

The Rubber Ceiling  
by Erica Heath [Erica Stull]

**Customer Service and the Armhole Effect**

There's just one dinky detail standing between me and the Nobel Prize for Business. I know there's no such honor at the moment, but there will be once I get past my little marketing problem and the Nobel folks get a load of my work.

Like Newton with the apple and Archimedes in his bath, I met my inspiration in the most mundane way possible. I was involved in a frustrating conference call between corporate guys and field managers, discussing our company's new customer service guarantee. The corporate folks at my end were all aglow, thinking about the beautiful new future of peace, harmony, and inflated revenues awaiting us as soon as our customers realized what a fine company they were dealing with. The field guys were all atwitter thinking of the thousand ways their least savory customers would abuse the new policy. They were all for customer service, but nervous about being nailed down. They begged for a deadly combination of vague commitments and fine print. The conversation ended with grumbling on both sides.

The explanation came to me in a flash. "It's the Armhole Effect," I said. Well, that's not exactly what I said, but the familiar body part I did mention isn't suitable to appear in a family newspaper. Or in a corporate conference room, for that matter. Normally, I'm fairly restrained, so the surprise expletive got everyone's attention.

I continued. "For every two hundred good, decent, honest people these guys work with, there's always one armhole who drives them nuts, takes advantage of every situation, and makes them wonder why they ever got into this line of work. Worse yet, the two hundred nice customers go about their business and don't bother anybody, while the armholes demand constant attention. Now we're asking our guys to guarantee service and compensate customers if they don't deliver. We're thinking what a nice impression that will make on the good guys, but all they can see is that they're about to be set up by armholes!"

I've chewed it over a lot since then, and I believe I've identified the key to a lot of what's wrong with business today. Companies set policy and employ platoons of lawyers to prevent being abused by the unscrupulous few. Unfortunately, armholes will always be armholes – you can't stop 'em, you can only slow 'em down. The rules don't eliminate armholery, they just make good customers resent being treated like criminals. The solution is to cultivate organizational far-sightedness, and see the distant crowd of decent people more clearly than you see the jerk who's in your face.

When you get right down to it, the Armhole Effect explains all kinds of problems, from road rage to the three-garment limit in department store fitting rooms. Do something about this unpleasant phenomenon, and so many of life's petty annoyances would simply blow away. With a little more work, the Armhole Effect might even qualify me for the Peace Prize. But first, I have to come up with a name they'll be willing to engrave on a plaque.

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