

## CUSTOMERS LIKE ME

By Rod Keefer, FSA, MAAA

Her name was Laura. I couldn't tell you much else about her. I talked to Laura only once, on a warm, windy day in June 2017. But that conversation left a lasting impression, and here is why.

One day earlier, I had participated in an all-day workshop during which leaders at my company reported on steps being taken to improve the experience of our customers. Afterward I went to the gym, and when my workout was finished I returned to the locker room and checked my phone. In addition to several missed calls, I had received a single, sobering text message from a neighbor. *"You'd better get home. Your house is on fire."*

That's why I don't go to the gym anymore.

That night my family checked into a hotel and tried to figure out what had just happened and what to do about it. The room was comfortable and the pillows were soft, yet we didn't sleep much.

The next day I called my homeowner's insurance company. After navigating through the typical sequence of automated menus, eventually I heard a live voice say, *"Good morning, this is Laura, how can I help you?"* Here is what I recall from that discussion.

- Laura asked if we were safe.
- She asked for details of the loss.
- She said that someone would call to arrange temporary housing and that a claims adjuster would follow up within a day or two.
- She suggested that we save receipts and start making a list of what we had lost.
- She offered to wire cash for immediate needs like food and clothing.
- Finally, in a soothing, sympathetic voice, Laura said, *"I'm so sorry this happened. Is there anything else I can do for you?"*

Had I not already been happily married, I might have proposed to Laura over the phone.

While the part that Laura played in the claim process was pretty small, for me at that moment her impact was huge. She passed the information along to others who would be more directly involved in the details. But Laura's response to that initial phone call was the first step in transforming our **grief** into **relief**.

Although I don't work with fire insurance, I've been an insurance company actuary for more than three decades. I know what it means to be on the inside of this business. I've created spreadsheets, built models, calculated premiums, and established reserves. I've held jobs as analyst, manager, officer, and appointed actuary. My training and experience have equipped me to help make sure that our company could pay for the bad stuff that happens to other people.

Then on that June day in 2017, I became one of those “other people.” I discovered what it’s like to be on the outside, to be the customer dealing with the stress and uncertainty of being at the mercy of my insurer. I came to appreciate colleagues in our industry like Laura, who for me became the reassuring voice of a faceless company.

But I also appreciated in a deeper way the people behind the scenes who do the kind of work that I do. They rarely answer incoming calls or respond to customer emails. Instead they’re developing policy language and actuarial memoranda that describe how products work. They’re running pricing models to compute premium rates for various coverage options. And with little fanfare they’re working tirelessly through their processes each month, to assure that their companies have set aside enough money to keep the promises that have been made to customers like me.