



Why your Unreasonable Employees Matter

**(They may be your competitive advantage,
if only you knew how to capitalize on them)**

Anyone in business probably has a favorite 'unreasonable' customer or client story. Mine is retail related, but I have since learned that 'unreasonable' customers are not unique to retail. Like all retailers, the furniture retailer I worked for in the 1980s had regular product promotional weeks. That meant that the price of a product could drop unexpectedly between a Saturday and a Monday (back then, this retailer did not open on a Sunday).

Surprisingly, or so we thought at the time, we often had customers who, having bought on the Saturday, would come to the store on the Monday demanding that we give them their discount. Our standard response was simple, blunt and effective: If the price had gone up instead of down, would they have come to pay in the difference? At the time we also thought these customers were terribly unreasonable.

Of course, since then things have changed so much that it is no longer acceptable to be openly sarcastic to customers. For one thing, customers now have the unreasonable habit of immediately emailing and text-messaging hordes of other unreasonables. Some will even blog you so that Google can log you. For another, our world has become so hectic and neurotic, so fast paced and unforgiving, that it has become second nature for many of us to be unreasonable customers and to think nothing of it.

Answer these questions truthfully and you'll understand what I mean: Have you ever stood in a store and used your cellphone to check whether you could buy the same product cheaper elsewhere? Have you ever gone to a store merely to see-and-touch a product before searching on-line for the cheapest supplier? Do you expect to pay less for more features, compared to what you paid and got a year ago? Do you assume that you can have a product customized to your liking without paying more?

If you answered 'yes' even once, then you are just one of the ever increasing number of unreasonable customers. And of the growing pool of latently unreasonable employees, for an employee is simply a customer being paid to wear a different hat for a period in time.

I still remember these ‘unreasonable’ customers after more than 20 years because I was never sure who was really being unreasonable, the customer or my employer. I mean, we were told that the customer is queen, we were trained to provide superior customer service and, to secure repeat business, we were expected to build a relationship with our customers. And then we would spring a surprise price reduction on them after we had already banked their money.

Every time my employer did this, I would have this little voice in my head saying that if I was my customer, I would also have an urge to be just a little bit unreasonable on a Monday morning. Even so, I never openly questioned my employer’s policies, for my bank manager had made it clear that the customer might be queen, but whoever pays my salary is king. To this day, however, I treat any comment about unreasonable behavior with sober skepticism.

The term reasonable normally means ‘not greatly less or more than might be expected’. In other words, as not being absurd and within the limits of reason. The problem is that we define ‘limits of reason’ and ‘reasonable expectations’ in terms of historic experience, even though the world around us is changing. To make matters worse, technology is constantly making futuristic promises, which you must somehow deliver. For example, thanks to the Internet your customer can do comparative shopping *before* leaving home or the office, and thanks to the cellphone can make comparisons while *already* shopping.

No wonder many customers seem beyond reason. (The funny thing, of course, is that the behavior you find unreasonable in your customers you think is perfectly reasonable when you are the customer.)

Should we blame technology?

You may, but it is senseless to blame an inert object for how people use it. It makes more sense to find ways to exploit unreasonableness in your favor. Instead of complaining about unreasonable customers, get customers to complain that your competitors are unreasonable.

How?

By making sure that customers always see you as reasonable, or at least as less unreasonable than your competitors. After all, it’s all about perceptions. An effective way to do this is to empower your employees to express their latent unreasonableness and be more like the unreasonable customers they are elsewhere. Somewhat along the lines of ‘set a thief to catch a thief’, unreasonable employees should relate better to unreasonable customers and understand how to serve them best.

In essence, this is still the nature of business: how to relate and form relationships with customers. How your employees relate to customers is the one factor your competitors cannot directly emulate. Whether online or brick-and-mortar, your competitors can find or produce similar products and services, and can often provide these cheaper than you. But they cannot deploy your employees (at least not until they have hired them away from you).

Read carefully what I have written, for we talk too glibly of an organization having a relationship with its customers.

Can one really have a meaningful relationship with an organization? Of course not, one can only have a meaningful relationship with another person. As a customer, I develop a relationship with a representative, but not with the organization itself. The longer my relationship with the representative endures, the less visible the organization becomes and the stronger my ties to the representative. And when that individual is no longer there, the relationship is over.

No wonder that as more customer contact happens via call centers and the Internet, the more management seems to hope that the unreasonable 'need' of customers for a human interface (a representative) will simply go away. But it will not, which is why many organizations try to ensure that all employees follow a common that's-how-we-do-things-here, hoping that the customer will be lulled into a feeling that there is, indeed, a relationship with the organization, and not with individual employees. More often than not, however, all the customer experiences is a common unreasonable-is-how-we-are-here.

Another amazing thing happened during the last years of the 20th century (apart from the emergence of the very visible unreasonable customer, that is). For the first time, traditional organizations witnessed what creativity is possible when people willingly give their time and energy: Thousands of Internet start-ups mushroomed, fertilized by the unreasonable visions of self-motivated people. But since the dotcom crash, it seems as if many of us have retreated to the safety of the traditional command-and-control style of 'motivating' people. No wonder we keep running out of time, out of steam, out of relationships and out of meaning. And, of course, out of customers.

One of the prime reasons for this retreat is that many organizations now find themselves caught between efficiency and effectiveness, an unexpected outcome of better communication and other technological advances. Organizations are under competitive pressure to provide something quicker and cheaper (efficiency), while knowing that differentiation, which historically earned a higher margin, is built on providing the results and experiences that customers want (effectiveness).

Of course, customers have always wanted to pay less. That is not new. What is new is that customers now expect to pay less (for they are better informed about prices) and to get more (for they are better informed about what technology has made possible). For example, many customers are aware that mass customization, previously an oxymoron, is now a reality. As a result, not many customers are still willing to pay extra for a perceived differentiation. Now that is unreasonable!

The problem is that in today's markets you must be both efficient and effective - not an easy task. Doing something different than your competition takes a different mind set than doing the same thing a little 'better' than your competitors. Some organizations are good at visions and strategies, and poor at execution, while others execute well what they copy from others. Only a few are good at both.

Can you be good at both? Yes, but it might take a shift or two.

Crafting a realistic vision of what you can offer customers requires a change in how you *see* your world, while focused action to deliver on that promise requires a change in how you *behave*. This is where your 'unreasonable' employees can be a great help, for they already tend to *see* and *think* differently: they tend to *see* your organization through customer-eyes and tend *think* like empowered customers instead of like do-as-told employees.

The risk is that if they also *behave* differently, then they are likely to confuse everyone around them as to what is really unreasonable and who is really being served. Unless, of course, their 'differentness' and unreasonableness is being managed, directed and exploited.

The problem is that managers are not taught to encourage unreasonableness. They are taught to demand compliance and conformity from 'reasonable' employees, even though this deteriorates into groupthink and a resistance to change. And even though it should be obvious to all that in a rapidly changing business environment, a sustainable advantage cannot be built on inflexible same-old-sameness.

Don't for a minute assume that it will be easy for your employees to suddenly come out of the cubical, so to speak, and exhibit their unreasonableness. From a very early age we are taught to do as told and then taught to learn how to get better at what we are told to do. Only a few of us break out of this pattern to do what we want, and not what significant others expect of us. Of course, in doing so, we are labeled unreasonable. But then, unreasonable people already know that George Bernard Shaw was right when he said, "*The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.*"

What should this tell you? That your perception of and response to unreasonableness could determine your rate of progress. In other words, your unreasonable employees are your best opportunity to secure a competitive advantage, for they already know how to be unreasonable customers. For this reason alone it is time to open your mind to a little bit of unreasonableness. Who knows, maybe you will finally hear what your unreasonable customers have been trying to tell you.

If you want the workshop “*Beyond Reason: How to capitalize on your unreasonable employees*” presented to your reasonable managers, please contact James McIntosh at james@nonsenseatwork.com or on (804) 754 0195

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