

Lessons from a Hollywood movie . . .



Actor William Hurt starred in a 1991 movie called The Doctor, freely based on Dr. Edward Rosenbaum's 1988 book A Taste of My Own Medicine. He plays Jack McKee, an arrogant, prominent heart surgeon with a terrible bedside manner who seems to have it all -- he's successful, he's rich, and he's supremely self-confident . . . until he's diagnosed with throat cancer. Suddenly his world is overturned: He becomes the patient, not the doctor.

He becomes the customer . . .

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In her column in a British business magazine a few years ago, Jane Simms reported that CEOs rank customer service above product innovation, sales performance and regulatory compliance as their top priority.

But what struck me most was her recipe for success. "The best way to improve customer service," she wrote, "is not to invest in expensive research techniques or pointless CRM systems, but *to experience the company and its products and services as a customer would.*" Referring to the senior executives for one of England's largest rail companies, she wrote: "How many have recently tried to buy a standard-class train ticket? Because if they did, they would realize what a complex and expensive nightmare that particular exercise has become."

Yes, we all agree customer service is important. After all, without customers, where would we be? But how many of us genuinely grasp what type of service customers want? More importantly, how many of us truly understand the obstacles customers face when they try to get it?

As we used to say back in my corporate days, customer service starts on the street, not in the tower. By that we meant too many senior executives haul up the drawbridge and retreat to their corner offices, rarely venturing beyond the moat. In the worst cases -- and I've lived them -- the senior execs refuse to listen to street-level employees who try to convince them their products and services simply aren't meeting the needs of their customers.

Do you know which aspects of your social enterprise's product or service delivery systems are the most comforting to your customers? The most discomfiting? Have you ever hired "mystery" customers to explore the positives and the pitfalls embedded in your product and service delivery process?

More to the point, have *you* ever decided to become a customer for a day? Or a week? Or to experience a customer relationship from beginning to end -- from the brochure to the phone call to the initial visit to the actual purchase decision to the customer satisfaction follow-up and beyond?

Needless to say, *The Doctor* being a Hollywood movie, Jack McKee eventually realizes there's more to being a doctor than surgery, prescriptions and a brisk bedside manner.

From the moment he discovers after a party that he's coughing blood onto the shirt of his tuxedo, Dr. McKee is plunged into the underworld of his profession. The movie takes a cold-hearted, clinical view of the medical routines he encounters once he's diagnosed with throat cancer and begins to collide with all the joys of a hospital stay.

At one point he rails at the procedures that force him to cool his heels waiting for further treatment. He finally complains to a hospital worker that he's been a surgeon at the hospital for 11 years. The indifferent reply? "Then you should know all about filling out forms."

At the end of the movie, he survives an operation and returns to work cancer-free -- but with a changed appreciation for the environment in which he operates. He orders the five astonished young interns under his supervision to become patients themselves. Each is assigned an imaginary illness, and the first step they must take (over their indignant protests) is to strip off their clothes and don that ridiculous hospital gown that ties in the back in two places but still leaves us exposed.

He then forces the interns to undergo for a week all the mysterious tests we as patients know so well, all the hurried visits from busy and distracted doctors, all the wonderful food, all the middle of the night wake-up calls for seemingly inconsequential reasons, all the cheerful but distant smiles from harried nurses who've just come on shift and aren't entirely sure why we're taking up space (I've been there, believe me).

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So, how many of you have done anything more than conduct rudimentary customer service surveys or talked formally or informally with a few customers? How many of you have actually become customers for your own social enterprises?

Try it. You might not like it.

This entry in "Jerr's Journal" is adapted in part from an essay in Boschee on Marketing. The entire book can be downloaded free of charge at http://socialent.org/Publications_Podcasts.htm.