

## The Solipsist Syndrome

*Many of the problems you're having with your customer may be the result of institutional self-centeredness.*

by John Guaspari

It was the middle of the afternoon. I was running a public seminar on what might technically be called "all this customer stuff," and it had been, I thought, a good day. The 40-or-so seminar attendees appeared to be responding well to the kind of profound obfuscations that we sophisticated management consultants are expected to serve up in such settings. (Basic operating, premise of all management consulting: "There is no idea so powerful that it can't have all of its value squeezed out by cramming it into a 2x2 matrix.") Then it happened. A little guy in the—back of the room—he hadn't said a word all day—raised his hand.

"Yes, sir," I said, acknowledging him.

"I don't want to make any trouble," he replied, scratching his chin in a disarmingly gee-whiz way, "but it seems to me that you're making things a lot more complicated than you need to. The way I see it, work is simple. What I tell my people is this: 'The customers have the money, we want it, and our job is to figure out what we need to do to get them to give it to us instead of to the other guys.'"

This resulted in much good-natured nodding, rib-poking, and laughter. (I joined in the laughter, then made a mental note to bend a corner on the little guy's evaluation form so that I could tear it up before turning it in to the seminar's sponsors.)

The fact of that laughter said this: Getting a handle on all this customer stuff ought to be simple. But the fact of the seminar itself—that 40 people would spend the time and money to attend such a session—would seem to suggest otherwise. After all, on one level, we know that we're supposed to treat customers well. We know that if we do, they will be more likely to give us their money than if we don't. Yet we also know that it's a lot easier said than done.

Why is it easier said than done? Because of something I'll call "Solipsist Syndrome." Why give it such a name? After all, *solipsist* is a pretty uptown word; it could seem pretentious to a lot of people. Then again, I like the alliteration. Actually, it's sibilance, isn't it? Or is it assonance? I'm not sure. I know that one has to do with vowel sounds, and the other with "s" sounds, but—I've lost you, haven't I?

Which is exactly the point. That last paragraph wasn't intended explain Solipsist Syndrome. It was meant to demonstrate it. Solipsism is the theory that the self is the only thing that can be known and verified that the self is the only reality.

One who is guilty of solipsism is, therefore, a solipsist. So the tacit assumption behind the highly solipsistic paragraph above is that because the matter discussed in it is of interest to me, it is, therefore, worth saying. It's not so much that I tacitly assumed that it would be of interest to you; that would just be obtuseness rather than solipsism. It's that it flat-out ignores the possibility that a "you" might even exist. That's an easy trap for businesses to fall into, and it explains why people who feel customer relations should be easy still end up at seminars to help them with it.

In the paragraphs that follow, you'll find descriptions of four symptoms of Solipsist Syndrome. Do any of them apply to your organization? If so, might it explain some of the difficulties you're having understanding why customers are giving their money to the other guys instead of to you?

**The Wild and Crazy Organization.** Remember when Steve Martin first turned up on *Saturday Night Live* as a white-suited, banjo-playing goofball who would, without warning, break out in a severe case of happy feet? (And if you don't remember, rent the tapes—it's worth it.) In one of his bits, he would announce, "To prove how much I care about my fans, I will now go down *among the people!*" Then he would wade into

the audience, so clearly appalled at the thought of doing so that he would keep his hands thrust high above his head, as though he were being held at gunpoint, while repeatedly issuing stern warnings to anyone around him: "Don't touch me!" The overall effect of the attitude Martin struck—a superficially magnanimous self-absorption—was utterly hilarious.

So why do we strike such an attitude all the time with our customers? Why do we make it such a big deal when we decide to get a little closer to our customers through mechanisms like surveys or focus groups? Maybe we send groups of people out to talk to customers, or even have customers come in for "Customer Day" visits.

In other words, we occasionally deign to "*go down among the people*" and chat them up for a bit. We don't do this too often because it's a bit untidy—"Don't touch me!"—and besides which, it can distract us from running our finely tuned operations. Then we—just a wild and crazy bunch of guys and gals—sit back and congratulate ourselves about how enlightened we are.

**Doing service.** When we talk about service, why is the conversation about the things that we do? This or that set of activities carried out according to the steps illustrate in our oh-so-precise and comprehensive collection of process-flow diagrams? That's a problem. Shouldn't service be "that thing of which we are to our customers" rather than "those steps we carry out in order to create our service offerings"? Shouldn't service be more about an impression that is left in a customer's mind (and heart) than about adherence to the flow diagrams festooning our conference-room walls, however handsomely rendered they may be?

**Whose movie is it?** When we talk about customers, are we thinking of them as "people who have decided to buy our product" or as "people who have determined that what we offer is the best answer to their needs"? Do we even think of customers as people at all? Or are they numbers on printouts of active accounts? Or maybe tick marks in the cells of market-segmentation charts?

Do we see customers as players—maybe even bit players, or extras—in the movie in which we are starring? Isn't that backward? Shouldn't it be that we've been cast by them to play a part in their movie rather than the other way around?

Doing unto others. What this is really all about is the Golden Rule, right? Wrong. The Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—is really solipsism masquerading as self-effacement. Think about what that almost universally accepted bit of conventional wisdom is really saying: "If we just treat other people the way we would like to be treated, then of course they will be happy." Can you conceive of a more densely compacted chunk of solipsism than that?

There's another version of the Golden Rule that goes like this: "Do unto others as they would like to be done unto." And if that's the version that comes to mind for you, then fine; you're off the hook. But (let's be honest about it) that ain't the one that most people mention. Come to think of it, doesn't that fact reveal more than anything?

To run a business, you do need to occasionally "*go down among the people.*" You do need to have clearly mapped processes by which you provide your service offerings to customers. You do need to know what the customer's role is in your movie. And, yes, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you isn't a bad place to start.

But consider an even more basic starting point. Ask yourself whether your institutional behavior reflects an awareness that there is a reality that extends beyond your institutional "self." Make sure you recognize that the customer is, in fact, the one who has the money and that you are, in fact, the one who wants it. Given that set of circumstances, solipsism is some seriously insidious and—yes, dammit!—sibilant stuff to suffer from.

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