

How many times can you say 'customer' and still be wrong?

HMRC must focus harder on giving TAXPAYERS good, reliable and consistent advice, says Tony Margaritelli

In July, HMRC issued its [Professional Standards for compliance](#). I know I'm batting zero when I say that I'm fed up with being called a 'customer'; it's never going to be changed back to taxpayer despite the fact that I am a taxpayer who engages with HMRC, the correct recipients of my taxes. I am not a customer of HMRC because customers have choices, don't they?

The new, modern HMRC love the idea that they are some sort of open-all-hours shop run and managed by a kindly Albert Arkwright, and that they and they alone truly understand the shopper. However, rather than provide what the shopper actually wants they will supply a set of standards on how they will deliver the goods that their customers cannot buy anywhere else. This is because it's good publicity and shows them in a bright yet warm light.

Their four standards are split into six key requirements and these standards are getting things right, being aware of our customer's situation, being responsive – communicating with customers – and, finally, treating customers fairly. All laudable standards that anyone would have a hard time arguing with. After all, "getting things right" and "being responsive" and "treating customers fairly" shouldn't really need saying, let alone writing down.

Yet I'm drawn to Standard 2, "Being aware of our customer's situation". It starts by saying "we will make it as easy as possible for our customers to engage with HMRC compliance activity", but how is that achieved or even achievable when they unilaterally close down the telephone helplines for their customers?

How do the standard writers feel when, on Saturday 29 July, a concerned individual is forced to write to a national newspaper consumer section for help with the following: "Help! How can HMRC shut its contact centre?" They go on to say: "I have tried on numerous occasions to phone HMRC on 0300 200 3310 without success – I simply get the message that they cannot take calls at this time. On the HMRC website, it now states that the service is closed until 4 September 2023." The paper's consumer champion replied: "My first reaction was that there must be some sort of mistake. But you are right: HMRC has shut its contact centre." I'm thinking he must have read the standard when it was issued and couldn't believe that shutting the contact centre was in line with "we will make it as easy as possible for our customers to engage with HMRC".

Announcing the closure on 4 June, HMRC said: "This will free up 350 advisers (full-time equivalent) to take urgent calls on other lines and answer customer correspondence. If focused on urgent calls, these advisers will answer around 6,600 each day, ensuring more customers who really need to speak to an adviser can do so."

Think on this for a moment: the poor newspaper correspondent had an urgent call, but 6,600 souls with problems had more urgent and compelling problems than his own and, of course, he didn't "really need to speak to an adviser".

Seriously, HMRC should stop with the 'spin' and concentrate on the job in hand. They should recognise that their 'customers' want to call and talk to a human whenever they have a problem; not all of them, not all the time, but sometimes when they need an answer. If HMRC cannot

provide that because of budgetary restraints then say so, be upfront and honest. They may well find that their 'customers' understand and will back them. I, for one, would for sure.

- *Tony Margaritelli is the Publisher of HMRC EIP magazine*