

By Calvin Sun

*When I was 14, I couldn't believe how ignorant my father was.  
By the time I turned 21, I was astounded at how much the old man had learned in just seven years.*  
--Mark Twain

We've all heard those jokes about stupid customers and the help desk:

- ◆ "I'm having trouble finding the key that's labeled 'any'."
- ◆ "Having the coffee cup holder in the PC is a great idea, but can you make it bigger?"

Entire Web sites have emerged, documenting such stories. Although we're tempted to laugh, such humor involves risk. Customers may find out, become upset, and speak to your boss. Does that mean you should never laugh at a question? No. But it does mean, when possible, you should think about what's behind the question and try to laugh in the right way.

Try giving your customer the benefit of the doubt. In fact, your customers (like Mark Twain's father or the TV detective Columbo) might just be smarter than you think. Let's take a closer look.

## There could be a valid reason for the question

Have you ever seen the optical illusion of a drawing of a woman? Looking at it one way, she seems to be an older woman. Looking at it another way, she seems to be a younger woman. Different people interpret the drawing differently. This idea applies to those questions you receive. Although you may not realize it immediately, there actually could be a valid reason for the question.

**What's supposed to happen vs. what's actually happening.** Suppose the caller asks, "When I click on the icon for Microsoft Word, should I end up with a blank document?" Now, everyone knows that's what happens, probably including your caller. But what if the caller clicked on the icon and nothing happened? Wouldn't that explain the question? In other words, it's not ignorance of what's supposed to happen, but concern over what failed to happen. (The caller might more accurately have said, "shouldn't I end up with a blank document?") In that case, a good response might be, "Yes, that's right. It sounds like you're getting something different, though."

By using this response, you've moved the conversation ahead, and more important, impressed the caller with your insight.

**Knowing the concept without knowing the term.** The first time I saw the term "breadcrumb navigation," I scratched my head. Then, after Googling the phrase, I learned that it's a reference to displaying, at the top of a Web page, your location relative to other Web pages. This display allows you to go backward by clicking on the display rather than using your browser's "back" button. I knew how to use those links to back up. I just didn't know that the technique was referred to as breadcrumb navigation.

If the caller asks what a term means, it could be simply that he or she just hasn't associated a familiar concept with a particular term. If that's the case, try giving a brief explanation, but also relate it to an example that uses or incorporates the term.

**Knowing the concept by a different term.** As a variation, maybe the caller knows the concept and a term for it, but it's a different term from the one you or your co-workers use. A soft drink might be called "soda" or "pop," depending on the part of the country you're in. So maybe instead of "breadcrumb navigation," the caller is used to the term "Hanseling and Greteling." Bear in mind that if the caller is unfamiliar with a term you use, it doesn't mean he or she is stupid. The caller might know that term by a different name.

## Consider the different levels of specificity

A person may be asking for more specific information than you think. In an early scene from the movie *The Sound of Music*, Maria has just been "dismissed" by the Captain and told to leave. As they stand on the back porch, the Captain, hearing a sound, asks Maria, "What's that?" When Maria replies, "It's singing," the Captain, with exasperation, says, "I know it's singing, but WHAT are they singing?"

*Your customers may be smarter than you think*

A question that may sound stupid on one level may not be stupid at all on a more specific level. Suppose you and a customer are looking at a PowerPoint file, and the customer asks, "What are we looking at?" He or she might be asking more than whether the software is PowerPoint. The question really might mean:

- ◆ Which *version* of PowerPoint (2007, 2002, 2000, or 97)?
- ◆ Which *presentation* or which version of the presentation?

In all of these cases, it's a good idea to avoid being fixated on the apparent stupidity of the question. In other words, *let it go*. Focus instead on the idea that the caller has a problem that needs to be resolved. The less time you spend thinking that the customer is stupid, and the quicker you start problem resolution, the better off your customer will be.

## Laugh WITH, rather than AT customers

Suppose the question or comment really is funny? What do you do? If you find that you *have* to laugh, the best way to do so is to laugh with--not at--the customer. Might the customer still get upset? Perhaps. But if you laugh at them, the chances are even greater.

For example, how could you handle the CD/DVD drive/coffee cup holder confusion? A suggested approach:

- ◆ Address the confusion directly by saying, "Oh, the device that slides out and in is a drive for playing CDs or DVDs. It's not a coffee cup holder."
- ◆ Acknowledge that the confusion is (somewhat) reasonable: "Yeah, I guess it kind of looks like it could hold a coffee cup." However, don't lie about it. If the comment or the misperception is really out in left field, don't say that anyone could have made the same mistake.
- ◆ Consider sharing some similar mistake or confusion you had in the past, for example: "You know, for a long time, I didn't realize that the computer was shut off via a Windows command. I would always turn the switch off manually."

The best outcome is for the customer to start laughing at his or her mistake. At that point, you can join in, because it's clear that you're laughing together.



Calvin Sun works with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications, and leadership. He can be reached at [csun@calvinsun.com](mailto:csun@calvinsun.com).

## Additional resources

- ◆ TechRepublic's [Downloads RSS Feed](#) **XML**
- ◆ Sign up for TechRepublic's [Downloads Weekly Update](#) newsletter
- ◆ Sign up for our [IT Career NetNote](#)
- ◆ Check out all of TechRepublic's [free newsletters](#)
- ◆ ["Improve end-user/IT relations with these communication tips"](#) (TechRepublic download)
- ◆ ["Interrupting others can sink your communications"](#) (TechRepublic download)
- ◆ ["IT pros: Avoid becoming a human OS/2"](#) (TechRepublic download)

## Version history

**Version:** 1.0

**Published:** February 26, 2007

## Tell us what you think

TechRepublic downloads are designed to help you get your job done as painlessly and effectively as possible. Because we're continually looking for ways to improve the usefulness of these tools, we need your feedback. Please take a minute to [drop us a line](#) and tell us how well this download worked for you and offer your suggestions for improvement.

Thanks!

—The TechRepublic Downloads Team