

## David Gandy: my customer service heroes

Whether you're travelling, shopping or renovating a property, good customer service is paramount, says David Gandy



Flying with Emirates: 'They know what they're doing and spoil you completely' Photo: Alamy

By David Gandy

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Within a year I take, on average, 80 to 90 flights. Multiply that by the 13 years I've been in the fashion industry, and then add the various other personal flights I take and, if my maths are correct, that means I've flown approximately 1,250 times in my life.

This amount of travel also means thousands of hotels, taxis, restaurants and shops. What do all these things have in common?

Customer service.

Airlines are an interesting example, as over the years I've experienced and witnessed the highs and the lows (excuse the pun).

Now, generally, I'm astonished at the organisation at airports. I look at the thousands of meals, pieces of luggage, passengers and it's beyond me how it can all run so smoothly. But when it goes wrong, it seems to go *so very wrong* that I think my three-year-old nephew could come up with a better contingency plan.



## REASONS to be CHEERFUL

A couple of weeks ago it took me 11 hours to get back to London from Madrid, because of fog at Heathrow. At one point, our flight just disappeared off the departures board. With no announcements in the Madrid airport lounge, I went to the desk and was met with a blunt "Yes, that flight has been cancelled." This was followed by a shrug and "I think there is room on the 2.45, if I were you I'd go to the gate and ask." Before losing it, I realised I was in Spain and it was siesta time...

Air miles or frequent flyer miles are interesting too, and seem to test the concept of customer service to its limit. As I understand it, these are a way of airlines rewarding loyal customers - the more miles you fly, the more money you spend, so the better the rewards. With all the travel I do, I'm lucky to be gold level with both BA and Virgin..... But try as I might, I can't seem to spend these mystical miles. I have 800,000 of the things, yet I have received some strange responses when trying to use them over the years:

You can't use air miles at the airport; your request is too short notice; you have the wrong class of ticket; you have the wrong type of booking; computer says no (OK, I may have made that last one up, but I often think they should just use that phrase).

Virgin, to be fair, are slightly better than BA at customer service. One member of staff at Virgin's Flying Club was so good that I took her extension number and she now gets the majority of my business. Simple! Customer service works.

However there is one airline that truly excels at this and that's Air New Zealand. The ground staff and crew are simply the most helpful that I have ever come across. Once, they even put on a wine tasting in their lounge when the plane was slightly delayed. On board they have come up with innovative and genius ways of making Economy and Premium more comfortable. They might seem like little details, such as having the entertainment system available during take-off and landing (and not just during the flight), but they make a difference - and have now been adopted by many of their rivals. If you are travelling from the UK to LA, make sure you take a look.

However, for the gold standard of airline travel, it has to be First Class on Emirates; little private pods, the largest screens, the best entertainment, pop-up mini-bar and vanity unit, and simply the largest flat bed ever. They know what they're doing and spoil you completely.

American businesses supposedly invented the phrase "the customer is always right" and I have been overwhelmed with examples of incredible service I've received in the United States over the years. This year I have had to travel to LA more than ever, and for a while my hotel of choice was the Sunset Tower Hotel. I've recommended it to numerous brands and companies I work with, too, but after repeatedly bad customer service, I'm changing my mind. Good customer service breeds loyalty; bad service makes customers fickle.

But it's not just in the travel and leisure industries that good service is vital. I've recently been learning a lot about service in the building industry, as I've been renovating an old Victorian house for the last six months. nu:builds of west London concentrate on a very personal service. Where many people I know have been having absolute nightmares with their builders - some of them ending up in court to resolve their differences - Richard and Nick of Nu Builds have become my mates. The build is ahead of schedule and they have adapted the way they have had to work with me (due to my travelling and work schedule), and we are already planning our next project together.

Eden Clay is a young company that deals in wooden floors and tiles. When I told them how difficult I was finding it to source exactly what I wanted, they simply said, "David, send us picture of what you want, we will find them, send you samples and give you a very good price" - and that's exactly what they did. What started with me buying an old school-style radiator from them has, thanks to their level of service, evolved into them supplying every single last metre of flooring for the whole project, simply because their customer relations went above and beyond anyone else.

Dealing with my build and renovation has had me dealing with larger companies too, including utility firms which often don't have a good reputation for customer service. But going against the grain of the usual horror stories, Southern Electric have always offered me a great service. In fact, I almost look forward to calling them, as I know that nothing so far has been too much trouble. We're always told to shop around for a cheaper energy supplier, and I've worked out that I'm paying a little bit more with Southern Electric than I would be elsewhere, but for the level of customer service that has saved me time and worry, I'm willing to pay.

But where I think customer service matters the most is when it comes to fashion and shopping. Richard James once explained that he started off as a personal shopper; he had a customer base for whom he would shop around the world, knowing their every style and requirement. His customers would trust him profoundly and that bond between supplier and client is something we don't see so much of in today's world, unless you know where to look.

Joe Ottaway is the head personal shopper for men at Selfridges of London and also has a private service. I've always said that women shop for a hobby while men shop out of necessity, but Joe takes

all the boredom and frustration out of shopping for men. You tell him what you require and he sources exactly what you need. After you've built up a relationship he knows your specific styling tastes, the prices you want to pay, and makes the process simple and effortless, often mixing high luxury brands with M&S and Topman, so this level of service is not just reserved for those with deep pockets.

Of course, this level of personal service for men has its historical roots on Savile Row. Men would have had a loyal bond with their tailor of choice; in many cases they would be the best of friends - and these relationships still exist today. I'm just as likely to be seen having a drink with the Thom Sweeney boys and lunch at the RAC Club with the Henry Poole tailors as I am to be seen in their shops buying suits.

Why can't this level of service be translated for men on the high street? Men don't like going through women's departments to get to the men's section, or sorting through rails of clothes, trying them on, standing in a queue....

Perhaps it's because there are so few big men-only fashion retailers. Come to think of it, there appears to be just one store on the high street that is dedicated solely to men, and that is Burton. I'd love Sir Philip Green to turn Burton into a mecca for men - the ultimate men's store where good service is key and where men could simply enjoy being. Service staff would be impeccably dressed, and a tailor could be on hand for adjustments; tea and coffee would be available to every customer. It could be one-stop shop for men, from casual to suiting, luggage to accessories, perhaps even with a vintage section where clothing could be sourced for you. Why not?

I've always prided myself on providing good service, and not just in my current job as a model. From working at a dog sanctuary aged 15 to delivering pizza, I always endeavoured to go beyond what was expected of me, and beyond what I was paid to do. I read when I was younger that it costs a lot less to keep customers than it does to recoup new ones, and that's something that's stayed with me.

Within modelling, there are thousands of models to choose from. I'm very lucky to have great clients and proud of the fact that I've been able to build relationships with the brands that I work with. I have worked with Dolce and Gabbana for nearly eight years, Massimo Dutti for 10 years and I've just signed for M&S and Lucky Brand for the third year in a row. For me, it comes down to a mutual sense of loyalty and respect - and that's something that gets overlooked far too often.

How we moderate

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