Preventing for damage limitation

Customer service is key to success, yet law firms often lack strategies to deal with complaints. In the first of a two-part article, Michael Herlihy explains what can happen when lawyers are caught unprepared.

Many years ago, I became an early adopter of Virgin Atlantic. Undeterred by my colleagues’ jibes of ‘but they’ve only got a few planes’, I eagerly embraced the new airline as an alternative to the starched service at BA and enthusiastically sang its praises to anyone who would listen.

Then one day the inevitable happened: I had a bad flight. Clearly not so bad that the plane fell out of the sky, but Murphy’s Law bad in that most other things which could go wrong did go wrong, all compounded by a cabin crew more interested in reliving the dubious highlights of their last stopover than serving their customers. The colleague I had persuaded onto the flight sat alongside me in silent recrimination.

With all the righteous indignation of a disappointed fan, I scribbled an ill-tempered note and thrust it into the hands of one of the crew.

Five days later, I received a phone call from Richard Branson (well, OK, not Branson himself — though I know people who have — but from his office).

Without going into the details of that conversation, suffice to say that, 15 years later, I still choose Virgin over BA, and am still telling people the story as an illustration of the importance of handling unhappy customers correctly.

Not that people need telling, of course. Everyone agrees that if you deal really well with customers’ complaints, you can not only avoid losing them, but can actually cement your relationship and enlist them as spokesmen for you as they tell their friends about the amazing service they received.

Indeed, more than once when discussing this phenomenon, people have responded with tales (urban myths, perhaps?) of how some businesses with ‘six sigma’ levels of customer service deliberately engineer a certain number of service failures just to give themselves the chance to show customers how brilliantly they handle them. Without being unkind, I suspect that few of these are law firms.

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