

## Transparent Labor

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Recently I had an interesting experience with AT&T's mobile customer service department. I needed help in getting a voice mailbox for my daughter's smartphone. She had done something quite unique for someone of her generation—moved from an iPhone to a BlackBerry Torch, but that's another story.



I called up AT&T's service department. I was provided good service in creating the voice mailbox. The process took some time but I was quite satisfied with the outcome.

It was only when the call ended that I discovered that when I was put on hold, instead of listening to muzak or AT&T commercials, I heard cackle of a call center. I distinctly remember being curious about the language being spoken in the background, to get clues to the country where the service was outsourced. I heard only indistinguishable gibberish in the background.

This simple task of adding a voice mailbox took an inordinately long time, yet at the end of the task, if AT&T had surveyed me, I would have given a kind and cheerful rating, contrary to how I rationally felt about this simple task taking so long.

Two days later, I read about a connected research by Ryan Buell and Michael Norton of Harvard Business School. It revealed that waiting during a service-call becomes more tolerable when there is an appearance of work being done on a customer's behalf.

Additionally, customers will value the service more than they would without this transparency. Moreover, the labor illusion can also be effective in increasing customer support scores for the same time spent on that service.

However, this transparency of customer-oriented labor is valuable when results are acceptable; it does not overcome poor results.

“Aha!” I went as I quickly made the contextual connections. On one hand, I was impressed with AT&T’s subtle method of wanting to increase customer satisfaction without actually improving their operations but my inner consumer was repelled by the concept of “labor illusion”.

Customer satisfaction is about managing the buyer’s expectations and exceeding them. The call center cackle while waiting helped me manage my own expectations. Consequently, I was more than satisfied with the service.

I now realized why I did not mind waiting at my favorite pizzeria, where I could see Antonio performing, tossing up a pizza behind a transparent glass wall. Similarly, the wait at the plush Khyber Restaurant in Mumbai was mitigated by similar aero-histrionics in the making of “Roomali Roti”.

I began noticing this “wait experience” first at food establishments, such as Starbucks—each order is processed individually with the added drama of steaming each cup. Personalization by writing the customer’s name on the cup was an added contribution to the overall “customer experience”.

I also noticed the trend while I was shopping in my neighborhood, especially at automotive service establishments—car washes, oil change, tire stores. At these places, customers could see the action. I was quite astonished to see how many men watched and followed their cars as they went through the car washing process behind a glass window.

Now that the benefits of “labor transparency” are visible to the commercial world at large, I expect it to grow in popularity. However, care should be taken to assure that customer’s don’t think that it is a “labor illusion”. Most customers, like me, do not take kindly to being taken for a ride, especially in the drive to improve customer satisfaction scores rather than real productivity.

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