



By Richard D. Czerniawski

## CARING FOR CUSTOMERS

*Is anybody there? Does anybody care?*

When I moved from Chicagoland to Pensacola, I canceled my AT&T business landline. I now conduct all business from my mobile phone as it is always on my person, and I can be available—regardless of whether I'm in or out of town—when clients wish to speak with me. However, two months following cancellation, I received a bill for my business landline for 30 days beyond the cancellation date with an advisory that I would receive another in just days.

I called AT&T to remedy the situation. I prefer to call and speak with someone rather than try to navigate around a website. Moreover, I prefer the verbal reassurance that someone has resolved my issue, and I will not be burdened again. Besides, AT&T is the company that "connects people" and lets you "reach out and touch someone." What better way to connect and touch someone than with a phone call when you can't be there physically?

I called at 1:15 PM. After responding to the automated prompts, I was greeted with the following message: "Thank you for continuing to hold. We appreciate your patience. All of our representatives are busy handling other customers. Your call will be handled by the next available agent. Please stay on the line. We value your call." This message was repeated every couple of minutes while I held until reaching a customer representative at 1:42 PM. I was on hold for 27 minutes!

We live in an "age of abundance and sameness." We have a plethora of options in virtually all categories. However, the options are basically the same as they do the same thing, work in the same fundamental way, and produce the same generally acceptable outcome. There's no material difference among AT&T, Sprint, Cellular One, and other providers. Such is the marketplace and resultant challenge we face in getting customers to choose our brand over those of our competitors.

One of the areas where we can make a difference in driving preference for our option is focusing on better serving the customer than competitors. Specifically, how we go about caring for customers can help our brands come out on top of their evoked consideration set. I purposely refrain from calling it "customer care," which to my thinking generally connotes an outcome without standards, and self-delusional label that makes management feel warm and fuzzy.

Instead, I'm referring to the difference maker as "caring for customers." This term suggests an intention, one that is customer-centric and empathetic. It also represents an act—a way of interacting with customers. Additionally, it reflects the marketer's desire to ensure the customer has a positive experience with the brand. We, as customers, favor brands that deliver a positive experience in caring for us as people as opposed to making us feel we're some regrettable cost or nuisance to be handled.

The automated request for prompts, the automated message, and the long wait time don't reflect genuine caring for customers. I imagine I'd get the same treatment from AT&T's competitors. It's a missed opportunity.

When we care and show we care for our customers, we distinguish our entry in a way that's both relevant and meaningful. It's our opportunity to "create brand loyalty."

Now for the rest of the story with AT&T. I connected with a customer representative located in the Philippines, who spoke from a script. She was most courteous and repeatedly apologized for AT&T's mistake and promised to fix the problem as my cancellation date was clearly on file. She told me I would be receiving a notice and credit in the mail. She also told me I needed to call AT&T and confirm when I received it. *Here we go again.*

*Richard Czerniawski*



## **Richard D. Czerniawski**

1812 Yates Avenue  
Pensacola, Florida 32503  
847-312-8822

[richardcz@bdn-intl.com](mailto:richardcz@bdn-intl.com)

[richardcz@me.com](mailto:richardcz@me.com)

[www.bdn-intl.com](http://www.bdn-intl.com)