

The View from Harvard Business

Fight 'Service Complacency'

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I love our local post office. One advantage of living in a small town is the people get to know you on a personal level, and we know very well the people behind the counter. They know us, watch out for us, let us know when a special delivery is in, take the time to explain the myriad of shipping and insurance options.

But I have to say this experience is the exception rather than rule in my four decades as a postal customer. And I dare say many of you reading this have favorite stories about postal ineptitude. Increasingly we have turned to technology for our communications, and embraced competitors, when they finally arrived, such as FedEx.

The Postal Service has been slow to respond. The result now is a steep decline in mail volume, a bloated budget and a \$7 billion deficit.

Inattentive service and runaway costs are not unexpected when it comes to an organization without serious competition, writes Harvard Business School professor **Frances Frei**. As she blogs:

“When organizations face limited competition (in the case of the post office, it was literally no competition), they often suffer from what I like to call service complacency. Service complacency is the malaise that infects a culture when good service feels like a choice rather than a business necessity.”

You should be checking for service complacency in your own organization. Here's one way to start.

I work in a building that houses an academic library. Folks here are very keen on giving great service to their customers, once known as patrons. But at the end of the day, many of our customers don't have a choice, especially if they are looking for a one-of-a-kind volume. So how do we get better?

One way is to imagine that a second library similar to our own is right across the street. Users now have a choice. How would this change how we do business? What services might we add to be more competitive? Would we emphasize more personal contact, so called high touch service? Would we spend our budget in different ways?

So become your own competitor and figure out a strategy for beating yourself. Then revise your own strategy to counter the threat.

Do you work in a low-competition market? How do you stay tough?

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