

I've Been Robbed! The Injustice of Bad Customer Service

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Have you ever felt "cheated" by a service business? Perhaps you went through a fast food drive-thru only to discover—five miles down the road—that your order was incorrect, was missing items, or your sandwich was sloppily assembled. Or, maybe your experience was a bad haircut, clothes damaged by the dry cleaners, a plumber who left a job incomplete, or an airline that arbitrarily cancelled a flight limiting your scarce vacation time.

We all have stories of bad customer service and sharing those stories can seem like a “sport” at times. I have actually seen friends, family and co-workers attempt to “one up” each other’s bad service experiences. “*Well listen to what happened to me...*” And if “real” friends and family won’t listen—there are millions of “virtual” friends tied into social media and consumer review sites like Facebook, Yelp, Google Local, Angie’s List and TripAdvisor hungry for advice. According to some sources, negative feedback on the Internet outpaces positive feedback by a ratio of 10-to-1.

Why are we so passionate about sharing our bad service experiences? Most likely it goes to our innate need for justice. We expect *fairness* in the transactions we engage—meaning the value or benefit we receive is equal or greater to the money we pay and our efforts in utilizing a particular service provider. Justice also means that processes and technology are hassle-free, policies and procedures are flexible, and employees interact with us in a pleasant, professional manner.

When these attributes of justice are absent, we feel *victimized* on several fronts—the need that led us to seek the service in the first place continues to be unmet, we’re out the time and money invested with the service provider, and there’s also the lost opportunity to have had our needs met in a more efficient/effective/timely manner. When experiencing such *injustice*, often our only mechanism for “settling the score” is to warn others.

Put yourself in the shoes of an urgent care patient whose doctor fails to correctly diagnose a condition. The misdiagnosis leads to prolonged pain and discomfort, extended absence from work, payment for pharmaceuticals that are ineffective or bring adverse effects, and eventually a second co-pay and time spent with another doctor. To add “insult to injury” did the first doctor *really* even listen, focus, or show empathy for the patient’s concerns in the first place?

It’s not entirely uncommon for a patient to walk out of an urgent care facility feeling as though he or she has no rights other than to take what the doctor provides, pay the fee, and leave. But unlike a restaurant, plumber or airline, medical practitioners do have professional codes of ethics they have taken an oath to stand by—codes that focus on the *rights* patients have when seeking medical care. In fact, unlike other service encounters where justice is simply *implied*—medical patients are *explicitly entitled* to:

- The right to information about treatment options and costs;
- The right to decide if a certain treatment plan is something they want to accept; and
- The right to be treated fairly, justly and with respect.

So what happens when a patient walks into an urgent care facility and the receptionist says “sign in” without even looking up? When office administrators are snappy and dismissive over questions about pricing? When the nurse ushers the patient to a room to take vitals—asking for “height and weight” instead of taking actual measures—and writing down the patient’s most intimate health concerns without showing any compassion or concern? Or, when the doctor finally comes in, looks the patient over, and forms a conclusion within seconds—the remainder of the encounter his attention focused on writing in the chart while the patient (in vain) rehashes her medical concerns? What happens when the physician then writes out a prescription without even providing a diagnosis, going over treatment options, or asking the patient if she’ll be fine with the medication she’ll be swallowing every day?

This sounds quite different than the “rights” expected in a patient-physician encounter, doesn’t it? A patient who expects a welcoming, skillful, respectful experience is certainly justified to feel an “injustice” has occurred...

If a person walks into a store and takes something without paying it’s called *stealing*. What’s it called when the opposite occurs—when you are promised something in exchange for money and then you *don’t receive* what you’ve paid for?

A trip to the doctor is already a frightening experience for many people. To be poked, prodded, ignored, dismissed and then quickly shown the door, well, that is a clear definition of *humiliation*. To be denied service, comfort, reassurance, consultation and respectable service while being expected to surrender your hard earned money...that is the clear definition of being *robbed*.