When Life Gives You Lemons...

Real-world lessons from outside the industry can and should play a major role in how you operate your business.

By Mark Richardson

In business, we often need lessons from other worlds to help us understand and improve in the one we are the most familiar with. We often use metaphors or analogies to communicate, but we can also learn from our own real-world experiences.

Oftentimes, these experiences can help us appreciate what our customers go through and the solutions and strategies required to assure they are satisfied no matter what happens.

The Journey

Earlier this year, my wife and I and some good friends took a long-awaited trip to Turkey, a country and culture we were not very familiar with but really wanted to see and experience.

We knew the trip would take many hours and cross many time zones so we used a travel service to arrange hotels and tours in several locations.

Our first stop was Istanbul where after more than 12 hours of travel we arrived late to make our first excursion — a Turkish bath, disappointing but were able to reschedule it for the next day. After a couple of days, we were scheduled to be picked up at the hotel at 5 a.m. to take us to the airport for our next stop.

The driver never arrived. We had to scramble to get another taxi and almost missed our flight. When we arrived in the Cappadocia region (a more remote part of the country), a man by the name of Mustapha met us at the airport for the one-hour drive to our hotel.

About 20 minutes into the drive he turned to us and said, "I am not your tour guide; I am the hotel manager, and I have some unfortunate news. I made this drive personally to deliver the news to you myself. We have some electrical problems at the hotel and several of the rooms, including yours, are not available for use."

As you can imagine after a very trying couple of days, we were not happy at all.

Then he said, "I have arranged for you to stay at a very nice hotel for the night and if you choose you can return to my hotel tomorrow or stay in the hotel. Mustapha was standing waiting for the car to greet us personally and bring us a bottle of his finest wine. After joining us for a drink, he invited us to be his personal guests at his restaurant the next night.

The next day after touring the region, our driver brought us to Mustapha’s hotel. Mustapha was standing waiting for the car to greet us personally and welcome us again to his hotel.

We ended up having a wonderful stay. We now have not only a new friend and fine memories but also some important business lessons to share.

Lessons Learned

So what did we learn along the way?

1. What your customer remembers is how they were treated and how you approached the problem, not the problem itself.
2. The highest level person needs to show he/she cares and personally get involved.
3. Do the unexpected (such as wine at 10 p.m. and a personal greeting at the door). Go over the top to show you are sorry and you really care.
4. Be a friend. Relationships are deeper than something you cannot control.
5. Follow up. While the problem may not be forgotten, the pain can go away and be replaced by other positive emotions.
6. Keep it coming. Don’t just check it off your list. Be sure to keep the love flowing. That is when the customer knows it is real and sincere.

So whether you draw off a travel nightmare, distant troubling memory, or painful purchase of an automobile, there are many lessons and experiences out there to draw from.

If you have the right customer-centric mindset or culture and are a little creative, you can turn lemons into lemonade.

After returning from our trip, we are communicating to everyone how great Mustapha was and why everyone should stay in his hotel. While he may have spent some extra time and a little money on us, he has and will see a huge return on the investment both now and in the future.