



oracle
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Our patience needs some urgent attention

Over the last quarter of the 20th century, the expression “have a nice day” became something of a cliché, especially in the services sector, where it was often delivered with dubious sincerity.

A leading candidate for the 21st-century’s equivalent of “have a nice day” could well be “thank you for your patience”.

It’s a phrase increasingly heard at airports, when a flight is delayed for some considerable length of time; while waiting for a person to answer a phone call to a call centre, because not enough staff have been rostered on to handle the volume of incoming calls; or in department stores, because half the cash registers are unstaffed.

What it all too often means is: “We realise our service has failed to meet your legitimate expectations, but don’t bother complaining about it, because we’re not here to listen to your complaints, it won’t make any difference, so just suffer in silence.” Or, as my daughter’s generation would say, “suck it up”.

“Thank you for your patience” is often accompanied by an apology for “any [emphasis added] inconvenience that [our failure to meet your legitimate expectations] may have caused”.

This is an adaptation to business circumstances of the “sportsman’s apology” – that is, when a sportsman (and it usually is a man) fronts a media conference to apologise for any offence that his racist, sexist or otherwise thoughtless remarks or behaviour may have caused – the subtext being that he’s not really convinced his remarks or behaviour have actually caused any offence, and that if anyone has been offended, perhaps that’s because he or she is hyper-sensitive.

Thus, when a plane is delayed, the airline concerned will typically apologise for “any” inconvenience – as if being an hour late might not have inconvenienced a large proportion of



the passengers on that flight. When shoppers queue for an inordinately long time to pay because the retailer hasn’t rostered on enough staff, they may be offered an apology for “any” inconvenience caused – as if most of them didn’t have anything better to do with their time.

POOR STANDARDS OF SERVICE ARE TOLERATED, IF NOT EXPECTED

The apologies businesses offer in such circumstances would come across as more sincere if they started from the assumption that the delay has caused some inconvenience and then apologised unreservedly for it – rather than offer a qualified apology.

The subtext of all this is that Australians are increasingly being encouraged to see poor standards of service as something to be tolerated with equanimity, if not expected.

It’s as if it has almost become “un-Australian” to expect services to be delivered according to the terms and conditions on which they are paid for. We are expected to have an inexhaustible supply of patience when the service provided falls short of what has been (explicitly or implicitly) promised. We’re supposed to say, “Oh well, what more can we expect?”

It’s not just businesses who expect

their paying customers to “grin and bear it” when confronted with poor standards of service. Governments and their agencies are much the same.

Motorists are expected to “show patience” when confronted with ever-increasing congestion on urban arterial roads because governments haven’t provided sufficient infrastructure to service the needs of a growing population.

Commuters using public transport are supposed to “show patience” when trains or buses don’t stop to pick them up because they are already full of passengers who boarded at earlier stops.

Patients are expected to “show patience” when waiting, often for hours, at the emergency departments of public hospitals – or for weeks or even months in their homes for “elective surgery” – because governments haven’t provided sufficient beds to cater for the needs of a growing, and ageing, population.

Airline passengers are supposed to “show patience” with the fact it now takes at least 90 minutes to fly between Sydney and Melbourne (compared with 65 minutes 30 years ago), in large part because governments have failed to sufficiently expand airport capacity.

None of this is to excuse “user rage” or other outbursts of frustration that people frequently experience in response to poor standards of service, and the feeble excuses for it. It is not the fault of the people at the frontline, who have to deal with exasperated users of inadequate services and deliver the formulaic apologies.

But until more people are willing to indicate, in constructive ways, that their supply of patience isn’t inexhaustible, the quality of services that Australians receive from both private and public service providers will probably continue to deteriorate. **ME**

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