

College of Business Book Review by Janet Ford

Title: "Your Call Is (Not That) Important To Us"

Author: Emily Yellin

Publisher: Free Press (2009)

Length: 261 pages

Price: \$26.00

Reading time: 8 hours

Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 2.5 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

I was intrigued by the title of this book because I thought it would validate my generally negative view about the deficiencies of modern customer service. Who among us does not have a customer service nightmare that we can share with sympathetic friends and family? When was the last time you heard a child proudly assert that he wants to be a customer service agent when he grows up? Let's face it. Customer service is not a career to which many people aspire. But why is that? In this book, Emily Yellin invites reflection on the love-hate (mostly hate) relationship our society has with modern trends in customer service.

Chapter One, entitled "Random Acts of Rudeness," reels in the reader by sharing anecdotes of outrageously inept customer service behavior with which we can all identify. Next, Yellin outlines the history of customer service and how customer service has inevitably been affected by developments in technology. Technological advancement has been both a blessing and a curse for customer relations. It is a blessing because automated customer service can be a cost-effective and convenient tool for both businesses and their customers, as it provides self-service options 24/7. Because of the sheer volume of customer service inquiries, many businesses have no choice but to channel some calls to self-service options. However, technology can be a curse for businesses with ineffective customer service programs because irate customers can, and often do, instantly broadcast their dissatisfaction on the worldwide web. When the technology does not function as well as anticipated, the result can be a public relations nightmare, as AT&T Wireless learned when its new customer service software crashed as soon as it was launched in 2003. Also, as Yellin points out, no matter how sophisticated the technology, automation is no substitute for the personal interaction, communication, and decision-making that is often necessary to resolve some customer issues.

Yellin examines the customer service practices, good and bad, of numerous companies. Throughout the book, Yellin reports on her observations of and meetings with customer service agents and experts in a variety of industries and countries. The information she gleaned from her research is insightful, practical, and useful to anyone in the customer service field. Yellin describes and summarizes some of the best practices she observed at companies who are currently known for superlative customer service, such as FedEx, Zappos.com, and Credit Suisse. The common theme that runs through her narratives is that the most effective and highly rated customer service programs are implemented by business leaders who recognize that customer service represents an opportunity to

cultivate customer loyalty, which contributes to the long-term success of the business. Accordingly, a business seeking to implement an effective customer service program will train agents to empathize with frustrated customers, provide agents with the information they need to identify the customers' problems, and empower agents with the necessary authority and expertise to satisfactorily resolve those problems.

Although the title of this book suggests that its contents will be critical of modern customer service practices, Yellin actually establishes that this field is vibrant with business leaders and workers who are devoting a substantial amount of time, energy, and resources to ensure that customer service experiences are positive, efficient, and effective. Some of the insights and best practices she identifies, such as "walking in the customer's shoes," have applications beyond the realm of customer service and may be useful in assessing other business operations, such as marketing, store layout, and scheduling. Overall, this is a worthwhile read.

Janet Ford is an Assistant Professor of Business Law in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web page at www.wcu.edu/cob.