



Speech to AT&T's Commercial and Traffic Conference
June 1942

Page, A. W. (1942, June 16). Service to Army Camps. Speech presented at AT&T's Commercial and Traffic Conference, New York, NY.

Summary

Page discusses the frustrations of those soldiers who waited in long lines to use the telephone at army camps during the war [World War II]. Research and strategies for changing attitudes and perceptions of the company are discussed.

The Bell System is encouraged to work on changing attitudes and opinions of those who wait in long lines to use the telephone at army camps. Although not much can be done about the service those in uniform are receiving, the perceptions of the company can change. Page suggests conducting more research on the use of the telephone in these camps as well as a publicity campaign that details the company's dedication to the comfort and well being of those serving in the war.

Key topics

Customer Service
Public Opinion – influencing public opinion
Public Relations – managing expectations
Research

Page Principles

Listen to the customer

Summary

Commercial and Traffic Conference
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SERVICE TO ARMY CAMPS

The last private I talked to told me that when he wanted to get leave he stood in line, when he wanted to report back he stood in line, when he wanted to get something to eat he stood in line—and, in fact, almost every time he wanted to do anything, he stood in line. And consequently he didn't seem to think it extraordinary that when he wanted to telephone—he stood in line. However, he did notice that he was not treated as well when he was soldiering when he wanted to telephone as he was at home, for there he was not accustomed to standing in line to telephone, even at pay stations. He was not particularly clear as to why he did not have plenty of telephone facilities in a camp and it had not occurred to him to compare the fact that we charged him a nickel and the Government charged him nothing for his mail. Even when I mentioned it, he seemed to figure that the free mail was not any great concession for a Government that was getting his services for \$40 a month.

Nevertheless, he had no good things to say of the telephone service or telephone people and his memory of the telephone in the war, if remembered at all, would be that it was one of the minor inconveniences. He certainly would not rate us on the plus side of his war experiences.

About five million of them like this who are negative in their relation to us now may carry that point of view many years and might very easily be stirred up to be very positively against us.

In ordinary times, if we had this kind of problem, we would go to work systematically at it both as to the facilities and as to the state of mind. The kind of job we ordinarily do is quite thorough and reasonably slow. I don't know how thorough we can be on this job, but we can't be slow at all. In other words, we have to use methods to change boys' psychology toward us, which will operate quickly. We can't make the service very good, but we can make the psychology good if we set about it.

In the short run and in unusual circumstances—and this has both—the reaction of the public may be very much better than the service justifies—or it may be very much worse.

In the last war, the Y. M. C. A. did a very great deal for the soldiers overseas but they did not do it in the manner which the soldiers liked, and in consequence, while the soldiers used the services very extensively they seldom ever mentioned it except as “the damn Y.” On the other hand there was a very, very small number of Salvation Army people in France who confined their activities to passing out doughnuts. I don't suppose one man in 100 in the A. E. F. ever saw the Salvation Army people or a doughnut, but the Salvation Army was known as the one perfect service that the Army got. The reason was that in the few places where they appeared they gave the impression of having no rules, no inhibitions and no interest except for the welfare and comfort of the boys—whereas the Y appeared to be full of its own difficulties as well as the soldiers.

Now, in our service to the camps we have taken care of the officers and the conduct of the war. I don't think we have given the impression to the boys that we are concerned about their state of mind as we should. I think the different camps are sufficiently different so that each one should be studied as to its environment troops in it and the telephone service it gets, and then as to what should be done. Now, when these studies are made presumably some things will appear to be useful to do at all camps, but there will be differences between the programs for the different camps and perhaps differences in the program in the same camp depending on what kind of soldiers are in it and from whence they come.

I have no specific solution to this, but I think that we might consider the following.

At the big camps it might be worth while to print a four-page folder which explained—for instance, let's take Camp Bragg, N. C., that Camp Bragg is bigger than any city but one in the State of North Carolina and that with the limitation of materials, manpower and time we could not put into Camp Bragg telephone equipment such as we had built up during 40 or 50 years in Raleigh, Wilmington or Charlotte, and for that reason

we could not give them the kind of service we gave people in these cities or we should like to give them at the camp.

The pamphlet might also contain information of use to them not connected with the telephone, because if we can't do our own job perfectly any incidental way of our own job perfectly any incidental way of our wishing them well might help.

We could also reach them through the camp papers, through news bulletins if they don't carry advertising—through advertising if they do. We might give lectures, demonstrations and movies for their amusement, which would also give us a background to talk in a wholesale manner to them about telephone service.

I think we can't look upon this camp business quite on a purely commercial basis. I think it is something like our overseas service. It is a general obligation we owe to a complete telephone service for the nation, even though it will no more make money than our total overseas operations make money.

I have suggested to the Public Relations Officers of the different companies that they take a particular interest in this problem and I am hoping that with their imagination and ingenuity applied first-hand to the problem we will find ways and means of having the psychology of the Army - private and non-com - on our side just as well as we now have the officers in the War Department.