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# Is Customer Service Extinct?

(Version 2)

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## Is Customer Service Extinct?

Is customer service becoming extinct? Have we “hunted” it to extinction? Will an economic downturn be the last straw? Can it recover from the endangered species list? Who or what will make that decision?

All good questions – but maybe not the *right* questions.

As consumers, rather than spend our time bemoaning the loss of terms like “southern hospitality” or “western warmth,” we should each look in the mirror and question the level of service we are *willing to accept*. I believe the perceived drop in customer service that many consumers are feeling is a direct result of two simultaneous forces: (1) an *increase* in the comparable services against which we now judge any service, and (2) a *decrease* in our willingness to speak up, grab the pulpit, and let the service purveyor know how we feel. Let me address these two forces.

### The *increase* in comparable services

It used to be that, as consumers, we pretty well knew the territory of comparison. We compared the service at our local banks. We knew the three closest pizza parlors and the local hair salons. When we called an airline to make a reservation, our point of comparison was “Airline X” versus “Airline Y.” This has all changed. Our point of reference has expanded.

Now, when we call an airline to make a reservation, we are consciously or subconsciously comparing our phone experience, not only against all other airlines, but we are evaluating that phone call with other phone experiences we have with companies like the Lands’ End catalog department and/or The Home Depot consumer affairs line. When I call my bank, and they ask me for my address three different times, I am no longer judging how my bank measures up against other banks, I am wondering how American Express seems to be able to transfer my personal information between agents, but my bank can’t.

**“We should look in the mirror and question the level of service we are *willing to accept*.”**

In the age of the worldwide Internet, we are now faced with *global* service expectations. The acceptable standard is continuously being raised – cross culturally and across industries. What is most interesting to me, is that as our required minimum standard for service has continued to rise, our willingness to complain about poor service appears to have fallen somewhat. Which leads to the second force...

### A *decrease* in our willingness to speak up and give companies our feedback

In a world of loosening values, declining courtesy, and speak-your-mind media, somehow the fear and avoidance of personal conflict remains mostly intact. Generally, all other things being equal, most people are “chicken.” They are conflict avoiders! Most folks would rather stick a fork in their head than tell you bad news to your face, particularly if they don’t know you. We may be willing to criticize a restaurant’s food in private, but when the meal arrives in front of us in poor condition, we often lower our eyes, and say nothing directly to the server or the manager.

Why is this? Could it be a result of the social interaction we've lost due to the Internet and computer gaming age? I'm not qualified to say. But it wouldn't seem far fetched, that in a world where neighborhood kick-the-can and street-corner conversations have been replaced with texting, instant messaging, video gaming, and sterile social websites, that a culture's comfort level with complaining directly about undercooked food would be diminished. It is one thing for a movie actor to say the words, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore."<sup>1</sup> It is quite another task to have the strength to provide that kind of personal feedback directly to a service provider.

## **The convergence of forces**

So, here's the situation: consumers with higher expectations and a wider definition of what constitutes "comparable service" are losing the courage to speak their mind directly and get things off their chest. But hey, everybody needs an outlet, right? So, where does a consumer go to vent their frustration over poor service? They tell 10 friends. They tell 10 neighbors. Heck, with the Internet and social media, they can tell 10 million strangers! Simple word-of-mouth broadcasting has exploded to become the global "bully pulpit." Is good customer service extinct? Nah, we're just hearing about the poor experiences more.

## **How can superior service companies *lessen the drama*?**

Best practice service companies have quickly come to understand that when they do "drop the ball" with a customer, they can either hear about it directly, or they can read about it on the Internet. Even worse, they will assuredly notice it through declining customer counts. So, wise service companies are making it easy for their guests to provide anonymous, risk-free feedback to them in as many ways as possible, and at every potential touch-point. Through these different channels, companies can capture real-time, actionable information that they can use to immediately improve their operations and, over time, create even more loyal customers.

## **Mindshare can help**

The Mindshare feedback system can lessen the impact of both forces described above, and help you close the gap. Because Mindshare collects over 15 million surveys a year, across multiple industries, our clients immediately see not only how they are performing within their company but also across their competitive set, and even more widely, across the general services landscape. They quickly see how their service compares, so that they can adjust their operations to be not only best in class, but best across all services. Also, by using automated customer feedback surveys, such as those provided by Mindshare, companies are providing their customers the ability to provide honest and direct feedback without experiencing the conflict of a face-to-face confrontation. For these astute companies, superior customer service is not extinct; it is alive, well, and flourishing.

This is how I see it.

### **About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare**

**Richard D. Hanks** is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, a leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is an author and frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings. Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal

*customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company's individual needs. For more information please visit: [www.mshare.net](http://www.mshare.net). To reach Rich directly, contact him at [rhanks@mshare.net](mailto:rhanks@mshare.net) or (801) 263-2333.*

<sup>1</sup> From the movie Network, 1976.