

## The Death of Customer Service

by  
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Recently, United Airlines has given the world the ultimate example of how far customer service has fallen over the years, by forcibly dragging a paying customer off a flight because the airline had overbooked and wanted to accommodate airline staff. This is obviously an extreme example, but it does exemplify how things have changed (not for the better) over the years.



My own example is nowhere near as drastic, but, to me, it represents the lack of customer care by service providers. My wife and I had planned a trip to Riviera Maya in early March, to get a brief respite from Winnipeg winter. We booked well in advance with CAA Travel because they offered us the best deal and, very important to us, direct flights to and from Cancun. In late January, I get a call from our travel agent, advising us that our direct flight had been cancelled and our new flight now had us going to Toronto at 6:00 am and catching a flight to Cancun, 40 minutes from the time our Toronto flight is scheduled to land. We had just done one of those kinds of flights going to



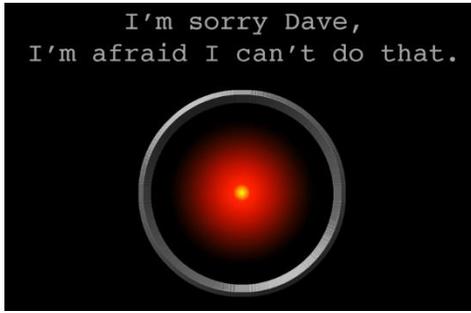
Vancouver Island in December, and I can still remember the shock of realizing that our flight to BC was boarding at the same time as our flight from Winnipeg was still taxiing to the terminal. I also clearly remember the mad dash across the Calgary airport to catch our plane. I was not about to start our vacation this way, especially going from a domestic flight to an international one at Toronto airport. It took a lot of discussion, and the demand for my money

back, before she came up with a plan that made sense. It is one thing for WestJet to be booking flights like this, which I think is ridiculous, but I shouldn't have to argue with my travel agent to get it straightened out. Don't they get paid for handling details like this?

Of course, airlines and travel agents aren't the only ones. This past Saturday I looked in our mailbox and discovered that our Saturday Free Press was not there. So I do the logical thing and call the Winnipeg Free Press circulation department. There are a series of automated responses, (press 1, press 2, etc.) from which I decipher the way of reporting that our paper wasn't delivered. I go through the usual routine of punching in our phone number, house number etc., after which I get the response "Your account will be adjusted." What the heck is that supposed to mean? So I call back. Now it becomes more



complicated, because I actually want to talk to a human being. I eventually get through. Or at least I think I did. The "person" I get on the phone was like speaking to HAL 9000 from 2001: A Space Odyssey. "The reason your account has been adjusted is because it is past delivery time," "there is nothing further I can



do,” “I am only following protocol,” “you may cancel your subscription if you feel it is necessary,” “do you want me to schedule a call back from a manager?” “I am not the one raising my voice sir.” After that last comment I hung up, because the next things I thought of to say would not have helped make my case. I truly believe that the Winnipeg Free Press has a robot running their customer service. What I do know is that they try very hard to get you to subscribe, (I received an e-mail offer from them during the time I was writing this) but they could care less about you once you are a subscriber.

I even got attitude from a cashier at SuperStore. My purchase had come to \$10.05, so I pulled out a \$20 and reached in my pocket to see if I had a nickel. I came out with four dimes. “Only dimes,” I said out loud, and handed her one, along with the \$20. She gives me \$10 change. I said, “Actually, I gave you a dime.” To which she responded, “No it was a nickel, and I rung it up that way.” I said, “It was a dime, I only had dimes, but whatever.” She responded by giving me a dirty look and throwing a nickel to the treadmill in front of me. I left it there. It was never about the nickel.

In my younger days, I used to work at a mall based shoe repair. A lot of the workers there, myself included, liked to party on the weekend and would often come in for a Saturday morning shift quite hungover. Thinking back on those times, I often think at our customer service was pretty poor, and it probably was, for those days. But our worst then was better than what is considered the norm now. Then, even being young and full of beans, even being hungover and short tempered, there were lines that we would not cross. There were ways that you treated people, especially those responsible for putting money in your pocket and food on your table, and we knew that customers were those people. No matter what, we never forgot it. Now the customer is a forgotten commodity. People in retail barely acknowledge you when you are in a store. I’ve had a person working at the counter of a store, set down his smart phone just long enough to ring me through, and have his phone back in hand before I put my wallet away. The customer means nothing to people who should be in the business of customer service.



the system to come back to Canada and realize how rude service people are here.

One place where customer service still means something is Mexico, and particularly in the Riviera Maya. Their income is almost 100% dependent on tourism and you can tell from the moment the plane lands. Everybody, and I mean everybody treats you like gold. They are well aware of where their income comes from and you are so well treated that it is a shock to



Now I should make some adjustment on this very broad statement. Not everyone in service treats you poorly. Many self-employed people still know where their bread and butter comes from, not only small business owners, but commission sales reps, hair stylists, as well as serving staff in better restaurants. But even here you can find those that just don't get it. I have had some servers in restaurant who have provided horrible service, but still expect their 15% tip. Find someone else, I pay for service. And I pay well when I find it. It just seems much easier to find down south than it is here.

Do we need to see someone dragged off a plane before we put our foot down and say, "ENOUGH!!!" Sometimes new attitudes aren't improvements. I would like to see the return of old fashioned customer service before it dies out completely.

