

The Rubber Ceiling  
by Erica Heath [Erica Stull]

### **Serving the Mutant Customer**

The big-picture people in the customer service business should start thinking smaller. For years, they've been obsessed with schemes to increase efficiency and service quality. With bigger call centers, snazzier technology, and measurement techniques that can quantify every variety of gnat's eyelash, the gurus believe they're well on the way to perfection. I think they'd do a lot better if they'd take their eyes off the forest for few minutes, and spend some time with that stunted little tree that's on the verge of infecting all the others. What they really need is a customer mutation detector.

Customer mutation is the mysterious phenomenon whereby a run-of-the-mill problem becomes an endless, waking nightmare for all concerned. You innocently try to return a purchase, or schedule a service call, or clear up an incorrect charge. One call should do the trick. But after the second call, you have a bigger problem than you did the first time. With each subsequent call, strange new troubles pop up like warts. You can't pinpoint when it happened, but at some point, you entered the zone of despair. You are now a mutant customer.

On the customer service side, the problem is equally bewildering. Each time the mutant calls, she repeats her ever-lengthening litany of woe to a new service rep. Unaware that mutation is involved, each new rep quickly sizes up the situation and arrives at one of two diagnoses:

1. **Defective Customer:** The new service rep hears a customer who could be a danger to society. In between yelling and hyperventilating, the unknowing mutant on the other end of the line describes a set of symptoms so unlikely as to defy imagination. Clearly, the service rep concludes, the customer is deranged. Turning to the "code red" section of her handbook, the rep begins to speak in a manner designed to calm the criminally insane. Further enraged, the mutant caller plots revenge.
2. **Idiot Colleagues:** The new service rep hears a deeply distressed customer describe her awful situation, and concludes that this unidentified mutant is simply the victim of other reps' incompetence. Eager to be a hero, the new rep assures the customer that help is at hand. The mutant sobs with gratitude, but by now, mere competence won't help.

The only way a mutant customer can return to normal is by jumping off the customer service track. She may cancel her account, alert the media, or find a friend who knows the president of the company. Each of these desperate measures will cause problems for the customer service staff. Meetings will be held, and heads will roll -- pain that could be avoided if service reps could intercept a mutation in the early stages.

Attention, customer service brain trust: my recommendation could be worth billions, but I'm offering it to you free of charge. Get the metrics meisters to identify the signs of a mutation in progress, and set up an early warning system for your service reps. Divert incipient mutants to an elite interception corps. It will take time and money, but your investment will pay off. On behalf of mutant customers everywhere, I urge you to start today.

Rocky Mountain News  
March 2006