

HOLD

The Suffering Economy
of Customer Service
And the Revolt That's
Long Overdue

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Chapter 1 – Section 3

Section 3: The Universal Pain

I

If I asked you to name five companies whose customer service brings you joy, you would struggle.

Go ahead. Try it. Five companies that you actually look forward to calling when you have a problem. Five brands where you think, "Thank goodness I get to deal with their customer service today."

You're probably still thinking.

That's not because you're particularly hard to please or unusually unlucky with service experiences. It's because customer service is universally painful.

To be sure, there are degrees of pain. The Department of Motor Vehicles may seem worse than a hotel chain. Spirit Airlines may feel more punishing than your local coffee shop. But scratch beneath the surface, and you'll find that all customer service is broken in its own special way.

The Tolstoy Principle

Leo Tolstoy wrote, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Customer service follows the same principle. Good customer service experiences are remarkably similar: fast, helpful, human, effective. But customer service failures are creative in their awfulness.

Each company has found its own unique way to make you miserable:

Airlines: Make you their hostage once you're past security, then nickel and dime you for basic human dignity

Cable companies: Give you appointment windows so wide you could fit a small vacation inside them, then charge you for the privilege of waiting

Banks: Act like they're doing you a favor by holding your own money, then charge you fees for not having enough of it

Insurance companies: Take your money enthusiastically for decades, then fight every claim like you're trying to steal from them

Government agencies: Design systems so Byzantine that you need a PhD in bureaucracy just to renew your driver's license

Tech companies: Hide behind "algorithms" and "policy violations" to avoid taking responsibility for anything

It may be wait times, access to human support, lack of follow-up, impossible policies, or representatives with no authority to help. Just different flavors of pain, each expertly crafted to frustrate you in new and innovative ways.

The Great Democratization of Suffering

What's remarkable about modern customer service is how thoroughly it crosses all demographic lines.

Rich or poor, young or old, urban or rural, liberal or conservative everyone has customer service horror stories. It's one of the few shared experiences left in an increasingly divided society.

Your Republican uncle and your progressive niece may disagree about everything else, but they both hate calling their phone company. Your wealthy neighbor and your struggling colleague both dread dealing with their insurance claims. The CEO and the intern both avoid calling customer service unless absolutely necessary.

Bad customer service doesn't discriminate. It's an equal opportunity tormentor.

But here's what's even more troubling: some groups suffer disproportionately, and the companies know it.

The Accessibility Crisis

A reporter reached out to me in the winter of 2024, working on an article about how customer service fails people with disabilities. It was a topic I'm ashamed I hadn't studied deeply.

What I learned was devastating.

The bad customer service that most of us complain about is completely inaccessible to those with disabilities. We think we have it rough navigating phone trees and chatbots. For people with disabilities, these systems aren't just frustrating, they're often impossible to use.

Chatbots and online forms are inaccessible for people who can't use a mouse or have visual impairments. Screen readers can't parse most customer service websites, which are designed for visual navigation rather than accessibility.

Phone channels are a nightmare for most of us, but they're completely unusable for people with hearing disabilities. You don't even get the privilege of navigating the telephone menu from hell if you can't hear the options.

Live chat requires typing speed and reading comprehension that may not be possible for people with certain cognitive or physical disabilities.

Video chat assumes you have both audio and visual capabilities and a stable internet connection.

In-person service locations have been closing for decades, eliminating the one channel that might work best for people who struggle with technology-mediated communication.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires equal access to services, but customer service departments routinely ignore these requirements. They build systems that work poorly for able-bodied customers and don't work at all for disabled customers.

When people with disabilities try to request accommodation, they often get routed to "specialized" departments that are even harder to reach and less empowered to help.

I spoke with a woman who needed to dispute a billing error on her phone account. She's deaf and requested TTY service. The customer service department told her to use their online chat instead. The online chat system couldn't handle her specific billing issue and told her to call the phone number. When she explained she couldn't use the phone, they suggested she have someone else call for her.

Think about that: a phone company telling a deaf customer that she needs to find someone else to make phone calls for her to resolve problems with her phone service.

This isn't just bad service, it's systematic exclusion wrapped in digital transformation rhetoric.

Companies spend millions on websites that look sleek but aren't accessible. They deploy chatbots that seem sophisticated but can't accommodate different communication needs. They eliminate human channels that worked for everyone in favor of digital channels that work only for some.

Then they act surprised when they get sued under the ADA.

The Violence Epidemic

The universal frustration with customer service has reached a breaking point that's literally dangerous.

There has been a 50% increase in violence against retail customer service workers in recent years. Think about that: customers are so frustrated with service that they're physically attacking the workers trying to help them.

The workers who get attacked aren't the executives who designed the systems that frustrate customers. They're not the consultants who recommended cost-cutting measures. They're not the shareholders who profit from understaffed customer service departments.

They're minimum-wage employees with no authority to fix the policies that create customer rage.

A Target employee gets screamed at because the website said an item was in stock but it's not on the shelf. A McDonald's worker gets threatened because the ice cream machine is broken again. An airline gate agent gets pushed because flights are oversold and delayed.

These workers didn't create the inventory systems, the equipment maintenance policies, or the overbooking algorithms that caused the problems. They're just the human faces attached to inhuman systems.

But they're the ones who absorb the anger when those systems fail.

I can't call 1-800 numbers in front of young children anymore. Not because of explicit content, but because I know I'll end up yelling "representative!" at a machine designed to ignore me.

The technology has turned customer service interactions into exercises in controlled rage. We start calm and become progressively more frustrated as we're transferred, put on hold, asked to repeat information, and given solutions that don't address our problems.

By the time we reach a human, we're already angry at the system. But the human becomes the target for that anger.

The Global Phenomenon

Bad customer service isn't just an American problem. It's a global export.

I've consulted for companies in 23 countries across 6 continents. The details vary, but the patterns are remarkably consistent:

Developed countries: Over-invested in technology that replaces humans, under-invested in humans who can actually solve problems

Developing countries: Used as offshore customer service centers for companies that don't want to pay developed-world wages for developed-world problems

Authoritarian countries: Customer service reflects the general relationship between institutions and individuals bureaucratic, opaque, and designed to discourage complaints

Democratic countries: Customer service has been captured by short-term financial incentives that override long-term relationship building

The specific technologies vary. The cultural expressions of frustration are different. But the underlying economics are the same everywhere: companies have learned they can take customers' money while systematically avoiding responsibility for customer satisfaction.

The Generational Divide That Isn't

There's a myth that younger generations prefer digital customer service while older generations want human interaction.

That's not what the data shows.

When the stakes are high, when money is involved, when something important is broken, when time is critical every generation prefers human customer service. Gen Z may be comfortable with chatbots for simple questions, but they want humans for complex problems just like everyone else.

The difference isn't generational preference. It's learned helplessness.

Younger customers have been trained from an early age that human customer service doesn't work, so they don't expect it. They've adapted to systems designed to avoid them by developing workarounds, gaming the algorithms, and accepting that most customer service interactions will be frustrating.

Older customers remember when customer service was personal and effective. They haven't yet accepted that the degradation is permanent.

But both generations are equally frustrated when the digital systems fail them. Both want human help when chatbots can't solve their problems. Both feel betrayed when companies promise support they don't deliver.

The Political Unifier

There are not many issues that unite this country across political lines, but frustration with customer service is certainly one of them.

Republicans and Democrats disagree about the role of government, but they both hate dealing with government customer service.

Progressives and conservatives have different views on corporate regulation, but they both get frustrated when corporations treat them with contempt.

Urban and rural Americans have different economic challenges, but they both struggle with the same cable companies and phone providers.

Customer service failure is the rare issue that creates genuine bipartisan fury. Everyone has been trapped in phone tree hell. Everyone has dealt with chatbots that can't understand simple requests. Everyone has been transferred between departments that can't see each other's information.

If politicians wanted to find an issue with universal appeal, customer service reform would be it. But most politicians never experience the customer service systems that torment their constituents.

They have staff who handle their personal customer service issues. They have corporate accounts with dedicated relationship managers. They get whisked past the normal customer experience straight to VIP treatment.

So they don't feel the pain personally, and it rarely becomes a political priority.

The Democracy of Misery

In most areas of life, money can buy you a better experience. First-class flights, private healthcare, concierge services wealth provides options.

But customer service is remarkably democratic in its awfulness. Even wealthy customers get trapped in the same phone trees, deal with the same chatbots, and navigate the same policies as everyone else.

Sure, some companies offer premium support tiers. But those are exceptions that prove the rule. For most interactions with most companies, everyone gets the same terrible experience regardless of how much money they spend.

A millionaire calling to dispute a credit card charge gets the same hold music as a minimum-wage worker. A Fortune 500 CEO trying to cancel a subscription faces the same retention specialist gauntlet as a college student.

The technology doesn't discriminate. The policies apply equally. The frustration is universal.

The Isolation Paradox

Modern customer service creates a strange paradox: we're all having the same terrible experiences, but we're having them alone.

In the old days, you dealt with customer service in person, often in front of other customers. When a merchant treated you badly, other people saw it. When you got great service, others witnessed that too.

There was a social element to customer service that created natural accountability and shared experience.

Now you deal with customer service in isolation. You're alone on hold, alone with the chatbot, alone with your frustration. When something goes wrong, it feels personal even when it's obviously systematic.

You don't see the hundreds of other customers having the exact same problem at the exact same time. You don't witness the service representative dealing with identical complaints all day long. You don't realize that your "unique" situation is actually a predictable result of broken systems.

This isolation makes customers feel powerless and companies feel unaccountable. Your individual complaint disappears into a database where it becomes a statistic rather than a story.

The Solution That Isn't

Companies have learned to respond to universal customer service complaints with universal customer service surveys.

Every interaction ends with: "Please take a moment to rate your experience."

But those surveys aren't designed to measure your actual experience. They're designed to generate favorable ratings that executives can point to when questioned about service quality.

The surveys arrive immediately after interactions, before you've had time to discover whether the "solution" actually worked. They use rating scales that overestimate "satisfied" customers.

The result: companies can report improving customer satisfaction scores while customer satisfaction actually plummets.

The surveys create the illusion that companies are listening while actually helping them avoid listening.

The Pain That Unites Us

What makes the universal pain of customer service so significant isn't just that everyone experiences it. It's that everyone knows it doesn't have to be this way.

We've all had good customer service experiences. Rare, memorable moments when someone actually helped us quickly and effectively. When a representative had authority to solve problems and seemed to care about solving them. When technology made things easier instead of harder.

Those experiences prove that good customer service is possible. They're not miracles or accidents, they're glimpses of what customer service could be if companies chose to prioritize it.

The universal pain exists because companies have universally chosen short-term cost optimization over long-term relationship building. They've all read the same consultant reports, implemented the same cost-cutting measures, and deployed the same deflection technologies.

The pain is universal because the solutions are universal. And those solutions are failing universally.

But here's the thing about universal problems: they create opportunities for universal solutions.

If everyone is frustrated with customer service, then everyone is ready for something better. If every company is using the same broken playbook, then any company that breaks from that playbook has a massive competitive advantage.

The universal pain of customer service isn't just a problem to be solved. It's a market opportunity waiting to be seized by companies brave enough to honor the promises they make.

The question is: who will be first to break ranks with the industry consensus that customers should be avoided rather than served?

And what will it take for customers to demand and reward that change?

PART II

How we got here

"From Personal to Systematic" How customer service evolved from human accountability to corporate avoidance

Read the full book – HOLD: THE SUFFERING ECONOMY OF
CUSTOMER SERVICE
And the Revolt That's Long Overdue

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