

# CUSTOMER SERVICE DURING THE LOCKDOWN: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

We have completed 3 surveys with TLF Panel during the lockdown, mainly to track how the lockdown has affected their lives and changed their attitudes and priorities. In the most recent survey we also asked panellists whether they had received any particularly good, or bad, customer service, asking them to provide details. Over 1,500 people from all over the UK completed the survey and on re-reading their stories over the last 2 days, what has hit me between the eyes is the huge discrepancy in service provided – literally from one extreme to the other. Rather than reading about me describing their varied experiences second hand, I'm going to use the full flavour of their own words to contrast the superb response of some companies compared to the appalling, I would say unethical, behaviour of others.

*All industries have been affected by the pandemic and in every in every sector you can find contrasting examples of superb and appalling service. Refunds have been a massive problem for many people during the lockdown. Let's take airlines. Comments about British Airways were overwhelmingly positive – "British Airways were very helpful and friendly even though they were busy and got the refund sorted out quickly and easily. It felt like a pleasant experience so we won't hesitate to rebook with them."*

Virgin, easyJet and Ryanair fared much less well. The 2 comments below are typical.

*"My main problem was the same as a lot of people. Money back on flights! Ryanair has been atrocious. After the first refund form (which they ignore) there is no way of getting in touch with them. They have a webbot which seems to be designed to be as little help as possible. They have a phone number which costs 13p a minute so after wasting 6 hours with no answers or results it cost you £46.80 for the privilege!" 25-34 female, Leeds*

*"We did have to contact easyJet when our flight to Faro was cancelled by the airline. It took us 2 hours in a queue to get through. They were extremely unhelpful refusing to refund the cost of our flight which was £324 and only offering an alternative flight for a future date. We eventually accepted a flight for next January and did expect they would allow us to use the full cost of our cancelled flight but again they refused and the flight we had booked only cost £140 leaving us out of pocket to the tune of £184. Really feel cheated by the company which*

*has left us never wanting to book any future flights with them."*

The customer experience with holidays has been just as variable:

*"I called Ionian Island Holidays when my holiday to Greece was cancelled. When they offered a voucher for future travel I explained my husband was likely to be made redundant. They told me I could have a full refund of my deposit £300 if I waited until my holiday start date. They were very kind. I contacted them again and received an e-mail from the Managing Director saying they hadn't been able to recoup their losses from either the airline or the accommodation owner, but would refund me in full. I wrote back, thanking him and the lady in the office I'd spoken to originally and I received another e-mail from the MD saying he had passed on the message to her and he hoped my husband's work situation improved. I thought that was top notch customer service". (55-64 female, Southampton)*

*"I had a cottage booked for April in Yorkshire, and of course had to cancel it. The fuss that the company put up, when I asked for a refund, was disgraceful, I explained that I have diabetes and cancer, but they were having none of it, they said I needed to get a form signed by my GP, so I downloaded the form, filled out my part, put in a cheque for the cost of filling it and a SAE so that they could send it back to me as neither of us wanted to go to the practice. About a week later I got a letter from NHS stating that I need to be shielded, I emailed it straight away to the company, and they gave me back most of my money. They kept £78 for administration costs, which I felt was a bit much!!!!!!" (55-64 female, South East)*

The much maligned banks seem generally to have provided a very good response during the lockdown. The comments of this 25-34 year old lady from South Wales followed by a 35-44 year old guy from Yorkshire were typical of the reaction of many panellists who have needed help from their banks over the last three months. The provision of apps to enhance the delivery of a seamless omni-channel experience seems to have been particularly effective

*"I am a Premier banking customer with Barclays and I have to say they have been AMAZING! I was charged twice in the space of 2 minutes for an order I made with Argos and after an hour on hold to them, decided to ring Barclays instead. I rang from the app*

*so I could go straight through security and I spoke to a guy there who answered within 3 rings and sorted everything for me in a matter of seconds. Amazing service! Everyone has a bone to pick with banks these days but I think their service should be praised when they're working at reduced capacity and still providing awesome service. BRAVO Barclays!!!"*

*"I contacted HSBC via the app. Although they took a long time to answer, they made me feel valued as a customer and they appreciated this difficult time we all face and understood my position. After a long conversation I was left feeling I had a bank that was there to help and would do anything to ensure I was happy and I knew they were only a call away. Money worries through these times and being furloughed with no idea when I'll be back is worrying but mortgage payments will be on hold and I know I can talk to someone that will listen and assist as much as possible! This gives me some peace of mind".*

There were many delighted customers including this over-65 year-old lady from East Anglia:

*"I nominate Gear4music who I contacted when my granddaughter's flute stopped playing properly. It had been a gift to her from us and she wanted to continue to practice during lockdown although her lessons had to stop. The flute was purchased through this company so I emailed and asked if they could help at all. They replied promptly, arranged for the flute to be uplifted from us, repaired it, free of charge, and returned it to us after only 1 week. This company would have had the same problems with staffing as everybody else, but my experience with others has been very poor, ranging from empty promises to no response at all. I think most of us will have had the same type of experiences and we will remember who to do business with in the future."*

This lady is by no means alone in thinking very carefully about who she will do business with in the future. And this young man from Scotland is having very similar thoughts:

*"I ordered some paint from Homebase at the beginning of lockdown and it only arrived today (23rd May). I tried to contact Homebase several times to chase up delivery but was unable to get a response of any kind. There's nothing worse than over-promising and under-delivering because you feel as though you've been robbed. I certainly won't be shopping with Homebase again."*

Next time the lady from Southampton wants to go on holiday to Greece I know which company she'll be using. But why can't companies understand that there are lots of places to buy paint, a host of other holiday cottage options in Yorkshire, other alternatives for most products and services. I know that customers' behavioural intentions don't always materialise in practice but I think the dramatic impact of COVID-19 will give customers much longer memories this time.



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