

The Rubber Ceiling
by Erica Heath [Erica Stull]

Customer Service: the Real FAQ

Here's a hot tip for some enterprising investigator: the most misleading labeling around can be found on the typical corporate website under the heading "FAQ." The initials stand for "frequently asked questions," and any receptionist or customer service representative can tell you that those enshrined questions aren't the ones that are frequently asked.

There are a couple of FAQ varieties, ranging from insipid to dangerous. The insipid form is really a sneaky way for the company to expound on its favorite topics while pretending that the public is interested in them. Insipid questions are also an easy way to fill up space by restating everything the company has repeated in other formats for years. Questions are similar to puffball queries bad TV talk show hosts make of their celebrity guests. For example: "What is GigantiCorp's mission statement?" "How does GigantiCorp maximize return for investors?" "What makes GigantiCorp the world leader in pork, pork by-products, and pork-related merchandise?" Occasionally, a seemingly antagonistic question appears in the FAQ, but it's really just a puffball with a scary face. "Wouldn't customers benefit if GigantiCorp were more strictly regulated?" gripes the surly puffball. Count on the answer starting, "Heavens, no!"

Dangerous FAQs consist of consumer-oriented questions that claim to deal with a controversial matter. Companies often hand out such questions with accompanying answers to customer service staff as a training technique. They're dangerous because they lull the naive service rep into a false sense of security. It's like a car mirror that says, "objects in mirror are exactly as they appear." According to the FAQ, the world is full of pleasant customers making polite inquiries like, "please explain why my monthly bill has increased significantly." In fact, the question is likely to be R-rated, and the scripted answer will only provoke more hostile questions.

It's time to stop the charade. In the interest of accuracy, here are a few frequently asked questions that will never appear on a corporate FAQ:

- Which political candidates has GigantiCorp purchased in the last year?
- Last year in the annual report, your CEO was almost bald, but this year he has a full head of hair. What gives?
- How many of your company's products have been recalled?
- Is GigantiCorp currently under investigation by any government agencies, and if so, what for?
- The typical employees in your TV ads are wholesome and good-looking. How come the people I see driving around in your trucks all have tattoos and mullets?
- The warning label fell off my new Slicemaster XE and my baby ate it. What did it say?
- The corporate offices on your website are stunning. What percentage of my monthly bill goes to pay for waterfall maintenance?
- I have a question that isn't in the FAQ or any of the canned responses I get to my e-mails. What number do I call to talk to a human being?

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