

**MARCH 2001:
ADVANCED
COMPLAINT
MANAGEMENT!**



MONTHLY FEATURE COLUMN: ADVANCED COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT

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Quick! What's the difference between complaint handling and complaint management? Handling is what you do with the customer him or herself. Management is what the organization does to learn from the complaint itself. Which is more important? They are both critical.

I had an experience this past month with a wonderful hotel where I frequently stay that made both me and the hotel's general manager conclude that my experience fit into Advanced Complaint Management. My situation, which I will describe in a moment, was handled very well by everyone concerned. The real key is what the organization will do with the potential learning that became very apparent to everyone as my complaint was investigated.

Here's the situation: A colleague delivered a package to me at a hotel where I was staying. I was not in the hotel, so the package was left at the Concierge desk awaiting my return.

Unfortunately, one of the people at the desk did not recognize my name, even though I am actually quite well known in this particular (and I might add, wonderful) hotel. I stay there frequently, and the Complaint Is a Gift philosophy has been taught to everyone on staff. A second unfortunately is that the hotel's Executive Housekeeper happens to have a name that is remarkably similar to mine, Janelle Barlow, and the package was delivered to her.

The package was a 350+ page binder with a brightly colored front insert. It was a substantial document, right down to the TMI name, complete with telephone and address printed in numerous places. The Executive Housekeeper who receives a number of promotional items from vendors who attempt to sell her just about everything, mistakenly assumed it was a promotional item and immediately threw it away.

I assumed that the package had not been delivered to the hotel; my colleague assumed I had it. Forty-eight hours later we discovered that I never received it. By that time, it was too late. The binder apparently lay under tons of trash at the city dump.

The document represents hours and hours of painstakingly crafted customized materials for one of our clients. Fortunately, I have a copy of this work on my computer, though printing the document out was costly; in addition, it took some time to recreate the

original document in another binder.

So, what was learned? What gift can we extract from this complaint? I definitely want to stay at this hotel again; I think it is superbly run, and if the proper lessons are applied, it will be even better run as a result of my misfortune. I, and every other guest at this hotel, will benefit from that improvement.

Here's what was learned. Whoever is in the hotel business can learn from this situation, and the example has general applicability to many other industries.

1) The Hotel needs to have a consistent practice of holding on to packages at the Concierge desk, rather than sending them to other departments or to guest rooms. The chances of mistakenly sending something to the wrong location are high. This particular hotel doesn't have a policy regarding this, as sometimes packages are sent midday to my room so they are there upon my arrival. Other times, I either go to the Concierge desk myself or call and ask that they be delivered. That policy needs to be reviewed, and the hotel would never know it if this situation hadn't occurred. It's clearly safer for the Concierge desk to hold on to packages until the right person comes to pick them up and sign for them. As the General Manager said to me, "Thank goodness it wasn't an irreplaceable contract or something of that type." He's absolutely right, and organizations do lose important documents of that type. Every time they do creates a perfect opportunity to tighten up procedures.

2) When I first talked with the Concierge he initially told me that the document had been delivered to another hotel guest's room. He said the guest reportedly "chucked it." Actually, I knew this wasn't accurate, because by the time I had this conversation with the Concierge I had been informed that the document had been sent to Housekeeping.

I talked with the General Manager about how strong the temptation is to lie when a complaint of this type is heard. It's never a good idea to lie when bad news needs to be told. Actually, I found the idea that another guest had my sensitive, proprietary document even more upsetting than that it had been sent to housekeeping. Who knew if the guest had actually thrown it away, or now had access to a great deal of high value and confidential work.

If organizations are to be truly sophisticated about complaint handling and management, they need to create an atmosphere where staff are inclined to tell the truth rather than to cover their tracks. Almost always, lies will get you into deeper trouble than the actual truth. And they are a natural phenomenon when people are stressed, and the Concierge Desk was very upset about having lost this document. Fortunately, this lie was stopped immediately by the hotel. But the hotel needs to do some work on this point, and the biggest piece of work is to create an atmosphere so staff feel so secure they don't feel compelled to make up a story to cover their tracks.

3) Finally, housekeeping needs to establish a policy that they never throw anything away for a set period of time. I told the General Manager that I frequently stay in hotels and leave things behind on the bed stands, or in the closets, or in the bathroom. Whenever

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I call to the hotel and ask for my possessions, I am almost always told that the objects were not found. I suspect they were tossed out.

In this case, if housekeeping had held on to the package a little longer, I would have gotten my document. In other cases, people staying in guest rooms will be more likely to recover left-behind articles. So, everyone would benefit from a change in this policy.

It's rather profound when you stop to think about this situation. One problem, and three major pieces of learning for this hotel. Three major pieces of learning that probably would never have been uncovered had my situation not occurred.

Once again, I return to the profoundly simply notion that complaints are gifts. We don't need to be afraid of them; when well handled they create stronger relationships with our customers, and they teach us as no other teacher can!

WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING:

We are all certifiably stressed out in this office. As many of you know we are moving to Las Vegas. Our movers arrive on the 9th of March, and we will be answering our phones there on the 16th if we can find them amidst our movers. In the meantime, please continue to use 415 499 5500.

If you are ever in the Las Vegas area, please do visit us at our offices! We have purchased a lovely building and hopefully we will be out of boxes by the end of March. In the meantime we are saying good-bye to some of our staff who have chosen not to move to Las Vegas with us. Jennifer Schmicher will make the move with us. Lynne Barnard, who has been with TMI since 1982, has chosen to live in Mill Valley for at least another couple of years. Maybe we'll entice her to move back to us then! Jaie Hightower has also opted to stay in the Bay Area where she has her belly dancing troupe and a wide circle of friends. We will miss them both, and hope that everyone will be understanding as we hire new staff in Las Vegas. Lars Spivock will help us set up our computers in Las Vegas and then support us from a distance.

One of the amazing things about moving in today's world is how stable it has become in many ways. We are able to keep our bookkeepers and accountants, who will now work with us through our web based accounting system.

In the meantime, we continue to offer our services to clients. Our work with the Isle of Capri continues. In addition, Peta delivered a rousing keynote to Tyan Computers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her subject was team building. She also worked with Ketchum in Pittsburgh on internal customer service issues. While there, she was able to see Frank Lloyd Wright's Rushing Waters home.

Janelle was humbled to speak about A Complaint Is a Gift to the World Bank technical support team. This group of highly devoted individuals make it possible for so many teams and organizations around the world to use technology in the spirit of the World Bank's mission statement: To end world poverty. One of the participants took the time

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to show me a very moving life-sized sculpture that graces the main lobby of the World Bank. It shows a young boy leading a blind man. I was told that the cost of curing River Blindness is a mere \$5.00, little more than a McDonald's hamburger.

Janelle also presented Strategic Planning for Results to Spirent Communications in Southern California. In between those two events, she attended a very invigorating National Speaker's Association Winter Workshop in Chicago and participated in the NSA Board meeting.

Janelle also travelled to Hong Kong to work with Morgan Stanley, and ING Barings. It's been a complete month, with every spare second devoted to packing boxes, throwing old files away. Everyone in the office is reminded of one of the true gifts of moving: "chucking" things.

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