brand. If you're unsure whether you want to be customer obsessed, I'd just remind you of Amazon's Jeff Bezos' oft-quoted statement: ["focusing on the customer makes the company more resilient"](#).

I'd counter all these by pointing out that in my example, a moment of real empathy and unfeigned connection can short-circuit almost all the challenges above.

I didn't care about what had gone wrong – because the engagement made me realise and remember that this is inevitable. While I still wanted a resolution, it wasn't an emotive, charged resolution I wanted (to feel vindicated) but just a transactional one (to get some food). In other words, I got over myself. And I defaulted back to being a person, rather than a complaining customer. Because the attendant had defaulted to being a person, not a defensive, butt-protecting automaton, which he certainly could have done (and I've seen others do).

The result was a conversation. Communication. And connection. The entire rest of that trip, and even now, I remembered that conversation – and my entire picture of that trip, and the entire brand he represented, is now positively coloured by that single, one minute, positive chat.

Having a default position of 'being a real person' in service is, in other words, always a good idea. There are no downsides to it. For the customer, for the colleague and team, and for the entire business and brand they represent. People remember and treasure real human engagement with the people serving them – at the right time and moment for it to have impact.

We can't always get it right. We will, on any timeline of our work, fail. No matter how good our training and how keen we are to succeed. And when we do, almost always the best way to deal with this is to admit it, be human about it, address it as a shared concern, and move on. Together.

We know this works. And we're seeing an increasing trend from our clients that recognise that it's important to make a real connection with their customers, to understand the real 'narrative' of how their customers feel and therefore, how they can better engage with them. More organisations want to measure and understand experiential engagement, not just check boxes. And it's this kind of organisation, I believe, that will win in the end – because they treat their customers as humans first, and numbers second.

#### **BIO**

Danielle Sones is an Experience Director at [ABa Quality Monitoring Ltd](#), with over 17 years' CEX measurement experience.

If you too share our vision and want to know more, get [in touch](#).