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## Business

### In some cases, you'll do well to understand the customer isn't always right

by Ed Brenegar, Real Life Leadership  
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Question: I've been in business a long time. It has always been my policy that the customer is always right. But over the past couple of years, I have found situations where what the customer wants was not in their best interest. What should I do?

Answer: In certain businesses, the maxim the "customer is always right" still holds true. These are businesses where the product is basically a commodity. The customer's decision is based on price and convenience. So, whatever the customer wants the customer gets as long as you have it in stock.

Advertisement Many of these "commodities" should not be distinguished by price and convenience, but rather by knowledge and customization. Recently, I tried to buy a pair of shoes recommended to me by a fellow traveler in an airport. The shoes looked great and were sold by a national clothing store. When I tried the shoes on at the store they did not fit. These shoes are a commodity. They were priced right and marketed to a very common, but limited foot size. So, I left without the great looking pair of shoes that I wanted.

The young man who served me in the store didn't know how to fit shoes. He brought me the boxes, and I tried them on without his help. His knowledge of the product was minimal, and the store was not able to provide me the right fit. This is what happens when a product becomes a commodity.

So, how do change your approach so that you avoid this dilemma? It begins with treating your customer as a guest in your business. This is the idea that Jan Gunnarsson celebrates in his book "Hostmanship." You welcome them into an environment where their comfort and confidence is enhanced by your relationship to them. You say to your customer/guest: "Those shoes are really not right for you. Here's a similar style that I can order in your size. It will cost a bit more. You'll be much happier with them, and they will last much longer than the ones you came in to buy."

What goes unsaid in discussions about customer service is the responsibility of the customer. The adage "The customer is always right" sends the message that the customer relationship is a commodity transaction. There is no relationship, only a financial exchange.

It is in every customer's best interest to establish a healthy relationship with the shops and vendors with whom they do business. If the idea of Hostmanship works for businesses, it also works for customers of those businesses. This means that as a customer, when I enter a shop, I act as if I'm at their home. I am a guest, and they are the host. As a result, we establish a mutually beneficial relationship of respect and trust.

In truth, the customer is not always right. They may be misinformed or mistaken about a product. In the end, it is far more important that your customers are satisfied than simply right.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, a leadership consultant and coach in Western North Carolina. He can be reached at [ed@edbrenegar.com](mailto:ed@edbrenegar.com) and additional commentary read at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>.

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