

If you don't get it, you don't get it.

The *Washington Post* runs an advertising campaign with the slogan "if you don't get it, you don't get it." And on Monday, I did not get my print copy of the *Post*. I called the re-delivery number and left a message. Five hours later, I had not yet received a replacement copy so I called again, and left another message, asking for a call back. Then I went to the online complaints, and left two messages—one about the missed delivery and one about another delivery issue I had during my end-of-year vacation.

I didn't get it

I heard nothing from the *Post*. Not one word. No call back and no redelivered paper. No apology. No credit. No nothing.

Subscriptions matter

The *Washington Post* has seen an increase in digital subscribers and a decrease in print subscribers. This isn't surprising since most people seem to prefer to read their news online. However, in terms of advertising sales, which is what pays the bills at the *Post* and most every other newspaper, circulation numbers are what sets advertising rates. Fewer print subscribers means smaller circulation numbers, which means lower advertising rates. Obviously, the less the *Post* charges Macy's and the various other advertisers, the less revenue it generates.

Disregard is disrespect

So subscriptions matter. And yet the *Post* continues to treat its subscribers with, if not outright disdain, complete disregard. Prices are increased every few months, credits are no longer given even though the print subscription charges for

delivery costs, and customer service has been outsourced to Asia, where the agents barely speak English and don't know K Street from Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Washington Post would prefer if you never called them, so they've created an online account/customer service portal. Except it sucks. Every time you want to do something, you have to sign in, and then somehow, you are signed out of your digital subscription. And not everything works. I tried to change my vacation hold dates, and was not able to. I had to call an unhelpful customer service agent.

When I got home from vacation, I discovered that of the six days I was gone, four days of newspapers were delivered. My vacation stop was not honored. I complained online and nothing. Again, no apology, no credit, no acknowledgment of a mix-up.

Here's the bottom line: The Washington Post can advertise for new subscribers all it wants, but until it fixes its broken customer service, it will continue to lose print subscribers (and by extension advertising revenue).

Customer service matters more than marketing in retaining customers. Marketing is about acquisition and customer service is about retention. If you acquire customers just to lose them because of poor service, you are wasting money marketing and you are threatening your bottom line.

Avoid Alienating (nearly) Anybody

Marketing communications is about persuading people that your product, service or organization offers something that is of value to them. It's really that simple. *How* you do it may not be so simple as there are many different strategies and tactics that you can use. Perhaps you will show the benefits of the product, perhaps you will make people feel good about choosing your service. But, whatever you do, you should not alienate your audience.

Businesses and organizations can alienate their customers and supporters by taking certain negative actions. Perhaps it is raising prices or cutting back services. Sometimes unpopular actions are necessary, which is why how you communicate those actions becomes even more important. In fact, taking a negative action does not have to translate into alienation if it is handled correctly. Perhaps, you work on making the case more forcefully.

Yet, how often do we see companies doing things that alienate their audiences? We see it often. Two recent examples stand out for me: Facebook with its privacy problems and Spirit Airlines with its decision to charge for carry-on bags. Both situations have been widely reported in the media, and both companies have done a mediocre job of explaining why they have taken those decisions. Facebook seems to think that what benefits it as a company should benefit you as customer. And Spirit actually claims that by charging for carry on baggage you benefit from lower fares. Both companies insult their customers' intelligence, thus, alienate them.

Here are a few tips to avoid alienating your customers

- If you must take a negative action, explain it from your

own perspective before the media/others do it for you.

- Don't underestimate your audience's intelligence: they can usually see right through a bad explanation.
- When you communicate, avoid being too self-promoting or too self-serving. Your customers and supporters are more interested in what you can do for them than in what you did for yourself.
- Be forthright and say what you mean.
- Research! It is amazing how many organizations and companies don't understand who their audiences are and what they want.
- Offer good-will gestures. If you've done something that is bad (cancelled a concert for instance), give your customers a carrot (make it easy to get money back, give an additional discount, etc.).

How do you think companies can avoid alienating customers?

