

# The Phonetic Enforcer - Customer Service Run Amuck

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From the absurdist school of customer service I bring you another tale of woe and frustration (and comic insight).

I write for a living. I know most folks think I actually code, troubleshoot, run a company etc - but in truth a large part of my job is to communicate in email, documents and instant messaging. Recently I got to thinking about purchasing a new software that would help me with style and editing (I'm a notoriously wordy writer). I started poking around and found [this link](#) with some excellent choices so I started reviewing them. I settled on one of them (I won't say which but it was pale and misty) for my first trial. It was inexpensive and appeared to have an easy interface. More importantly it seemed to be able to jump to life within any software I was using. Since I use Word, Evernote, Outlook, Gmail, Google docs, and Homesite (for blog writing using hand coded HTML) I thought that was a great feature.

I downloaded a copy and tried it out on a few things - emails mostly. I liked it so I purchased a licensed. I began with a document that I was prepping. Uh oh.... the software has a 10,000 character limit - it won't scan more than 10,000 characters at a time. That's a non-starter for me - and it's too bad. The software was really nice and slick - and I was digging it. I contacted support and they were extremely helpful in answering my questions and confirming that it would not meet my needs. I asked for a refund (I'd had my license about an hour) and they said "no problem". They forwarded me to "Lee" in the payments department. That's when the trouble started. Here's a rough outline of how it went.

## Kafka's Heir - "General" Lee

He had an Australian or perhaps New Zealand accent (I was never good with accents - but he sounded a bit like an Aussie) and he began.

- **Lee** (beginning tactfully): I'm sorry you were not happy with our product. Can you tell me your problem?
- **Muse**: Sure... I liked the product but it turns out It cannot scan more than 10,000 characters at a time. That's not going to work for me. I want a full report sort of interface like I see with Stylewriter - at least when working with a large document.
- **Lee**: I think you don't know how the software works, let me explain...
- **Muse** (cutting him short to save time): Actually I have been over this with your support folks and I'm pretty clear on everything... so I just need a refund.
- **Lee**: If you will just let me explain sir. You see the software works by starting at a paragraph head and.... [Lee begins to drone in a sort of pedantic explanation of the nuances of his software]... so if you are using it correctly... yada yada yada yadh...[more droning, Muse tries to butt in... gets nowhere....]
- **Muse** (finally breaking Lee's concentration): Yeah... I've been over this with support. Aren't you the finance guy? I just need a refund.
- **Lee** (petulantly condescending now): If you would just let me finish sir. You see.... [more droning]...
- **Muse** (breaking in again): Really Lee - I already know this won't work for me. Can I simply have the refund?

- **Lee** (angrily and almost hurtfully): Please let me finish... if you let me finish you will learn what you need to know and then you can make up your mind... ok? [that last sounded like the lady from romper room... "if you pick up all your toys we can have a popsicle.. ok?"]
- **Muse** (amused and annoyed): Can I speak to your manager?
- **Lee** (triumphantly): I *am* the manager. [somehow I knew that was coming]
- **Muse** (resigned): Okey dokey Lee - let's have it.
- **Lee**: Very well... if you take your cursor and put it on blah blah blah..... [a full 3 minutes of explanation]
- **Muse** (just getting back from refreshing his coffee): Excellent... is that it?
- **Lee**: So you will be keeping software?
- **Muse**: No.. I want a refund?
- **Lee**: But why?
- **Muse**: For the reasons I've already mentioned. Can we move on?
- **Lee** (haughtily): Fine - I'll need the email you used to register.
- **Muse**: Cool... it's mkruger at...
- **Lee** (interrupting hastily): No no...the line is very bad... please spell it phonetically....
- **Muse** (who heard Lee fine): Uh...Ok... M - K - R -...
- **Lee** (interrupting again): No, I need it phonetically as in whiskey tango alpha... like that.
- **Muse** (who doesn't have that ready vocabulary): Uh.... ok... "M" as in mark... K as in in... uh... K-mart...R as in roger [I was proud of that one - it sounded right], U as in under... G as in god, E as in every and R as in roger... *at* C as in carl.. F as in frank... W as in ...uh... waterloo... B as in boy... O as in... dang it.... [I was laughing uncontrollably by now] ... uh olive.. O as in... another olive [I lost it for 20 seconds]... L as in love an S as in sam... oh... dot com.
- **Lee** (very fast and with no trace of emotion now): Ok.. that's mike alfa romeo uniform golf echo romeo at charlie foxtrot whiskey echo delta oscar lima ... dot com. Is that correct?
- **Muse** (who followed barely at all - but thought he heard delta): Uh... no I don't think it's correct.
- **Lee**: Ok, let's try again...
- **Muse** (in real danger of peeing his pants at this point): Look.... do you have an email? Why don't you just give me your email and I'll send you my activation email right now - ok?
- **Lee** (with rapid staccato): Sure... it's lima echo echo at whiskey hotel india tango echo sierra mike oscar kilo echo india november charlie... dot com.
- **Muse** (giggling uncontrollably): Could you just say it please? I don't speak phonetics and my head hurts.
- **Lee**: Sure... it's Lee @ (the name of the domain).
- **Muse**: Fine... thanks for your time Lee.
- **Lee**: No problem... I'll look for your email.

After I hung up from Lee my son came into my office - having heard the conversation - and the two of us cracked up. It was absurdly comical.

In all seriousness, this sort of customer service is more common than not in the online world. Such behavior would probably never happen at the local JC Penny customer service department. Lee made 3 crucial mistakes in dealing with me.

1. He assumed he could speak from a place of authority and that he could control the situation through his authority. It's possible he even thought he came off rather well - having "put me in my place". In fact, practically nothing he said was of actual value to him, his company or me. The only real outcome of the conversation is this blog. In reality nothing he could say or do was going to dissuade me - and he should have known that rather quickly and switch tactics. In particular he should have known the jig was up as soon as I asked to see his manager. But instead of intuitively grasping the situation he chose to control it and maintain his position of authority to the very end. Even going through the little phonetic charade was a way of forcing me to jump through some hoops to get my money back.
2. He assumed I was uninformed and he *automatically* assumed I knew less than him. He saw me as a "mark" (notwithstanding my given name) and believed he could buffalo or bully me into keeping his product through some high handed explanation. At one point he told me "No software can scan through an entire document of more than 10,000 characters without slowing your computer down to a crawl. Think about that statement... not only is it a blatant falsehood (a lie) but it assumes that I'm too stupid to know any different.
3. He assumed I was equipped to follow his jargon. I was not equipped to "spell phonetically" - though perhaps it's a skill I should learn. But unapologetically forcing a customer to do something in a particular way was an epic mistake. The fact that he was a manager (if it's true) makes me wonder what his boss was thinking about when promoting him. "Lee.. you attack our customers and kick butt.. you don't take no guff from anybody... and ya got that slick accent to boot. You are just the kind of sheriff we need to clean up this town.... what say you become the customer service manager.... and supervise the gallows we are building out back as well... how bout it? You in or out?"

Ok... so maybe I'm too hard on 'ol "general" Lee. It's possible he's simply the right man in the wrong job. He sounded competent and intelligent and I'm guessing in a different context I would like him. Still... he was not on his game today. Here's hoping he learns to stop and listen.