

Sprinting After the Amazons

Written by Jack Sparacino

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I wrote here recently about the importance of providing people who do excellent work for us positive feedback, ideally right on the spot. Since then, several wacky customer situations developed that left me wondering if I had temporarily slipped off a cliff into another dimension of time and space... hello again Mr. Serling... or do I ring the little bell for Brian De Palma or Alfred Hitchcock?!

Calling the man in the moon. Here's one that left me nearly groping for an oxygen mask. Our ancient, dinged up cell phone couldn't hold a charge or consistently complete calls any longer. We had owned this little relic for many years and ordered a replacement, hoping to keep our existing account and phone number. Jane made the first few calls and was informed that the plan we had was no longer available 'free and clear' with any new phone. She eventually seemed to navigate around that problem although she got cut off twice in the middle of a conversation. A "new" (actually refurbished) phone arrived and Jane attempted to activate it. One problem was that it had a new number, another was that we had difficulty figuring out how to remove the cover in order to locate the identification number under the battery (I was of no help initially as there was no obvious release point but the manual vaguely indicated where to pry it open and we eventually succeeded).

Trouble was, we had damaged the phone in attempting to open it. After a few more calls to customer service, I 'sprinted' to my car and drove to the company's store here in town. The senior tech guy there said the damage was only to the camera (which we didn't really need), but he couldn't activate the phone which had just been deactivated at headquarters. Nor could he do anything helpful since our old plan was obsolete. Steam beginning to hiss calliope-like from my ears, I drove home looking to regain that zen state of mind, took a deep breath, and called customer service again. And again, and again. Always reaching a different person, often in a different location (none of these people have last names or direct lines, some do not speak English as their first language or they sound like they're speaking through a damp horse blanket or a chunk of drywall). A second replacement phone was sent our way and a very nice fellow named Marty walked me through a dozen or more bewildering steps to activate it. I then made two test calls, both successful. Things were looking up!

Except that a half hour later, the phone went dead. The screen said the power was off, it was "pre-charging" and advised me to "please wait." Which I did, initially overnight. Then for an entire week! Unplugging it several times and reinstalling the battery per the support guy's suggestion did nothing so I left it plugged in a few more days and then called the daunted sprinting-to-your-assistance people yet again and requested another phone. When it came, I unplugged the 'Marty' phone and just for the heck of it, plugged it back in immediately. Wonder of wonders, it lit up and let me make another call. But no more, as it quickly went back into a deep, pre-charging sleep and advised me again to "please wait."

Back to replacement phone #3. This time the customer service rep walked me through a short series of steps, besting good old Marty, and the phone activated. We made a couple of test calls, I croaked "thank you" and we hung up. Did I mention that this was call #15 and that around call #11 the ever so nice young lady granted us a \$15 credit for "all the hassle" as she put it? If I did the math right, that credit came out to \$2 an hour for my time, almost as much as

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my hourly wage as an 18-year old working a summer factory job in Milwaukee in 1969. (For reference, you could get a decent draft beer down the street for twenty cents and gas was practically free by today's standards). I politely (sort of) told the last representative I spoke with that I had never had such a frustrating experience with any company, large or small, and that they should be embarrassed over their poor products and service. And to please relay this nightmare to her supervisor. I'm betting that two bucks an hour that no one in any position of authority will quickly do anything to clean up their inefficient processes and defective phones. Make that \$5. And a phone!

▣ **Captain courageous.** Now here's a recent encounter with a terrific company, Amazon. We use their website to buy all kinds of things, in my case most often books. I like to review excellent books or the occasional stinker on their website and generally ignore the mediocre stuff. But I flipped over Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, Admiral Eugene Fluckey's "Thunder Below" detailing his WWII submarine heroics and earnestly wrote a 5-star (highest possible) review. Which was quickly rejected (whaaat!?), my first such experience through many on-line reviews, all of which I take great care with. Puzzled, I polished it some more and salted in additional details. Nothing doing, they rejected it again. OK, Sherlock, think. I figured this might be an automated program that's being triggered to reject submissions by something like . . . the very name Fluckey, which of course includes an embedded profanity and the use of such is quite justifiably prohibited. So I deleted his name and looked to substitute "the author" or "the captain of the USS Barb." Bingo, my review sailed right through and was followed by a congratulatory e-mail.

The next morning I checked to see if the review was still there, and it was. I then suavely called Amazon's customer service number (no, not crustaceous was I) and got 4-month-on-the-job, 24-year-old Dominique on the line and explained what had happened (so thrilled, I even guessed her age correctly and wondered for a moment how well I could keep up that kind of spooky wizardry at a carnival). Perhaps, I gently suggested, their computer programming people could revise their software such that authors' names do not trigger automatic rejections. She politely took down the issue and said yes indeed she would forward the information. As it happens, the admiral was nicknamed "Lucky Fluckey." For a moment there, this columnist was tempted to feel happy-go-lucky-fluckey and tell my friends about cracking the case wide open via my 'new' (uh, refurbished) cell phone!

Throughout these minor ordeals, which come to think of it run through most of our lives like an off-yellow brick road, I tried to remain calm and not take the annoying or merely silly stuff too much to heart. Think about the essence of life and all that makes it worthwhile seriously, yes, but not oneself. And smile, ever so gently. Sometimes no amount of sprinting will let you catch up with the amazons.