



Repair or remove weak links

There's a parking garage near work with a great "early bird" special. As long as you're in by 11 a.m., the fee is only \$4. Most early specials end at 8:30 a.m., so if I have a late appointment (or just roll out of bed later than I should), I can still park at a pretty reasonable rate.

The one drawback is on event nights. When there is a concert downtown or a Cleveland Cavaliers or Indians game, the garage wants you to clear out by 5:30 p.m. (or they start tacking on an extra fee). Usually that's not a problem, but every so often my dedication to this magazine (just in case the boss is reading this) keeps me here late. A couple months ago, I left work about 5:15 p.m. for the short walk to the garage, hopped in my car and threaded my way down the sloped parking decks to the pay booth. It was about 5:28 p.m. and there were several cars queued up waiting to sit in even longer lines on the streets heading out of downtown. Four minutes ticked by before I could pull up to pay for my nightly freedom. I handed

the young woman a \$5 bill. She said thanks and raised the zebra-striped barrier barring my exodus.

I asked for my change, and she said the fee had risen a buck because it was now past 5:30 p.m. I explained (with a little annoyance in my voice) that I was trying to get out before the deadline, but because they weren't able to process cars fast enough, the deadline passed. It was their fault, not mine.

I was about ready to forego the dollar when the attendant leaned out of her booth spoke over my head to the co-worker in the next booth, ranting about "one more customer showing her disrespect..." At that moment the dollar became about principle. I shifted the car into park and sat there until she called over her supervisor. After my brief explanation, he reached into his pocket, handed me a dollar and I was on my way.

I used to park in that garage fairly regularly. In the past two months, I've only parked there twice. I found another early bird special that is only slightly more expensive, but they don't charge a late fee, even on game nights.

Losing one customer in a garage that holds hundreds of vehicles is not going to bankrupt the company that owns the garage. It might never go beyond that supervisor. But that low-level front line employee soured me — and many of the co-workers to whom I've told the story — on the garage.

I can't imagine I was the first customer to complain that it was slow service that pushed me past the 5:30 p.m. deadline. Imagine the good will it would have created if the company had given the employee the ability to forego the extra dollar for five or 10 minutes. Heck, imagine if they'd given her a little customer service training — taught her to smile, listen to complaints and empowered her to take immediate action to make it right.

Every company is only as likeable as its front-line employees. If you don't know how to interact effectively with customers, your next communication with that client might be about why they're now giving their business to your competitor.

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