



BACK OUR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

SERVICE WITH RESPECT

The Institute of Customer Service

SERVICE WITH RESPECT

When emotions are heightened and tempers fray, it's often frontline customer service staff who bear the brunt of the consequences. Sadly, that's something which has got worse under the pressures of the pandemic, as organisations struggle to adjust and customers are quicker to boil over. In July 2020 The Institute of Customer Service launched its Service with Respect campaign to help tackle the problem. We caught up with Chief Executive Jo Causon to find out all about the campaign, what progress has been made, and what The Institute aims to achieve.

The origins of the campaign

The spark for the Service with Respect campaign happened when Jo was presenting to an All-Party Parliamentary Group on the retail industry. Some research was shared which showed an increasing number of incidents of abuse and hostility towards staff, and Jo knew that it was a problem which was wider than just retail.

The next step was for the Institute to commission its own research to determine just what the scale of the problem was, across all industries, and to what extent it had been exacerbated with the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The Institute was shocked to discover that over 50% of staff reported an increase in hostility since the beginning of the pandemic, and that incidents included not just verbal abuse, but physical assaults, spitting, and violence as well.

That kind of behaviour is never acceptable, but it seems particularly beyond the pale at a time when our reliance on key workers in customer service roles has been made more apparent than ever. As Jo comments,

“These people are literally putting their lives on the line for us. Keeping the lights on, making sure that the shop shelves are well stacked, making sure that I get to where I need. Why would we treat them in that way?”

What the campaign calls for

The Service with Respect campaign has three main objectives:

- ***To ensure organisations support their staff***
- ***To ask for a specific law to protect frontline customer service professionals***
- ***To encourage customers to reflect on their behaviour***

Organisations

The Institute's research showed that most staff do feel that they are well supported by

their employer, but there is always more that can be done. Organisations need to adopt a zero tolerance approach to abuse, offer their people training so that they are better able to handle hostility when it happens, feel supported, and have a clear understanding of how to escalate a situation if they need to.

“I want us to really learn as organisations about the importance of our customer service professionals and ensuring that we're protecting them, supporting them, and giving them the recognition that they should have as a result of all of this.”

We've all experienced bad service, and there can be a tendency for people to seek to diminish the problem by saying that it's quite natural for customers to get angry when things go wrong. Organisations have a duty to their customers, but we as customers have a responsibility to behave reasonably too. Our research at TLF through lockdown has shown that most customers are very understanding of the additional pressures that the pandemic placed on organisations, as long as they don't try to use it as an excuse.

“I think it is really important to recognise that Covid is not an excuse to give poor customer service. Organisations need to demonstrate how they're trying to deal with it in a reasonable and rational way, and we as consumers

need to accept that life is not normal and be a bit more tolerant, a bit more accepting and understanding.”

Things will sometimes go wrong, and customers will get angry, but there is a big difference between getting angry and giving abuse:

“You can get hot headed and that is very different to threatening someone. What we’re talking about in this campaign is the abuse that should not be tolerated. Organisations need to try to alleviate some of the stress from customers, absolutely, and they need to think about training staff to understand that people are more likely to be stressed, so our fuses are shorter. Recognising that, and making sure you support your staff with that.”

Much of the abuse that staff face is online or over the phone rather than in person, but it may still have a profound effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

“If you’ve got people that are working remotely, what support networks are we putting around them to make sure that they can deal with this?”

Over 130 organisations have already pledged to the campaign, representing more than a million employees and a combined turnover of £150 billion. That’s testament to the fact that something needs to change, but also to the commitment that many companies have to supporting their people.

“This is about joining up and keeping momentum. If you can say that over 130 organisations, with over a million employees, that each of those organisations are standing up... well, that’s a good start, but we’re not going to rest there.”

Strengthening the Law

Assault against anyone is a crime, of course, but Jo believes that a change to the law is necessary in order to protect customer service professionals. This would include all abuse of customer service workers, whether in person or remotely.

As part of the campaign the Institute, with

the backing of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Customer Service, is asking for a new law making abuse of customer service professionals a standalone offence.

Customers

Ultimately, though, there would be no need for a campaign such as this if it were not for the behaviour of customers. One major aim is for all of us, as consumers and customers, to think about our behaviour, and to take a collective decision on what is and is not acceptable.

“My personal belief is you should have the right to go to work, feeling safe and secure, and knowing you’ve got mechanisms for addressing abuse. It’s a very simple message: it should not happen and we won’t tolerate it.”

With support from media organisations like the BBC and LBC, Jo has been getting the word out about the campaign, and consumers are responding. Customers don’t like to see staff being abused. Some will intervene when they see it, and many more support the idea of protecting customer service workers.

“People have written to me from a consumer perspective saying ‘we’re really supportive of this.’ If you look at some of our other research, what you see is that consumers do step in. There’s a growing societal feeling about what is acceptable and what is not, and I think that’s got to be a good thing.”

The role of customer service in society

TLF’s research* on how customer priorities changed in 2020 showed that it really matters to customers that organisations look after the health and wellbeing of their staff. The Institute of Customer Service has found the same thing—looking after staff and looking after customers go together.

“We as customers are going to be much more loyal to organisations that we think helped us and did the right thing for their employees and

for us, and our research shows that.”

This campaign focuses on protecting staff from abuse, but it fits into a wider discussion about the importance of customer service to the UK economy and to society.

“This is an opportunity in my mind, not just to address this particular issue, but once and for all, to get people to understand how important customer service actually is. The campaign is really important because it has a specific aim, but on top of that, when 80% of GDP in the UK is services, our ability to serve well and for customer service to be respected is really, really important.”

Good customer experiences are created by happy, well-supported, staff. Those businesses who look after their staff and customers best will be the ones which thrive in the future.

“It drives a real sense of pride and a real opportunity for staff to feel really positive. The data shows that a lot of staff do feel well supported by their employer, and that’s great. Well-run, well-respected, organisations are trying to do the right thing to support their staff, and their staff recognise that. It’s a win-win-win. It’s a win for the staff, it’s a win for the organisation and it’s a win for customers.”

The challenge for all of us, as we come out of lockdown, is to negotiate our way to a new normal. It’s likely that some of the changes we’ve experienced during 2020, like increased remote working and online shopping, are likely to stick, at least to some extent. We need to make sure that we continue to support customers and staff through 2021 and beyond.

“What I hope for is we don’t just revert. One of the challenges that we have as organisations is to challenge ourselves about what’s been good and what’s not been good.”



*<https://www.tlfresearch.com/whats-important-to-customers-in-a-changing/>

You can find out more about the Service with Respect campaign, pledge your support, and get involved at: <https://www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/news/service-with-respect/>