

## Winning Back Customer **Trust**

The 5 key questions that you need to answer in order to build, rebuild and sustain customer trust



by Sharon Oatway

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**WHO DO YOU TRUST?** Depending on where you live, you likely trust firefighters the most and telemarketers the least. And depending on your own personal bias, it may take you just seconds to trust someone while others may take days, months or even years.

Your parents probably warned you not to trust strangers...I know mine did. And yet, whether we like it or not we must trust others. From the moment we are born we are required to trust for our very survival. From the food we eat, to who protects our life savings, to whom we trust with our friendship, our cars, our bodies and even our children. The kind of trust I am talking about is based on the expectation that what someone says can be relied upon. My word is my bond.

## Trust is a tricky game

For the average person, trust is a tricky game. On the one hand, it's a prerequisite for many worthwhile things: child care, friendship, sex. And on the other, putting your faith in the wrong place can carry a very high price. To keep trust alive often requires a leap of faith. As human beings we want to trust and sometimes, despite our best judgment, we do.

Over time heroes have disillusioned us, politicians have disappointed us and we have been betrayed a little...or a lot. Hearts have been broken. Disappointment abounds. We take a leap of faith and end up feeling embarrassed and ashamed at our gullibility. I should have known. I told you so. How could I be so stupid?

When that bond of trust is broken, it is an emotional memory that stays with us for a long time and it is difficult (sometimes impossible) to shake. That's why it is so easy for feelings of betrayal to get transferred to others. Your girlfriend cheats – all women cheat. You buy a lemon from a used car lot – all used car dealerships are shady. The bad behaviour of a few can spread mistrust like a virus.

This was only too true during the unravelling of the Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme back in 2008. When Americans were asked if they thought the Madoff

ripoff was an isolated case or common behaviour among financial advisers and institutions, 74% told CNN they thought it was “the norm”. That is truly staggering: three-quarters of Americans believed that Wall Street was rife with not just ethically challenged behaviour but with outright criminal fraud.

Such is the baggage that we take into all of our relationships. And these are the emotions and corresponding sense of caution that our customers bring into relationships with us.

## Trust drives revenue

It may be obvious at this point but why is having customer trust so important? To quote the former Chairman and CEO of Unilever: *“You can have all the facts and figures, all the supporting evidence, all the endorsement that you want, but if – at the end of the day -- you don't command trust, you won't get anywhere.”*

This is backed up by a study conducted by Concerto Marketing & Research Now. When a customer trusts your brand:

- 83% will recommend it to other people
- 82% will use its products and services frequently
  - 78% will look to it first for things they need/want
  - 78% will give its new products and services a chance
  - 50% will pay more for its products and services
  - 47% believe the brand will keep them informed about products and services they like

So if we want to grow our business, we have to pay attention to trust.

## Industries Canadians trust

Now in its 14th year, the Edelman Trust Barometer is the preeminent worldwide study of trust. Surveying 33,000 respondents, ages 25 to 64, across 27 countries, including Canada, it takes an in-depth look at trust in Business, Government, NGOs, and Media. (For the full report, go to: [www.edelman.ca](http://www.edelman.ca))

Companies headquartered in Canada are among the most trusted in the world. Within Canada, technology companies are the most trusted and, unlike the rest of the world, Canadians' trust of banks continues to be strong. Where does your company fall?

“The expectation that the word of another can be relied upon.”

## People we trust

One question to ask is whom do customers trust when it comes time to look for a new product or service? Study after study points to ‘people I know’ as being the most trustworthy source of information. Interestingly, following closely behind are recommendations from complete strangers who post their opinions on sites like Amazon.



According to media experts, the average person has 184 conversations a week about the products he or she buys. Where once customers trusted advertising and celebrities who endorse products, now they only trust each other.

Getting recommendations from other customers is not a new thing. In fact, companies like Tide have been using customer testimonials for years to endorse products.

We know that customers seek out the recommendations of others when they are thinking about buying a product/service. But whom do they trust most *within* a company. Edelman asked the question: “*When forming an opinion of a company, how credible would information be from each of these individuals?*”

Once again we see that it is “people like you” that customers trust the most (53%) followed very closely by regular employees (50%). Who is near the bottom of the list? Board of Directors (35%) and CEOs (33%).

This statistic alone sends a very important message about how important our ‘regular’ employees are to building, rebuilding and sustaining customer trust. We can see this in action everyday in the customer care centre.

## 5 questions that build trust

Over the years I have learned that there are 5 questions that customers ask about your company before they hand-over their trust:

1. Do I trust that you know me?
2. Do I trust that you know what you are doing?
3. Do I trust that you will do what you said you would do?
4. Do I trust you will not steal from me?
5. Do I trust that you will take care of me?

### 1 Familiarity

*Do I trust that you know me?*

**Familiarity** is a level of intimacy and understanding of your customers. It answers the question: “*Do I trust that you know me?*”

Recently my Aerogold card was switched to TD from CIBC. I needed to set up my online account and so I called TD for assistance. They needed to authenticate me. After asking me the obligatory questions like account information and address they then asked me:

*“How long have you been a customer of TD?”*

I proudly answered: “*Since I opened my first business account with you in 1990.*”

Error. I tried again. Nope. As the agent tried valiantly to manage my growing anger (yes anger!), I was wrong and instructed to go into a branch to get the support I needed. Obviously his information only reflected my personal business with TD.

Knowing a customer means to know them in their entirety — not merely one silo of product/service relationship they have with your company.



What does it take for a company to know me?

- Understand my full product and service relationship with your company (family and business)
- Keep my information accurate
- Know my needs
- Understand a little about what makes me tick

One of the best illustrations of not knowing your customer is to ask them to repeat themselves. According to ClickFox, the thing that frustrates customers the most is: 'Having to speak with multiple agents and start over every time' (42%). 'Being kept on hold for a long time' or 'Not getting what I need on the first try' is a distant second (17%).

## 2 Competency

More than half of all customer interactions are multi-touch and multi-channel and yet...70% of channel cross-over events need information that has already been given. That doesn't build trust.

The reality is that customer support is still driven by product silos and personalized treatment is still maturing.

*Do I trust that you know what you are doing?*

**Competency** is all about demonstrating ability, expertise and knowledge. Beyond spouting facts and figures, there are other attributes that are key to representing competency.

First is to **sound** confident. How confident a person **sounds** will determine whether or not the customer accepts the information provided. How many times has a customer called back again to speak to a different agent because they didn't trust the information given to them by the first agent? A lot of this has to do with *sound-ing* confident and credible.

The second is to **be** confident. This is where connecting the customer to the right answer or resource the first time matters. More and more of my customers are investing in Knowledgebase Technology to deliver a timely, accurate and consistent message across their call centre, branches, dealer networks and website.



The third is **consistency**. Multi-channel customers need to know what to expect from you. That's the key to success for brands like Starbucks — a Skinny Vanilla Latte is pretty much the same in Fredericton, as it is in Toronto as it is in Paris or Sydney.

Consistency goes hand in hand with improving overall performance. It is very difficult to raise the bar in a call centre if every agent is performing at different levels and generally doing their own thing.

## 3 Dependability

*Do I trust that you will do what you said you would do?*

Dependability means to predictably deliver on your promises. Consistency is also important here.

**The goal is to be 'effortless' — to remove friction and eliminate waste. To proactively remove any and all barriers to a great experience.**

In a recent study, when asked if they felt that the customer service departments of today's companies were generally meeting their customer service needs and expectations, almost 80% of customers said 'no'.

This is a tough question because customer expectations are always changing. Customers are forming their expectations not only on what you do but also what your competitors do. And sometimes what companies outside of your industry are doing.

The goal is to be 'effortless' — to remove friction and eliminate waste. To proactively remove any and all barriers to a great experience. If earning a customer's trust begins with 'walking a mile in their shoes', then understanding the journey customers have with you is vital.

The pre-requisite to developing a great experience is to first understand what customers are experiencing today and proactively design the best possible experience over time. The starting point? **Customer Journey Mapping.**

It's important to note that while customer loyalty may not be highly correlated with a superior customer experience, customer disloyalty is highly correlated with a poor customer experience. This means that the key to driving customer loyalty is to be both dependable and consistent.



Customer journey mapping comes in all shapes and sizes. At a minimum, the map must reflect the customer's point of view — questions they ask, decisions they make, resources they rely on and so on.

The second is that it must be detailed enough to be able to identify moments of joy, excitement and/or happiness as well as points where the process, decisions and/or interactions are painful, difficult or frustrating. By mapping this out in detail, you can see pretty quickly what the priorities are. (Also see VQ Whitepaper: “Customer Journey Mapping: 8 steps to prioritizing where to improve the customer's experience and generate more revenue”)

**A good contact centre experience increases the likelihood a customer will buy/buy more by 14 times and a good web experiences 11 times.**

Granted, no customer journey is ever going to be perfect given the broad range of clients and their ever-changing expectations. With this in mind, successful organizations will carefully prioritize those points within the experience that are going to provide the biggest payback in terms of customer engagement and loyalty.

Why do we care about this? A good contact centre experience increases the likelihood a customer will buy/buy more by **14** times and a good web experiences **11** times. If you care about improving customer loyalty and increasing revenue then you must also care about whether your customers trust you.

I'm going to pause a minute to point out the obvious when it comes to dependability. You must also have a product or service that customers want and need. It must deliver on the promises you make about it and it must work.

That being said, you can have a great product but if you don't earn the customer's trust, they will likely buy from someone else they do trust even if your competitor's offering isn't as good.

## 4 Integrity

*Do I trust that you will not steal from me?*

When we talk about integrity we are talking about adhering to sound moral and ethical principles. To simply be honest.

At the foundation of integrity is **transparency**. Transparency is another behaviour that should come naturally to us and yet so many businesses have trouble coming to terms with what it really means.

Customers are smart. They can almost always tell when you are hiding behind a policy or fabrication. If integrity is your go-to strategy, then customers will appreciate and admire you when you admit to an error rather than trying to cover it up or (even worse) avoiding it altogether.

There may be times when you know what you are going to say will upset the customer or result in a lost sale. While that may be true in the short-term, in the long run, you'll have built your relationship on the bedrock of honesty. And honesty always trumps dishonesty.

In the description of integrity I have deliberately used the phrase “*I trust you will not steal from me.*” You may think – this definitely doesn't apply to me. We don't steal! The truth is, most companies do. Some companies call this ‘marketing’. I call it ‘appropriation by omission’.

This is what happens when a bank does not proactively inform seniors of the fact that there is a chequing account without fees for those over 65. Or when an energy company locks a client into a high rate annual plan knowing that rates are dropping. Or when companies sign customers up for a FREE trial and then leave the onus on the customer to cancel. And my favorite, when organizations reward new customers (or customers who are threatening to cancel) with special rates.



## 5 Benevolence

*Do I trust that you will take care of me?*

Benevolence refers to a person's motivation to put another's well-being ahead of his or her own interests. To be genuinely caring and supportive.

Being trustworthy goes well beyond not telling lies. Being benevolent means that you will never sell a solution that isn't in the customer's best interest. Sometimes you just won't have the right solution at the right price. If that is the case, it is always best to be honest with the customer, instead of proposing something which you know will not fully deliver the outcome the customer is looking for.

Being benevolent also means we will use our superior knowledge to serve the customer's interests first. If you know a way to help customers out of a predicament or into a better product/service, let them know. People everywhere are looking for someone to trust. By compromising the sale today you may gain a customer for life.

The best way to demonstrate our benevolence is through empathy: engaging with the customer in a way that let's them know we understand and share their feelings. To give you an idea of the impact an individual call centre agent can have on the way a customer feels about a company, I want to share a case study with you.

### **A CASE STUDY ON EMPATHY**

Our client was concerned that they weren't making any headway on their customer satisfaction results. They knew they needed to do something different but just didn't know what. After analyzing a sample of 15,000 calls collected over a period of 1-1/2 years, we found that 27% of customers were expressing anger or frustration at the beginning of the call and this trend was growing. Sometimes they yelled. Sometimes it was a slow burn.

By listening to the clues customers left with every interaction, we were able to isolate a key behaviour of top performing agents that made a real difference. We found that the agents who were the most successful in turning around upset customers were **empathetic**. They had the ability to understand and reflect back the feelings of the customers they served. As a result, the customers believed those agents understood their problems and would do everything they could to help.

It's no surprise that upset customers who have a poor experience get emotional about it. And perhaps customers today are more emotional and vocal than we have seen in years past. This is because when dealing with your company or the cell phone company or the utility company or the bank, complaining loudly tends to work. Upset customers get escalated to other people who have a greater ability to help them.

“ **EMPATHY:**  
**The ability to understand and share the feelings of others.** ”

In this case, 13% of the unhappy customers reached an agent who was empathetic. The empathy we speak of wasn't over-the-top but rather just a simple statement that reflected back the emotion the customer was feeling: *“That's frustrating,” “That's disappointing,” “That's upsetting”*.

Overall, the call centre experience created 8% more happy customers from unhappy ones. Importantly, by the end of the call, 82% of those unhappy customers we talked about earlier were pleasant and pleased.

Because we are also customers, we all know that customers respond positively when a genuine human connection is made. When we apologize in a genuine way we're saying, *‘I care about you. I know you've been through something difficult, and I'm thinking about that.’* Gestures like these enhance trust, even with people we don't know.

Study after study tells us that superior customer service is essential to driving superior customer loyalty. But HOW we deliver that service matters when it comes to building trust. Every time we follow-through on our promises, we are building trust. And every time we respond to a problem immediately and solve it (or at least make sure we are on top of it) we are building trust. It's just about being there for the customer before, during and after.

## In Summary

There are 5 questions that customers ask themselves before they decide to trust us:

1. FAMILIARITY: *Do I trust that you know me?*
2. COMPETENCY: *Do I trust that you know what you are doing?*
3. DEPENDABILITY: *Do I trust that you will do what you said you would do?*
4. INTEGRITY: *Do I trust you will not steal from me?*
5. BENEVOLENCE: *Do I trust that you will take care of me?*

### What are your answers?

When we are face-to-face with someone we look for superficial cues that tell us whether or not we should trust them: symmetrical smiles, eyebrows upturned near the inside edge and racial characteristics that match our own. We're more likely to trust people we see as attractive.

In the call centre environment it is an entirely different situation. Our first impressions are formed differently and perhaps more deeply. We have to judge each interaction with an agent on that agent's actions and behaviours and, if all goes well, we feel they share our values -- paving the way for the kind of trust that endures.

### Sharon Oatway, President & Chief Experience Officer

**SHARON OATWAY** is President and Chief Experience Officer of VereQuest. She is an award-winning and seasoned sales, marketing and operations executive with wide-ranging success in identifying, developing and implementing customer-centric initiatives related to planning, technology, culture and alternative delivery channels. Sharon has held several key, senior management roles in companies looking to grow market share through new offerings and/or markets. She has a proven track record in combining visionary planning with a practical, hands-on approach to turn-around or start-up situations. Importantly, through in-depth, hands-on experience in the integrated disciplines of customer service, data-driven marketing, sales, operations, training and CRM, Sharon is uniquely qualified to provide insight into the factors that alter customer behavior and build sustainable loyalty.

Founded in 2002, **VEREQUEST** is a customer experience consulting and monitoring firm specializing in industries whose customers value their time, money and/or health. We have had much of our success in multi-channel environments where customer-to-employee engagement is critical to building loyalty and reducing costs. Through our unique team of customer experience coaches, proprietary technology and wealth of experience we provide our clients with reality-based analysis and actionable insight critical to sustaining profitable customer relationships and reducing operational inefficiencies.



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