

MY PROBLEM WITH “NO PROBLEM”

When I first thought to write about this issue (i.e. Employee use, and overuse, of the phrase “no problem” as a blanket response when being thanked by a customer), I wondered what it was about those two words that bothered me so much when used in a modern customer service setting. Was my irritation overblown? I decided to test it.

We've discussed how *critical thinking* is vital when analyzing a problem or making a difficult decision. Critical thinking has many different definitions – one of the very best teaches that critical thinking is simply *a system where you think about, and test, your thinking process*. So in this process of self-interrogation, I asked myself if my problem was generational. Was I being cranky and showing the dreaded first signs of being a “square?” Was my problem with “no problem” mine alone? Did I have good reason to dislike it or was I turning into Abraham Simpson, grandfather of television's The Simpson's clan? Let's dig deeper. Grampa Simpson lives involuntarily at The Springfield Retirement Castle (their welcome sign reads *“Thank you for not discussing the outside world”*) where he and his old friends live out their lives bouncing back and forth between sweet bliss and senility.

At the Retirement Castle, he writes angry and confusing letters of complaint to people and organizations that upset his world; even if no one else but Grampa is particularly upset. Once, Abe was so bothered by television's portrayal of the elderly that he wrote this classic complaint; *“I am disgusted with the way old people are depicted on television. We're not all vibrant, fun-loving sex maniacs. Many of us are bitter, resentful individuals, who remember the good old days when entertainment was bland and inoffensive.”* His anger and frustration come from change that he doesn't like and cannot stop and so he rants at the world passing by. Given time, he might one day have his own problem with *“no problem.”* Until then, I'll pick up the torch – square old coot or not.

Background: The Essence of Service

The past decade witnessed some arm twisting by the service gurus of Big Business Land as they launched a service offensive that sought to open our eyes to the very essence of what service must be to survive in the new century. Their big-selling mantra rightly preached that A) customer service occurs at all levels of an organization ... living most large at the touch points that occurred during the life of each transaction. It didn't matter if it was the receptionist greeting the customer or the finishing team in the shop or someone in accounts receivable posting a payment to the customer's account. It was all service. Every little point was a critical contact point and, therefore, it was all vital – every single communication. And, B) everyone in that service chain better have a genuine love for pleasing the customer or they might be responsible for a breakdown and a serious loss of revenue and good will. The service function ... the service mantra must be at the heart of everything we attempt to do and with anyone we attempt to do it with. The rest was simply window dressing. This was sensible stuff for a change.

My job today is to convince you to take a fresh look at the presence of “no problem” in your business. Let me begin by admitting that I can be very exacting about communication in the workplace (as you are about seam quality in the shop). This love of language can make you very picky about words and their multiple interpretations. My complaints with the *“no problem reply”* may, at times, seem subtle but, still, take a fresh listen. Like most other examples of workplace communication this too can come down to how you say it. If you are an enthusiastic service pro and offer up a big, happy version of “no problem” that more closely translates into *“There's not a thing I wouldn't do to make you happy, Mr. Customer, and this particular service act was no problem at all for me, in fact it was nothing but a pleasure to perform”* than we have no beef. But that's not what I hear in the real world. Do you?

Thank You

If it weren't for the *thank you's* your team receives, there'd be no issue this month – so let's first take a moment to acknowledge *"thanks."* Those two words are good to hear in a service setting although the actual expression predates today's Wal-Mart-like transactional experiences by about 600 years. Believe it or not, in 1400 AD *thank you* was everyday medieval slang, just trying to get a foothold in our culture. You might hear a young patron at a barbershop say, *"Hey, Yortuk, thank you for the extra long bleeding today"* or some up and coming Overlord complain *"No matter how much I whip and whip and whip that serf, I can't get a thank you out of him"*. Nearly always, *"thank you"* indicates gratitude and satisfaction although there are times when the tone of the *"thank you"* offers nothing but pure sarcasm and snarkiness – always know the difference.

Why Does "No Problem" Leave Me Flat?

1. My biggest issue has to do with the effect on customer perception and appreciation, over time. If an employee is genuinely thanked and the employee then responds by indicating that the efforts made on the customer's behalf were "NO PROBLEM" it is virtually the same as saying ALL THAT YOU DID/ ALL THAT YOU DO in successfully fulfilling your role as a valued fabricator of high-quality countertops, is INCONSEQUENTIAL. Those market responsibilities, as we know, are nothing if not intense, complex and foreboding. Review this partial list of the more significant elements of market responsibility shared by the vast majority of our readers:
 - maintaining your facility, shop equipment, vehicles and technology
 - ordering materials, arranging delivery, managing cash flow and scheduling workers
 - taking on additional A/R financial risk, maintaining field equipment
 - cutting/risking expensive raw materials, creating inventory with leftover stock
 - hours embedding finished quality into the job, handling "middlemen" in field
 - maintain operational lines of credit to support cash flow needs and opportunistic marketing
 - prepaying taxes, payroll, suppliers, insurances, leases, training and interest expenses

I am not suggesting that every employee believes your market responsibilities are free from financial risk or costly troubles. Nor do I believe that your customers, now hearing that phrase, suddenly believe your work is easy and problem-free. However, I do firmly believe there's an unwanted effect of these impressions, over time, that minimizes your efforts and your investment. They reduce your shine.

In fact, it's the exact opposite of the message you want expressed! Folks might not understand what *"You're Welcome"* actually means when said to someone offering up thanks. It's an old phrase that implies that the service they are gratefully acknowledging was your pleasure and that the person is always welcome to ask another. *You're Welcome* is an invitation. If you were a farmer, would you knowingly fertilize your soil (your customer base) with feed (communications) that diminished your crop (the value of your role)?

2. If *"No Problem"* is really no problem then what comes next? How much more can our business language devolve? Will it one day seem normal to respond to a thank you with *"Whatever"* or *"No Biggie?"* As the minority makeup of our country shifts perhaps *"No Problemo"* would be more effective. If we take our language to its logical conclusion, my money is on *"Hey, No Sweat Off My A**."*

A Summary That Matters / Destination: Bulletin Board

There's an element to this column that doesn't fit neatly into the above but is, in a way, far more important than how your folks respond when they are thanked. PLEASE TRY THIS LITTLE EXPERIMENT: Take a week and quietly place yourself within hearing distance of various customer interactions (your phones, display area, pickup counter, etc.). Are you hearing your people saying a lot of *"no problem's, you're welcome's, my pleasure's, etc."* as their calls end?

The Great American Gratitude Shift

If you're hearing this wrong-way loop (you're not the first) you will note it's weirdness – customers are the ones doing the thanking and employees are the ones "getting the glory." Please imagine the sound of an extremely loud buzzer going off in your head – the kind of buzzing warning alarm that would make the long lazy ears of the sleepest hound dog fly up in the air, flapping and fluttering! That noise is the rarely-heard *"Something's Wrong in America"* buzzer. It only sounds when something very basic gets twisted. It last buzzed when Sylvester Stallone attempted his ill-advised switchover to musical comedy.

As a society, we have become so grateful and, sadly, so relieved when a transaction we attempt goes smoothly in our favor. We seem to have forgotten that we chose this company and blessed them with our patronage and shrinking pay. Instead of hearing their heartfelt gratitude as the transaction ends, we blurt out our thanks to them simply for accomplishing the task they promised to accomplish. Why ... because competence and organizational quality are rarer than they should be. It's as if we are courting them.

We can reverse this with one training session. Teach your people about the Thank You/You're Welcome cycle. Show them when and how to properly thank a customer – give them an informal version as well as a high-society version of them both. Teach them how a polite and gracious thank you, with the right people and at the right moment, can make quite a difference in your bond with the customer. Because of the bad apples in the construction industry, we have a higher bar to leap. Please consider telling your people how a *"No Problem"* response might not provide the lift in courtesy we need to clear it.

