



## **What Might Will Rogers Think of Customer Service?**

*By*

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### **Introduction**

Albert Einstein warned us of the insanity of repeating unproductive methodologies in expectation of better outcomes. Accordingly, winners forensically scrutinize their losses for learning opportunities. Unfortunately, egos sometimes eschew the mining of these experiences for corrective and preventative actions. The 2021 version of the University of Georgia Bulldogs college football team is a prime example for a teachable moment anecdote. After an embarrassing loss in the SEC Championship game, the team adjusted and redeemed themselves, first in the Orange Bowl and finally in the National Championship game—coincidentally against the same team who blemished their undefeated season aspirations. (Dawg fan factoid: We loath mentioning the evil empire by name.)

Like low tides (yes, this is a double entendre), the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a business model debris field for the wise to observe and adjust. This quarter's value-creation article will revisit a favorite topic which small business may exploit to the detriment of big business in an extremely differentiable way: customer service. Whereas mediocrity and indifference may safely hide in big business bureaucracy, the leaner numbers of small businesses necessitate the requisite opposite response: excellence and accountability.

According to Statistica.com, \$296.4 billion was spent in North America in 2021 on advertising—down only slightly in response to COVID-19. Superior customer service canards punctuating advertising messaging are widespread. Even so, if it is common knowledge that customer referrals are the most valuable form of advertising, then why is so little common sense invested in operational execution? Indeed, in Daniel Pink's *To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth about Motivating Others*, we learn that 40 percent of non-salesperson bandwidth is at least indirectly attributable to the sales effort. Bain &

Company complements Pink by arguing the importance of support functions which make sales professionals' focused customer facetime more effective. Good customer service is part of the magic.

Former US. House Speaker Thomas Phillip ("Tip") O'Neill opined that "all politics is local." The same may be true for vendor-customer dynamics—especially localized B2C models, e.g., plumbing, electrical contractors, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), veterinary services, dentistry, arborists, etc. Given the popularity of some of these verticals for investor roll-up aspirations, "localized branding" begs attention in integration strategies. Instead of "caveat emptor" (let the buyer beware), the mantra should be more appropriately "caveat venditor" (let the seller beware).

The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to offer blanket immunity to customer *disservice* via several mutations of staffing issues. M3 does not entirely buy the argument. Customer *disservice* examples emanate from a perpetually toxic fountain. Within these instances may be clues for David slaying Goliath value proposition differentiation. All businesses—and small businesses in particular—should not assume that customer relationships are copacetic beyond leadership's line of sight.

The Will Rogers legacy is an American treasure. He checked many admirable descriptive boxes: cowboy, humorist, author, adventurer, and statesman to name a few. He tendered timelessly poignant observations with wit and charm. Rogers may have weighed in thusly on the state of modern customer service:

*"Everything is funny, as long as it's happening to somebody else . . . If advertisers spent the same amount of money on improving their products as they do on advertising, then they wouldn't have to advertise."*

Rogers will posthumously weigh in throughout this article.

### **Begin with Values**

Four enabling words are prevalent amid M3's client coaching to identify the behaviors they want to acculturate in their organizations: accountability, trustworthiness, teamwork, and excellence. "Excellence" is shared with some reluctance because it is not a value, but rather an outcome highly correlated with the enabling values. To be clear, values are the behaviors to which we hold ourselves and others accountable. A litmus test is mapping each value to an action ending in "ing." Revisiting the big three above, this resembles owning, trusting, and cooperating, respectively. Individual and corporate

values need not be identical, but they must be compatible. All four words haunt in juxtaposition the rampant dearth of good customer service in the mainstream economy.

*What might Will Rogers say about values? “Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip.”* (Note: M3 espouses this mantra as its core value as evidenced by its website.)

FROM THIS POINT FORWARD, THE NAMES ARE CHANGED TO PROTECT THE GUILTY.

### **Rental Cars**

Several examples are shared because they emanate from the same vendor in different venues and belie the isolated instance excuse for a systemic problem. The first episode was in the Midwest. A rental car vendor charged the customer for two rentals over simultaneous dates despite being the sole traveler. Moreover, the anti-smoking renter was fined for smoking. The agency “customer service” line was AWOL. Holding over their 800 number the most part of three days without acknowledgment left the renter exasperated. Fortunately, the credit card vendor enjoyed leverage in bulk on the vendor and solved the problem.

The second instance for the same traveler occurred on the west coast. Her late evening arrival ended in the discovery of a crowd complaining about the same problem: (i) her name was not on the message board despite their preferred customer status, (ii) the service counter was woefully understaffed, (iii) no cars were available, and (iv) there was a nominal cleaning crew returning cars to service. By the time the traveler received her turn at the service counter, all she wanted was a straight answer by which to gauge her options. The attendant reaction was to decide it was time to go home—and simply walked away without explanation. No one replaced the employee.

Eventually—but much later—a vehicle became available. The weary traveler hopped into her vehicle and escaped. It was not until returning the car that insult to injury was discovered. In providing the vehicle, the vendor expunged the original reservation with a spot order at a much higher rental rate. Again, considerable time was invested in protest to a disinterested customer disservice function. The best that could be negotiated was a modest credit against a future rental.

Are these two incidents lone exceptions? Not at all. COVID-era rental adventures are abundant. One need only buy frequent travelers the first round at happy hour to tap the motherlode of corroborating circumstantial evidence.

Customer Service Points:

*Systems which can alert customers to weather hazards, road conditions, and flight status have proved the technology for communicating the availability of cars—or lack thereof. Texting notices to rental customers about conditions on the ground is a reasonable expectation.*

*What might Will Rogers say? “The older we get the fewer things seem worth waiting in line for.”*

### **Car Dealership Service**

It was past the time to change the oil and the consumer was caught in a jam. The customer opted for an unfamiliar car dealership which was geographically proximal. The dealership had a clever communication offer which included sharing a cell number for texting when the car was ready to be retrieved. Before sharing their cell number, the customer specifically asked if the number would be used for anything else—ever! Assurances were made. However, ever since and unfortunately (but not surprisingly), the dealership continues to spam the customer.

Customer Service Points:

*Some customers literally go the extra miles to patronize a car dealership which provides impeccable service. This axiom may be as potent for Fords as Ferraris. There may be closer dealerships, but the opportunity cost algorithm trades commute time for reliability. Polite and helpful service professionals ask questions and offer ideas—but in a way that the consumer knows they are being served instead of sold. There is a difference. The dealer’s service pledge flunked the trustworthiness value. People pay much more attention to what you do than what you say.*

*What might Will Rogers relate? “Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.”*

### **HVAC, Cable, Telecommunications, Security, and Plumbing**

A service technician who replaced a malfunctioning home security sensor alerted the customer to seriously antiquated technology. The advice registered with the customer that it was time to update the system. After the repair, the customer accumulated info requested by the vendor for a quote. However, the vendor never responded to several attempts by the customer to receive the quote.

A second example regards a leaky shower drain discovered in a crawl space. Despite the customer's contextual description when placing the service call, the vendor's technician arrived without proper equipment. Moreover, his disinterest in crawling underneath the house was obvious. The technician "observed" at a distance by a flashlight that there was not a leak and pivoted with a deflection about the solution being a vapor barrier that some other (unspecified) vendor could easily install. He skipped the obvious step of operating the shower to confirm the drain leak. It was, after all, a drain—not a water pipe under pressure. Empty vertical drainpipes do not leak. Whereas the drain was not emptying into the sewer, the vendor's brand equity was.

#### Customer Service Points:

*Service often **IS** the business model. Scheduling crews is analogous to how 3PLs coordinate freight, i.e., perpetual project management. Labor utilization is key to productivity. The all too often oversight is customer communications. When a customer calls for service, they expect service upon arrival—not sales or another service call with the right materials and equipment. Good service is an enabler for recurring revenue or upselling AFTER the fact. Service calls should not be Trojan horses.*

*HVAC, cable, telecommunications, security, and plumbing vendors have more in common than may meet the eye. "We'll be there in a window of noon to 5PM"—three business days away. Seriously? First, how many of us have seen the service people arrive on the front end of the time frame? Assuming the vendor tracks and uses cycle times for scheduling, a material portion of the calls should precede the mean. Many of us may think of Garrison Keillor's quip about Lake Wobegone "where . . . all the children are above average." All of anything being above average is statistically impossible but seemingly routine for service calls. The only thing worse than losing a half-day awaiting the technician is an outright cancellation at the end of the timeframe.*

*Collateral damage occurs when the service call appears to ignore the reason that the vendor was summoned. The focus is all too often a replacement sale. There may be a time and place, but this is not necessarily either. Emotional intelligence would come in*

*handy. A red-faced customer could mean the same thing as the red, octagonal road sign posting “STOP!”*

*Vendors should make sure their technicians are informed about the nature of the issue before being deployed. Additionally, a quality assurance measure is a checklist relative to the problem—including the right equipment. By attesting to adherence of the script the technician is placing their competence and/or ethics at risk.*

*Service technician training should include appropriately educating the consumer, but what is the right model? Consider these steps: (i) what was observed, (ii) what the observation may mean (i.e., analysis), and (iii) itemizing the options. Of course, repair is one of the options. Even so, the customer may understand that repairs may only delay the inevitable. If handled appropriately, the vendor may be the first call for the replacement decision as a reward for candor and transparency. By contrast, pressuring may eliminate the vendor from consideration for renewal or upgrading.*

*What might Will Rogers impart? “It's not what you pay a [vendor], but what [the vendor] costs you that counts . . . If you want to be successful, it's just this simple: know what you are doing, love what you are doing, and believe in what you are doing.”*

### **Big Box Retailers**

Especially amid the disruption of global supply chains during the COVID pandemic, wise shoppers check store sites for inventory before an excursion. The quantities listed may be wrong (attributable to the timing of cycle counts which also adjust for shrinkage and damage), but not necessarily out of stock when posted quantities are large. This is especially true if point of sale systems are tied to perpetual inventory systems. If a customer's needs are a fractional subset of the posted quantity, this seems a safe bet.

Even worse than an out-of-stock item is when multiple department employees have never heard of what the customer wants—even when the customer uses their smartphone to identify the item on the vendor website to the floor representative. The trifecta of offense is indifference and endlessly referring shoppers to others on the opposite end of the ginormous floor who neither know nor seem to care.

#### *Customer Service Points:*

*As Lee Corso would say on Game Day, “Not so fast my friend.” Let's start with training. Employees may be set up to fail by their employers. Employees should know their*

*products and how to use their tools. If they demonstrate indifference during training, employees should never make it to the floor. If they demonstrate indifference after making it to the floor, the minimum response should be corrective action.*

*Will Rogers might chide the big box retailers with "it isn't what we don't know that gives us trouble, it's what we know that ain't so."*

### **Vehicular Accident Incident**

The week before Christmas, a homeowner awoke to a 4:30AM Sunday morning big bang. Realizing that the security system was not alarming, but the dog was going berserk, the homeowner commenced investigation. Man's best friend zeroed in on a bay window. The homeowner peered through the window to discover a sportscar in their yard.

As evidenced by a debris field (including the catalytic converter), the car jumped the adjacent neighbor's driveway and proceeded across the homeowner's lawn before crossing the driveway. The vehicle ricocheted off a retaining wall and back across the driveway before resting entirely in the yard. The posted speed limit is 35 MPH and there were no skid marks. The speed was likely excessive. A 911 call was placed. The scene was investigated. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

The process for receiving the accident report consumed a month. After navigating that delay, the homeowner learned that the car was a rental. The insurance purchased by the driver from the rental agency did not cover the wall damage.

#### *Customer Service Points:*

*Anyone who has ever pursued a claim of this nature appreciates the criticality of accuracy and timeliness of documentation. This maxim extends beyond traffic laws to all claims and disputes. Perceived personal accountability may wane with time.*

*What might Will Rogers suggest to us? "If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging."*



### **When the Mail Delivers a Mess**

In less than three days following the repair completion on the same homeowner's wall described above, a mail truck navigated the homeowner's driveway to deliver a package that did not fit in the mailbox. Coincidentally, the homeowner was standing outside as the vehicle approached. After delivering the package directly to the homeowner, the driver backed out. In the process, the vehicle strayed off the driveway across a flowerbed, edging, and malibu light before stopping in the yard. The crunching noises compelled the homeowner to look up and see what had happened. The driver left without acknowledging the incident.

#### *Customer Service Points:*

*Alexander Pope imparted that "to err is human; [to] forgive [is] divine." Forgiveness is the prerogative of the offended party. For the offending party, accountability is essential to preserving customer relations. Prompt resolution is even better. The mail person delivered neither. Oligopolistic and monopolistic models may think they are immune to accountability, but karma is an interesting beast. Timing is the only unknown.*

*Will Rogers might suggest to the mail carrier that "the best way out of difficulty is through it."*

### **Mortgagee Mischief**

Hurricane Michael (2018) ravaged many Atlanta neighborhoods despite being "comfortably" inland. High winds toppled a mature hardwood in the back of a homeowner's lot. The tree's downward trajectory demolished a small storage structure. The modest insurance claim was quickly processed (to the homeowner's delight). However, the mortgagee insisted on inspecting the home despite it being a distally separate and unaffected structure. The rationale was the mortgagee's "policies and procedures." The more likely motivation was the mortgagee's fee for the required inspection. The irritated homeowner asked for the balance on the mortgage and paid it off. Instead of supplemental income, the mortgagee lost existing income.

#### *Customer Service Points:*

*Policies are guidelines—not commandments or laws. Context matters. Are company policies onerous or enabling? Another consideration is incentives. When behaviors defy common sense, consider whether incentives are motivating counterproductive behaviors.*



*What might Will Rogers (wryly) think? "People are getting smarter nowadays; they are letting lawyers, instead of their conscience, be their guide."*

### Summary

Societal tolerance for—or enabling of—bad behavior appears to be breeding bad customer service. In the process, businesses may be destroying their enterprise value. The proof will be the mass exodus of “loyal” customers when an alternative is discovered. Make no mistake—this is a clarion alert to small business for a differentiating opportunity which is relatively easy to implement. Consider the primary touchpoints of customer communication: website, social media, snail mail, email, text, phone, and face-to-face encounters. Vendors should ask themselves two questions:

- Is it easy for our customers to buy from us?; and
- When something goes awry, how easy is it for the customer to accomplish a prompt, satisfactory resolution?

If vendors do not ask objective third parties to audit this dynamic, they are unlikely to learn the hard truths that may double as existential threats.

Customer purchasing decisions are rooted in some combination of (i) value, (ii) quality, (iii) timeliness, and (iv) service. Customer service is the hardest to measure; however, its criticality is substantiated thusly: owning and promptly resolving deficiencies in value, quality, and/or timeliness.

A W. Edwards Deming’s plan-do-check-act audit might abide the following Will Rogers observations:

- *“Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects.”*
- *“An ignorant person is one who doesn't know what you have just found out.”*
- *“The worst thing that happens to you may be the best thing for you if you don't let it get the best of you.”*
- *“People's minds are changed through observation and not through argument.”*
- *“People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing.”*
- *“Never miss a good chance to shut up.”*
- *“Get someone else to blow your horn and the sound will carry twice as far.”*
- *“You've got to go out on a limb sometimes because that's where the fruit is.”*

- “Ability is all right but if it is not backed up by honesty and public confidence you will never be a successful person. The best a [person] can do is to arrive at the top in [their] chosen profession. I have always maintained that one profession is deserving of as much honor as another, provided it is honorable.”

The inferred leadership warning is encapsulated in this simple question: “Can you bet the house that your business is executing satisfactorily from your customers’ perspectives?”

***Hint: You are betting the house!***

Value-creation is much like gardening. You cannot expect abundant harvests without adhering to the continuous discipline of preparing the soil before seeding/transplanting, providing nutrients and water on a timely basis, weeding, and pruning. May the fruits of your value-creation labors favorably differentiate you among comparatively less conscientious gardeners.

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