Satisfaction (Not) Guaranteed

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Claiming satisfaction in radiology.

Readers of last week’s column will know that I recently had an unwelcome three days of no connectivity whatsoever, courtesy of a bit of weather and a less-than-responsive cable/internet/phone service provider.

It’s probably bad form for me to specify which provider, if I’m even allowed to here. But regular readers of this column will also know that I reside on Long Island, in NY, and there’s really only one major provider of all three services in the area...not too hard to figure out for those interested. In any event, even though the outage was early on a Friday, and I wasn’t due to resume my teleradiology work until Monday morning, a couple of frustrating calls to the ISP had confirmed for me that there was a good chance that I would not be back up and running in time.

This wasn’t simply a matter of an unhappy customer wanting to jump ahead of the line and be treated better than other, equal customers. When I’d first started my telerad gig, I’d recognized that maintaining my online access would be of paramount importance, and thus paid top-dollar for the best tier of service the ISP offered. Which included not only the fastest download/upload speeds I’d ever heard of, but treatment as a “business” customer, with prioritized service. To this day, their website boasts of a same-day service guarantee.

All well and good...until circumstances arise to actually depend on that guarantee...when it turns out to be just so much hot air. I’m generally distrustful of guarantees to begin with. I’ve been around the block a few times, and formed the impression that the more someone makes a point of promising things, the greater the chance they won’t be able to deliver. If that someone happens to be a business, and they gild their promises with words like “guarantee,” that just increases my cynicism.

That’s because such promises are nice, cheap words, costing nothing to utter in the vast majority of cases. They’re a little like radiology QA in that regard: If, say, 95% of the studies you read are normal or as-good-as, breezing through them and calling them normal without really looking carefully will still give you a 95%-plus accuracy rate. Similarly, a guarantee, especially for something nice and vague like “satisfaction,” won’t be tested most of the time. You thus get to claim that the overwhelming majority of your customers have been satisfied.

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I actually respond more favorably to someone offering no such promises up-front. It gives me greater faith that they are confident in their performance (past and future), and if unfortunate things happen, they stand ready to do whatever it takes to make things right. Don’t tell me what a good job you’re going to do; do it, and/or give me a bunch of references to previously satisfied customers who can tell me you’ve done it well before.

About the only time I place faith in a guarantee is when it comes with a spelled-out contingency as to what will happen if it doesn’t get honored, for whatever reason. I call this the “pizza delivery” test, because that exemplifies the sort of contingency that makes it dependable. If the pizza you ordered doesn’t show up at your door in, say, 30 minutes, it’s free. Failed guarantee equals free pizza; you’ve got a measurable criterion for whether the guarantee was honored, and a tangible payoff if the criteria weren’t met.

And yes, I’m of a similar mind regarding our line of work. Is your radiology group going to earn and
retain referrers by guaranteeing turnaround times, subspecialty reads, accuracy rates, doctor-to-doctor phone calls, etc.? You’d better have a plan of action in case you’re ever unable to live up to some of your promises. Might be preferable to focus on actually delivering on them, first…and then show clients stats that prove you’ve got a good track-record.

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