

## **HOW HAVE YOUR CUSTOMERS CHANGED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS?**

**By Ross Shafer**

First of all, forget the tired, old adage; “The customer is always right!”

It’s just not true...or even relevant, anymore.

Replace it with, “The customer is always...*Vulnerable*.”

Customers feel vulnerable, helpless, out of control, and anxious. That was the clear message we got from them when we dissected 1,000 random customer complaints we found on customer complaint web sites, blogs, and chat rooms. We didn’t edit the complaints. We didn’t solicit them or try to manipulate them. We just read what customers typed into cyberspace when they had nowhere else to turn for satisfaction. The complaints were emotionally charged and spoke to how customers *feel* before, during, and after the transaction...with you.

### **WHAT’S CAUSED THIS DRAMA?**

Your customers get emotional about the transaction because they *need* you for something. And, anytime you need somebody else for something, you’re vulnerable. Somebody else has the control. Somebody else has the knowledge. Somebody else has the product, service, or solution you want. Abundant “need” is the active ingredient for your customer to feel vulnerable, helpless, and *emotional*. Face it, you know everything about *your* business – the costs, the hidden expenses, and the time of delivery...but your customer doesn’t. He/She needs guidance from you. He/She needs a livable price, a quote and/or budget from you. He/She needs you to keep your production deadlines. He/She needs to keep his boss happy. He/She needs you to make him look smart for hiring you...so he/she can get some sleep at night. ( I realize using the “he/she” is annoying but let’s face it He may be a very powerful She!)

### **HAVE CUSTOMERS ACTUALLY EVOLVED?**

Yes! Our company has been making human resource training films since 1994 and we’ve witnessed a huge shift in the customer’s emotional state; especially since one shattering event in American history; the 9-11 attack on the Twin Towers. That morning, Americans saw more than 3,000 of our fellow citizens vaporized before our eyes. We no longer safe felt safe in our own country. The convenience of airline travel evaporated. Homeland Security was established. Retail sales of Taser stun guns, mace, personal body armor, home security systems, biological weapon suits, home generators, and firearms instantly tripled. Books like, *Purpose Driven Life – What on Earth Am I Here For?* became overnight best sellers as Americans looked to their faith and purpose as a way to cope with impending catastrophe. At the same time, reality TV shows like *Survivor*, *Dog Eat Dog*, and *Fear Factor* enjoyed staggering ratings as Americans tuned in, not only for entertainment, but as a weekly lesson in disaster preparedness.

Today, America is still on high emotional alert. When the movie trailer for Universal Pictures “*Flight 93*” was shown in New York, the AMC-Lowes in Manhattan made the decision to pull it after viewers said they found it to be too upsetting. How does this make your customers feel five years later? The brave ones remain cautious. Some are

just plain scared. But, everyone is irritable if they sense fear or anxiety if their money, reputation, business, or life is endangered.

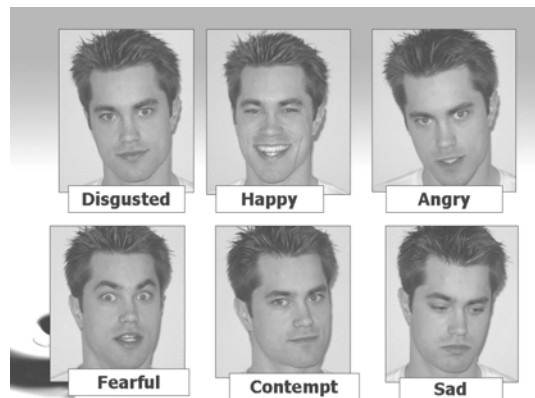
### **THEN, THERE IS THE HUMAN MATTER OF SELF SUFFICIENCY**

Ah, don't let me forget to mention that the Online Purchase/Kiosk/ATM/Self Checkout economy is doggedly detaching your customers from your most important relationship building tool; *you*. While you may not be generating and maintaining a lot of bids, business, or service calls over the Internet today, count on it to infiltrate your business soon. Online inquiries, bidding submissions, progress reports, sales, and evaluations are already becoming popular. Saves time, right? Short term, yes. But, there is an enormous lost opportunity cost when your customer no longer needs you. Because so many business people have learned to complete the transaction themselves with a computer - or through an automated kiosk, it actually results in less purchase anxiety. Question is...do you really want your customers to stop needing you?

### **SO, WHAT'S THE FIX?**

Find a mirror. Gaze closely. It's You.

You have the power to capture your customer's loyalty by putting your face in front of theirs. Learn how to interpret your customer's emotional state before, during, and after the transaction. It's not difficult. First, assume your customers don't have all of the answers and are feeling vulnerable. Next, you can easily read their faces and interpret their tone of voice by becoming familiar with the top six facial expressions that telegraph your customer's "hidden" emotional state. You do it when you're playing poker, right? Why not apply the same study to your customers; without the gambling?



Besides looking them in the eyes, stop talking. Ask a few non-threatening questions and really listen to what your customers are telling you. Avoid the urge to show them how smart you are by jumping in with something to advance *your* agenda. It's not about you, right now. Keep it all about *them*. Don't question your customer if he's misinformed. It makes him feel stupid. Rather, take the position that you may have misheard – then carefully clarify again. Keep digging deeper with more questions until you are absolutely clear about his concerns.

### **THE CUSTOMER'S THE FINAL MOMENT:**

Customers remember how they *felt* during the final moment more than at any other time during the transaction. So make your final moment worth remembering.

Naturally, you want to leave them with a smile and a promise kept. But more importantly, make them *feel* like they made the best choice with you. Positive “final moment feelings” are what will not only bring that customer back to you, but eliminate your need to compete on price alone. Customers will pay a premium price to someone who cares about them. Plus, caring about people is a differentiator that costs you nothing - yet contributes more to your bottom line than all other marketing efforts combined.

**Ross Shafer is an Emmy® award winning writer, TV host, and producer of (14) human resource training films on customer service and motivation. His latest books, *The Customer Shouts Back!* and *Customer Empathy™* have just been released. For free downloads of his e-books visit: [www.RossShafer.com](http://www.RossShafer.com)**