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Broken dreams: How to kill a customer relationship

IF YOU thought an angry customer was a threat to business, there is a more insidious danger: the disappointed customer. Disappointed customers don't call to complain; they just build negative credits against the company, disengaging over time and, ultimately, departing.

Disappointment erodes the feeling of connection. If you feel cheated, ignored or humiliated, you're not going back for more.

Angry customers are easier to deal with because they are more visible. Companies have built systems to manage and defuse customer complaints, but they're usually unaware of disappointed customers because they don't make themselves known.

A consumer emotions study, conducted by Evaluate and Psychologica for the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals, found that 39 per cent of customers who had a negative surprise from a company did not complain because they lacked confidence in the problem being resolved.

Disappointment is a low-arousal emotion, says consumer psychologist and Psychologica's managing director, Michael Edwardson. When you're disappointed you don't want to engage; your motivation is to leave. Anger is a sense of being violated; disappointment is having expectations dashed.

The study involved nine companies in the automotive, aviation, home services, financial services, telecommunications and utilities sectors, and 4000 of their customers. Twenty-one per cent had had a negative surprise, while 26 per cent had a positive surprise.

What most people do with anger [is that] they want a setting of retribution. As long as the call centre can handle that, and negative surprises and complaints are handled well, the outcome is as positive as if you didn't have the problem at all, says Edwardson.

The concept of disappointment is just being discovered by companies around the world. Edwardson, who also lectures in marketing at the University of NSW, says We don't understand how to manage disappointment.

The danger for companies is that the greater the brand promise, the greater the likelihood of disappointment. There is a disconnect between the marketing promise and the day-to-day reality, says Wayne Croker, managing director of Evaluate. Marketing creates emotional expectations. There's no honeymoon period. You have to be good from day one.

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