

It was a hot summer day on the shore of Lake Ontario, just a few feet from sandy beaches and beautiful water. Tourists and locals lounged in Sunnyside Café's wicker chairs, sipping pina coladas. The lake sparkled in the sun; the cheese glistened on thin-crust pizzas. Most Sunnyside customers were in paradise.

But I was in a war zone. Frazzled, tired and sweaty from walking back and forth for hours, I faced the lunch rush with the remaining bit of my sanity.

As the hostess – first in the line of fire – I greeted customers with a smile and apologized for the long wait time. For one middle-aged man, this was not good enough.

After waiting five more minutes than promised he stormed up, snatching the pen out of my hand and crossing his name off the list. I just stood there: stunned, silent.

“And,” he told me, “You can fuck off.”

I was hurt, but fellow employees all had similar tales. Who hasn't worked with a rude customer? A struggling seventeen-year-old hostess being told to fuck off was just another casualty in the war of Us versus Them: customers versus staff.

While everyone is at times a customer, not everyone will work in customer service. But every one should have this experience – at least once.

According to Statistics Canada, more than 13 million people work in customer service. These workers face customers at their best: on vacation, celebrating special occasions, getting the chai latte craved all day. But they also deal with people at their worst, bringing in bad moods from disappointing days. Too often, these customers are quick to dole out excessive criticism and needless blame.

It could boil down to a nasty drift in society as a whole. A poll by the Associated Press and NORC center for Public Affairs Research in 2016 found that 74 percent of Americans feel people overall have become more ill-mannered in the last 20 or 30 years. Though a stereotype endures of Canada as the United States' friendly neighbour, we are not excused from this rudeness trend.

Disrespectful treatment of Canadian call centre employees, including racist, sexual, and threatening comments, is a harmful daily reality. In 2016, the national union launched a campaign urging employees to “Hang up on abuse” and end offensive calls without repercussions.

Not all customers are rude, and not all customer service workers are pleasant. But having customer service experience reminds us the human standing in front of us is just that – human.

Years after the Sunnyside incident, facing a particularly infuriating travel day while flying home for Christmas, I stood in line at a customer service desk. I watched one frustrated flier after another demand, in escalating voices, that the employee locate their bag immediately.

The employee – who, of course, had no blame in anyone’s lost luggage – was apologetic, hard working, and promised to go the extra mile with a rush delivery order for when my bag arrived.

He was doing this, he told me, because I was the first customer to smile at him that day.

Customer and employee interactions may seem trivial, but the way we treat each other matters. Everyday empathy and respect is what The Daily Show host Jon Stewart calls “the quiet activism of living pleasantly.” Replacing the “fuck off” with some compassion is a small personal stand against the world’s cruelty.

The choice is yours – it takes only a second. What kind of customer do you want to be?

The target audience of this piece would be young adults, specifically those in their twenties, as this is a key time for people to make decisions surrounding jobs. It would be beneficial for young people to learn more about the benefits of working in customer service. I would pitch this article at The Coast in order to reach this audience and feature the more informal language (including swearing) that I used in this piece.