

Customer Service: the Relationship Goes Both Ways

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I've been thinking lately about customer service, having had several extremely disappointing and frustrating experiences, like we each occasionally have.

From airlines to office supplies to restaurants to — well, I'll skip the rest of the list. The point is that all too often many businesses simply lack a sense of good customer service.

These experiences may have literally fulfilled the dictionary definition of service: "*Employment in duties or work for another.*"

Yes, the person showed up for work and did their duties, which apparently were to deal with the customer and move on to the next one. Put the stuff somewhere, collect the money, deal with the lineup. But is this really service?

Unfortunately, history has often aligned the word “service” with “servitude” in the sense of slavery, rather than in being a goal we can all strive towards. This contrasts with the Baha’i teachings, which say that an action performed in the spirit of true service is a form of prayer. To serve from the heart, not because I must but because I want to, because I see nobility and worthiness in the other person and in what I am doing for them — that is true service.

The Baha’i writings have extensive comments about service, frequently in everyday terms such as this advice by Abdu’l-Baha from a talk he gave in Paris: **“Help to make them feel at home; ask if you may render them any service; try to make their lives a little happier.”**

Wow! What would happen if a sales clerk thought of the store as a home, where my comfort and happiness were important? What if a helpdesk person sincerely wanted to satisfy my concerns and not just scuttle off to the next caller? What if the employee cared whether I returned or not? What if an airline valued my time?

But service goes both ways. Last weekend I was at a farmers’ market and waited a long time at a busy food stall. When the vendor finished with the customer in front of me, she turned her back and took a bite from a sandwich. One part of me thought, “Hey, I’m next, I’ve been waiting, eat on your own time.” Then I decided just to relax.

When she turned back to me, still chewing her food, I told her I didn’t mind waiting another moment, that she probably needed the break and deserved to keep her energy for her hectic day. She gratefully smiled, and we ended up chatting about local shopping and dealing with stresses of the marketplace. I got home maybe five minutes later than I would have, and I realized that I had enjoyed the market more than usual that day.

That experience reminded me of the other side to all of this, when I, as a customer, can reciprocate. It may require me to be patient — to realize the other person may be having a tough day, or recently finished with another customer who was rude, abrupt, or just plain difficult. If I want to be of service, and the other person is trying, then there are times when I can serve the one who otherwise serves me. As Abdu’l-Baha said:

We must look higher than all earthly thoughts; detach ourselves from every material idea, crave for the things of the spirit; fix our eyes on the everlasting bountiful Mercy of the Almighty, who will fill our souls with the gladness of joyful service to His command “Love One Another.”