

# Abolishing Yourself - Time To End The Procrustean Bed Of Customer Service

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A friend in the charity sector recently explained to me the difference in mindset between the corporate world and charity world. In my world, I wake up every day thinking about how I can help my company expand, grow and deliver more results to more clients. My friend, by contrast, wakes up thinking, “how can I abolish myself?” The end goal of any charity is to no longer exist: to solve the problem it was established to alleviate.

It is this attitude that customer services should be adopting, from both a technology and a business perspective. When the term *customer service* comes up, I imagine most of us have the same reaction, a mental image of long, exasperating phone calls when something goes wrong. Trying to explain a problem to a less-than-interested person, just trying to get a problem fixed and that. Not. Happening. Or maddeningly, constantly, failing security questions because no, I do not remember that PIN you sent me seven years ago, and why do you need my mother’s maiden name? It has always worried me that so much security seems to rely on my mother’s maiden name, like no one could ever crack that code. Sometimes it seems as though our whole economy revolves around my mother’s maiden name.

But how about this as an idea: I propose that firms set as a goal the abolition of their customer service departments and, counterintuitively, aim for minimal contact with their customers, in its current form. At present, it seems multiple companies in multiple sectors, structure their customer service offer in the same way, simply because, that is how it is done - taking the same approach as always, rather than actually asking what provision do we need?

While this may work, in ensuring that customers who need support or want to

complain can at some point do so, and often after staying on hold for what seems like forever, get a solution, it is not the best approach for either customers or companies.

This is no way means an end to all customer interaction. That is here to stay. This means the creation of a better approach, which moves customer interaction away from the flawed model of today towards a more useful set of interaction for both the client and the company. To achieve this would require two solutions.

The first solution may sound obvious, but I feel it needs to be stated. Products should be intuitive to use and not necessitate calls to customer service. Self-explanatory and flawless systems are yet a stuff of legends, but nevertheless it is the goal - to make things better for clients. The perfect example of this is Ikea; their customer service department may deal with complaints about missing parts, but very rarely about how the product fits together. Equally, Apple (or at least until very recently) delivered products to market that just worked in a way people instinctually understood. Building products that just work in the way people expect them to reduces the need for customer service staff to focus on helping people use products, freeing them up for when things go wrong.

However, making products just work cannot be the whole solution. Customer service practices must change themselves and here, as in so many other areas, in technology lies the answer.

Santander recently integrated voice recognition software into their app offer. As is often the case, where financial services leads, the rest of technology follows three years later. Voice recognition software such as Santander's and voice assistants (think Siri or Alexa) should be leveraged by customer service departments to dramatically scale down the amount of time clients have to spend either with people, or jumping through hoops just to get a solution. Instead of having to remember that seven-year-old PIN or the answer to some unknown security question, an effective system would identify you on the basis of voice, tonality and the device you are using. Equally greater and

intelligent use of chatbots by customer service departments can have the impact of helping customers with simple, question answer enquires. Indeed, any area where all a customer needs is a simple answer to a simple question, or just needs to state information can be automated.

Meantime, while all these technologies are being explored across multiple industries, for me what is missing in how corporations are approaching this is the *why*. *What exactly is the point of all this?*

For now it seems to be focused on making customer service function more effectively and, as such, investment decisions are targeted towards this. Instead the aim should be to eliminate customer service all together.

With a renewed focus on making products that just work how people expect them to and restructuring customer service so that technology is used as a tool *to help people*. Customer service - we have travelled a path together. You have all our intimate secrets; even what our mothers were called. Now, please abolish yourself.

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