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# Your customers could be smarter than you think

by [Calvin Sun](#) | [More from Calvin Sun](#) | 2/26/07

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**Takeaway:** Tempting as it may be to assume our customers are as clueless as those featured in the ever-popular dumb-user stories, that's often not the case. Sometimes, our customers just don't know how to communicate the problem--and other times, we're busy thinking 'stupid question' as their point sails right over our head.

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*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.

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