Customers Don’t Always Tell The Truth

The SCORE Chapter to which I belong is in the process of planning its workshops for next fall. I think one of the additions that we will make is one on the topic of “customer relations” based on concerns that I have heard from local business CEOs. They say things like “it is really hard for me to figure out what our customers are thinking” and “I am really frustrated because I have experienced several occasions where a client seemed to lie to me”. Do customers lie to you? Or at least are there instances where they really don’t tell you when something is wrong?

My experience says “yes”. But, before I discuss how they lie, let me explain why they lie. First of all, they lie because they are human. As humans, they are embarrassed, ashamed, trying to avoid offending you, to gain control, as a power play, or because of the million other reasons we lie. People are people.

And let’s not forget that no one is beyond lying (white lies or some other color lies). Most everyone lies. Everyone. Not just your children. I’m talking about your customers, friends, you, me. Now, I’m not talking about a premeditated, dastardly lie, but a failure to be completely truthful. The “take home” here is that if we as business people recognize this, we may be able to find the truth behind the words, which is critical to business success.

Now, let us consider how this happens. I am going to share with you some thoughts that I got from one of my favorite business leaders, Mike Michalowicz. He is an author and the founder of multiple multimillion-dollar companies. He is a nationally recognized speaker on entrepreneurial topics and is the CEO of Provendus Group—a consultancy that helps companies whose growth has plateaued. He wrote The Pumpkin Patch Plan that I shared several weeks ago.

1. “I think your service is great!” The next time a customer tells you she thinks your service (or product) is great, she is probably lying or at best not telling you the whole truth. It is socially inappropriate to tell someone else they are bad at what they do. Instead of risking offending someone, you just pretend not to see that fuzz ball in her hair or booger on her face and simply say, “You look great.” You don’t want to hurt feelings, so you lie. And your customer is no different. They say you are great and then never use your services again.

2. “You got the project!” Have you ever gotten a verbal commitment that never materialized? This is the customer lying to you, even if he or she does not mean to. You only “get the project” when the contract is signed and the check is cut.
3. “You’re the only vendor we’re considering.” This may be true, but there is always the option of leaving things status quo. Don’t be fooled by the lie that “there is only one choice.” There are always alternatives, including the “do nothing” alternative.

4. “I need your references to make a decision.” This is a confusing lie, since the request for references is genuine. However, it is a lie for your customer to imply that she needs references to decide. References are not used to make a decision; they are used to support a decision that is already made.

5. “I am the sole decision maker.” Even when your customer is a company of one, she will have outside influencers (friends, spouse, vendors, clients, etc.) who can persuade her. Almost every “sole decision maker” does have the ability, solely, to say no. They are just lying about the part of being able to say yes alone.

6. “I am weighing all the factors.” Everybody likes to believe they are completely logical. But no one is—not even Mr. Spock. Emotion is a major (perhaps exclusive) driver to decision making. When you hear someone say, “weighing all the factors,” recognize it is a lie. People can’t comprehend all the factors, nor can they put an even proper significance on the factors. Logic is less present then people think, and emotion is an under-appreciated driver of decisions.

7. “We have an urgent need!” This lie is particularly confusing because urgency changes. The customer is not only lying to you, but also to herself or himself. Urgency is relative to other urgency. For example, if a person has severe muscle pull in her leg, she may urgently seek rest on the couch. But if her house starts on fire, the urgency will no longer be about lying on the couch; it will now be about getting out of the house. The leg-pull will be completely forgotten (at least for now). Pain is the driver of many decisions, and the urgent need your customer tells you about today, may no longer even matter tomorrow.

The lesson here is not that people have bad intentions (though some do). Rather, you should expect that your customers and prospects to lie to you or at least the words they use may not hold the real truth. Your job is to anticipate lies and determine what the truthful message is behind the lies.

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