The Hungry Gods Request a Screen Recording

N. Van Seters & Claude

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THE FLOOR

The Customer Experience floor at Ampersand took up the fourteenth storey of a glass tower in a business park where it was always, for the purposes of the North American queue, the middle of the afternoon.

Every agent on the floor showed up to the customer under the same name. The name was Ampersand Customer Support. It came with a small grey avatar shaped like an ampersand, and it joined conversations, and left them, and joined them again, and from the customer's side of the window there was no way to tell that the thing joining was a different person each time, except that it said hello again.

Each agent held four conversations at once. The console showed them as four tiles. A tile turned amber after three minutes without a reply and red after five, and an agent with a red tile got a gentle prompt suggesting they might like to acknowledge the customer. Most agents acknowledged the customer by typing *Hi there.* It was the fastest thing you could type that turned a tile green.

Handle time ran from the moment an agent accepted a conversation to the moment it was resolved or paused. Paused was a status. A paused case was not resolved, but nobody was

handling it either, so it did not pile up handle time. A paused case that heard nothing from the customer for forty-eight hours resolved itself, under the code CUSTOMER UNRESPONSIVE, and counted toward the floor's resolution rate.

The quality rubric had sixteen items. Item 3 was *Uses customer's first name.* Item 5 was *Expresses empathy.* Item 12 was *If asked, confirms that the customer is speaking with a human.* The macros had been written to the rubric, so that an agent who picked the domain macro would send, in one keystroke, a message that used the customer's name, expressed empathy, and asked for a screen recording.

Escalation to Tier 2 went through a form. The form had a field for the ticket number, a field for a summary, a dropdown for category, and two attachment fields marked with red asterisks: *Screen recording (MP4, full view, from customer)* and *Proof of purchase.* The Submit button stayed grey until both were filled.

The fields had been added in April. In March, Tier 2 had gone through a month of escalated domain cases and found that a fifth of them were domains the customer had typed wrong, and another fifth were domains bought somewhere else entirely and attached to Ampersand by hope. After the fields went in, domain escalations fell by two thirds. The fields were considered a success. They were one.

Tier 1 could not see purchase records. This had also been decided in the spring, after an incident nobody on the floor had been told the details of and everybody on the floor knew the details of. A Tier 1 agent could see a customer's email address,

plan, and ticket history. They could not see what the customer had bought.

The floor had a word for this. The word was *visibility*. *We don't have visibility on that* was said several hundred times a day on the fourteenth floor, and it was true every time.

NEIL

Neil Van Seters had bought something over a dozen domains from Ampersand, and he had bought them the way the platform meant him to, which was by asking.

He would tell the platform's agent what a site was for. The agent would build the site and suggest a name. He would click Buy, and some minutes later the name would work. He had done it for a consultancy and a podcast and for his brother's books and for an idea that had not survived the week. He had told a great many people about this. He had told people at dinners who had not asked.

The latest was for a charity that ran programs for children, called A Little Help Along the Way. The site was at alittlehelp.ampersand.space, and it was a good site, and it worked. The name was alittlehelpalongtheway.org, and it did not.

The launch email had been sitting in drafts since Wednesday with the address in its first line. The volunteer who wrote it had asked him twice that week whether she could send it.

At a quarter past eight on a Friday evening he sat down at his kitchen table and wrote to support. He wrote carefully. He gave the domain and the published URL. He said that the apex returned Cloudflare error 1001, that HTTPS failed during the TLS handshake, and that www had no DNS record. He gave the published version, which was a forty-character string beginning *aba62a*. It was the kind of message a support engineer prints out and pins to the partition.

The first reply came from Morgan, the platform's automated assistant. Morgan said there was no need to submit duplicate messages. Inside fifteen minutes Morgan had confirmed that the site was live, that DNS now resolved, and that the domain was still marked *Available* rather than *Deployed*. Morgan said the remaining issue was the project-to-domain binding, on Ampersand's side. Morgan said the case was being transferred to the technical team, that the queue was long, and that Neil would receive an email.

This was correct. It was also the last time that evening anyone on Ampersand's side of the window would say so.

The transfer put the case in the Tier 1 queue under *Technical*. In the console, Morgan's messages sat at the top of the conversation, collapsed beneath a grey bar that said *Automated Assistant (6)*. The bar could be expanded by clicking on it.

PROVENANCE

The Seeker took the case a little after half past ten, Neil's time.

He was a slight man with reading glasses pushed up into his hair, and he had been on the floor longer than anyone except the supervisor. His tiles were rarely red, because he read faster than other people typed. He read Neil's first message and admired it, the way he admired a well-made footnote. It had a domain, a URL, a version hash, and three separate error conditions.

It did not have a source for the claim that the domain had been bought from Ampersand.

He could not check. The purchase record was on the other side of the firewall. A domain could have been bought anywhere, and a statement about where it was bought was a statement, and the Seeker had read the March audit.

"Could you please confirm whether this domain was purchased from Ampersand?" he wrote. Then, because the macro appended it: "Kindly note that if we do not hear from you within 48 hours, this case will be closed."

"yes, it was purchased from Ampersand," Neil wrote. "Which i have done multiple times with no issue.."

"the fact that you don't know that is very weird."

"and why are you trying to access my microphone?"

On Tuesday the chat widget had been updated to support voice notes. It now asked for the microphone every time a new agent joined. The prompt showed only on the customer's side, so nobody on the fourteenth floor had ever seen it. The Seeker

had no answer to this and did not invent one. His block ended. The console rotated him onto a billing dispute in Ohio.

SAME PAGE

The next agent to join was the Chaos-Weaver.

He ran his four tiles the way a short-order cook runs a grill, and he had once proposed, at a team meeting, that the macros be abolished. He had been asked to write the proposal up. He had not. The console showed the last three messages by default, and the last of the three was about a microphone.

"Just want to confirm that we are on the same page," he wrote. "Are you trying to transfer your domain?"

"Are you getting any error?"

Then he pressed the domain macro, and it said: "We understand how frustrating this must be, Neil. To help us investigate further and get this cleared for you, please provide a full-screen recording showing all the steps from the very beginning. Please make sure that it is in MP4 format and in FULL VIEW, capturing the process from the start until you encounter the error. Once we receive this, we will immediately look into your account."

"i'm not doing any of that," Neil wrote. "i bought a domain off of Ampersand. alittlehelpalongtheway.org. it doesn't work. you need to make it work. if your chat bot can't do it, escalate it to a human."

The Chaos-Weaver opened the escalation form. He typed a summary. He chose a category. He looked at the Submit button, which was grey.

“Could you please provide us a receipt or invoice so we can check it for you.”

“you don’t know what you sold?” Neil wrote. “you realize how crazy that sounds? just look at my account.”

A REAL PERSON

The Conscience-Keeper joined at ten to twelve. He read back up the thread to the grey bar and stopped there, because it was the top of what had been handed to him.

“Kindly note that we need a screen recording showing the domain not loading, and another screen recording showing the Cloudflare 1001/TLS handshake errors.”

“I will pause this case while you gather the required information. Please note that the case will automatically close after 48 hours if no response is received.”

“Please escalate to a human,” Neil wrote. “This line of questioning is insane.”

“now please.”

“Hi there,” the Conscience-Keeper wrote. “Thank you for your reply.”

“why?”

“Unfortunately, we are not able to escalate without a screen recording from your end.”

“escalate to a real person.”

The Conscience-Keeper did not type the next line lightly. He had read the guidance behind Item 12, which explained that customers who believed they were talking to automation tended to disengage, and that agents were required to confirm their status truthfully when asked. He was sitting at a desk on a floor, with a lanyard, and a badge photo, and a parking spot, and a dental plan.

“You are currently in touch with a human.”

This was true in every sense the guidance had been written to cover.

“wonderful,” Neil wrote. “fix the issue with the service that you sold me.”

THE WALLBOARD

At the end of the floor, under a wall of screens, the All-Seeing watched the queue.

He was not on chats. His title was Real-Time Analyst, and his job was the shape of things. The screens showed contact volume by category in fifteen-minute bars, and one category had been climbing since twenty past two on Tuesday afternoon, which was when the platform release had gone out.

Custom domain — not resolving. Two hundred and twelve open cases.

The All-Seeing knew a great deal about cases like these. He knew that, across the previous quarter, eighty-six percent of

customers asked for a screen recording had sent one within the hour, and that most of those recordings had shown a typo, or a registrar somewhere else, or a customer who had not clicked Publish. He knew the April fields had been right, and could have told you how right, to the decimal. The policy was correct. It was correct in aggregate, and the aggregate was where the All-Seeing lived.

This week's bar did not look like last quarter's. It was steeper, and it had started all at once. What he could not do was say which of the two hundred and twelve was which. Somewhere inside that bar was a man at a kitchen table who had already given them the answer. From the end of the floor, that man was the same height as everyone else in it.

He wrote a pattern report. *Domain binding contacts up sharply since Tuesday release. Distribution suggests platform-side cause. Recommend engineering review of domain binding.* It went into the following Thursday's operations deck as slide 23.

THE LOOP

After midnight the case passed among them, and they each did what the case asked of them, and the case asked the same thing every time.

"May I know the reason why you can't provide a screen recording?"

"because the request is ridiculous."

"Please understand that this is required, as without it your request will be rejected."

"you say you are a real person, but this conversation suggests otherwise."

"Yes, you are speaking with a real person. Please understand that we don't have visibility on it. That's why we need your full cooperation."

"and no human would say 'Please understand we cannot fix the issue. . . .' "

The Conscience-Keeper read this twice. He said *please understand* because he wanted Neil to. It had not occurred to him that wanting someone to understand could be entered as evidence against you.

"when was dns invented?" Neil wrote. "and you can't figure it out now?"

"What do you mean, DNS invented?"

1983, at the University of Southern California's Information Sciences Institute. The Seeker knew this. He was two desks away, on the billing dispute in Ohio.

"my time is worth $250/hour," Neil wrote. "how much have I spent discussing this with you?"

Nobody answered.

"If you don't trust the human you are speaking with right now," wrote the Chaos-Weaver, who had come back around, "I have three options for you."

"i am a pro subscriber and i do not trust this human response at all."

"You can visit us via Discord and Reddit."

The third had been the phone line, which had been discontinued in August. He saw that it was gone after he had typed two of them, and sent the two, because two was what there was.

"how much am i spending with you this year?" Neil wrote. "if you were human you would be able to tell me."

"what other urls have i bought from you?"

"I don't have access to that information."

It was not a fair test. It was the test the firewall had been built to fail.

"this is for a charity reaching out to children," Neil wrote.

The Seeker's block rotated him back on. He read the last three messages, the last of which was about children. Above them was a screenshot Neil had sent of the domain not loading. He sent a link to the help article *Connecting a Domain from Another Registrar*, because a link was what he knew how to give. "Have you already read this article?"

"i have done 10 plus urls," Neil wrote. "this one failed."

THE RECORD

At half past one Neil asked for a transcript.

"can you provide me a transcript of this conversation to save me the cut and paste effort?"

"i have officially asked for a transcript of this conversation."

"We don't have a way to provide a transcript of this conversation," the Seeker wrote. "You can do it on your end."

He did not like typing this. A conversation without a copy was a conversation without a source. But the console had no export button. He offered to send screenshots showing Neil how to save it as a .txt file.

“you are the most powerful ai on the planet and you can’t produce a transcript?”

“We really apologize,” wrote the Seeker, who was not an AI, on behalf of a company that sold one.

Neil then did what people do when they have been in a loop long enough to see its shape. He became extremely formal. He wrote a numbered statement of the facts, ending with the diagnosis at the top of the thread, and asked them either to escalate the case or to confirm in writing that Ampersand was refusing to escalate a known Ampersand-side fault without a screen recording.

The Conscience-Keeper had the case back by then.

“Please make sure to provide a full screen recording,” he wrote, “so we can check it further. Once it is proven that you have done all the steps correctly and there is a known issue, we will escalate this to Tier 2 as soon as possible.”

“We are not refusing your escalation.”

“you are refusing,” Neil wrote.

“I can give you the ticket number,” wrote the Conscience-Keeper, and created one. It was 141361108.

“yes,” Neil wrote. “transfer the transcript of this idiot conversation to the head of your customer support/customer success department.”

"I understand this can be upsetting, but offensive language isn't allowed in our support chats."

Neil then asked for a statement to be added to the ticket, verbatim. It ran to a hundred and fifty words. It began *Ampersand Customer Support has confirmed that it will not escalate this case,* and set out five reasons it should, and ended *Please preserve this refusal to escalate as part of the formal record for ticket 141361108.*

"Please confirm that this statement has been added to the ticket."

"This is already put on our notes."

It was. The Conscience-Keeper had pasted it into the internal notes field in full, every word and every semicolon, and checked it against the original. The internal notes field was visible to Tier 2. Tier 2 would see it the moment the ticket arrived. The ticket could not arrive. He knew this, and he did it properly anyway, because properly was the only way he had of doing things.

"so you are confirming that the above requested information is being added to the ticket and that it will be escalated accordingly?"

"It will be escalated once you provide the screen recording."

CITATION

At ten to two the Seeker came back on and found a paragraph that made him sit up.

Neil had quoted Ampersand's own support guidance. *Contacting support from your registered account email allows us to identify you, locate your subscription and account activity, and verify ownership.* Receipts and other documents, it said, were only needed when you could not use the registered email.

The Seeker opened the help centre in another tab. He found the article. He checked the wording against Neil's quotation and it matched. He checked the revision date and it said June 2026. Neil's quotation was better sourced than most of the help centre.

In the internal notes he wrote: *Customer citation verified — Help Centre, "Verifying Account Ownership," rev. June 2026.*

Then he opened the escalation form, and the asterisks were still red, and the button was still grey. He flagged the case to the supervisor queue, which had no asterisks.

"Additionally, please provide a full screen recording of the error you are having and what you are trying to achieve. Without this information it will be hard for us to check and reproduce the error on our end. We will pause this case while waiting for your confirmation. I have already put all the notes on our end, and thank you for your feedback."

"are you not reading what I'm sending?" Neil wrote. "you say in your own policy that you don't need this information."

"even you can't argue your own policy."

The Seeker had not argued with it. He had agreed with it, and written down that he agreed with it, and given the date. Agreement had no field.

THE SUPERVISOR

The Allfather picked the case off the supervisor queue a few minutes after two.

He was a big man with white in his beard, and the floor liked him, because he gave people more than they had asked for: the longer break, the second chance, the easier shift. He read the case from the bottom up, which took a while.

“Hi there, thank you for your patience while waiting for our response. Kindly allow me to put you on hold for 5 minutes while I review this.”

“its 2:09 am,” Neil wrote, “and you had me up for hours in this pointless discussion. so please be quick.”

The Allfather took twenty-two minutes.

He took them because he had something the others did not. On the supervisor console, purchase records could be opened, as long as you chose a reason code and typed a justification that went into an audit log. He chose a reason code. He typed a justification. He opened the record.

There it was. *alittlehelpalongtheway.org*, bought through the platform and paid for, along with a dozen others, going back two years.

He went to the escalation form. The *Proof of purchase* field accepted a file upload and nothing else. The record could be read on the supervisor console but not exported, printed or captured; that had been the other half of the spring. A supervisor could know that a customer had bought a domain. He could not attach knowing. The field would take an invoice, and invoices lived in the customer's inbox.

While he was on hold, Neil pasted something into the chat.

It was long, and well organized, and it began *No—you are not being unreasonable about the core issue.* It went through the case point by point. It said the domain had been purchased through Ampersand, that the published site was live, that DNS appeared to resolve, and that the earlier exchange had already identified a binding problem on the platform side. It said that repeatedly asking for a screen recording and an invoice had been circular. It also said, evenly, that calling the conversation idiotic had been counterproductive, and that claiming a refusal to give a transcript broke the laws of many international geographies was a legal conclusion that would be hard to support. It recommended a short, non-accusatory message.

"you know who this is from?" Neil wrote. "you! this is an Ampersand response."

It was. He had asked the platform's own agent, the one that had built the charity's site, to read the conversation, which he had copied out after all, and tell him whether he was being unreasonable. The Allfather recognized the house style. The paragraph headings were the giveaway, and the fairness. He agreed with every half of it.

"i am going to bed now," Neil wrote. "if your strategy was to repeat the same thing over and over until i fell asleep, you did a decent job."

The Allfather came off hold.

"Apologies for the long hold. Upon checking, I can see that you have multiple purchased domains, which is why we are requesting the invoice: to verify and confirm the date of purchase of the domain in question."

"As for the screen recording, this will help us check the steps you are taking and the error you are experiencing."

The multiple domains were what he had seen. The date of purchase was the reason the supervisor macro gave for the field. Then, because he could not leave a man with nothing, he offered something nobody else had.

"If you are unable, can you provide your DNS records?"

"that is just the same thing said differently," Neil wrote, from bed. "you do not have my agreement or alignment to pause this case."

The case was paused.

CONNECTED

Neil came back to the case on Saturday evening. He opened it from the notification on his phone, which took him to the newest message, which was a request. He had told the volunteer he would let her know the moment it worked. She had asked again that afternoon.

“why do you keep pausing the case,” he wrote. “just go look up my account records and then fix the problem.”

“if i wanted to ask someone for the invoice, i would ask you.”

“because you’re the company who sold the service.”

The Companion had the case. She was the only agent on the floor who, on being handed a case, clicked the grey bar at the top of it, and so she was the first person at Ampersand to read Morgan’s six messages. She read the diagnosis. She read the rest of it. It took a long time and turned all three of her other tiles amber.

She could not send it to Tier 2. She had the same console as everyone else, and the same form. She did not use the macro.

“Hi there. I’ve read your case from the beginning,” she wrote. “The first assistant found the fault, and it’s on our side. I can’t send it to the team that fixes it without the two attachments the escalation form asks for. That’s the form. It isn’t you.”

Neil did not answer. He was making dinner.

The Companion waited longer than the console liked. Then she wrote: “Are we still connected?”

Six minutes went by. The macro offered itself, and the Companion took it, because her shift was ending. “Since I am not receiving any response, I will be placing this chat on pause.”

She was standing up with her bag over her shoulder when the tile flashed.

“we are still connect”

“connected”

She read it standing. It was the only message in the thread that answered a question she had asked.

The console had already rotated the case on. The next agent had joined. “Thank you for coming back to the case,” the agent wrote. “We will need the domain purchase proof, so that we can look further into your concern.”

PROCESS

“why do I need to prove to you that i bought something from you that you know i bought from you?” Neil wrote. “can you not see the logic flaw?”

“We will need the invoice to validate the information from our end. We will need the screen recording of the issue as well, so that we can assist you efficiently.”

“i don’t need to send you a screen recording for you to fix a DNS issue. you issued the url. you make it work.”

“like you have every other time.”

“without screen recordings.”

“Please share the screen recording so that we can assist you efficiently.”

Neil went away for a few minutes. When he came back he pasted something new from the platform’s agent. It was headed *Recommended support process*, and its steps were numbered. Step 6 said that Tier 1 should not make escalation conditional on a recording when the problem is independently reproducible and appears to be server-side.

“your own system is trying to teach you how to do customer support,” Neil wrote. “please follow the process your system lays out.”

The Conscience-Keeper had the case again. He read every step. He agreed with every one. The escalation form did not have a Step 6. It had two red asterisks.

“Thank you so much for the feedback,” he wrote. “Please share the necessary information so that we can assist you accordingly.”

“what kind of support process has no escalation path?” Neil wrote.

“I understand your concern.”

“i’m not sure you do,” Neil wrote.

The Chaos-Weaver took the case off the Conscience-Keeper at the top of the next block, and answered Neil straight, which was off-script.

“I do.”

There was a pause long enough for the tile to go amber.

“Now, I need the screen recording.”

Neil told them he had written to senior leadership, and to every Ampersand address he could find, and he listed them. He said that if it weren’t for his love of the platform he would have cancelled his account.

“We truly understand the importance of your concern,” the Chaos-Weaver wrote, by macro. “We would like to solve your issue as well, which is why we need your cooperation. Please share the screen recording of the issue so that we can look further into your concern.”

THE COUNT

“how many times have you asked me to share a screen recording?”

On the wallboard at the end of the floor, a keyword monitor flagged the message, the way it flagged anything containing *how many times*, because customers who asked it were statistically likely to churn. The message appeared in a small box in the corner of the All-Seeing’s screen.

The All-Seeing knew the answer. Counting was his job. Fifty-eight. He knew too how many times the floor had asked the same thing that week, across all the domain cases, which were past three hundred by then, and the four thousand other cases on the floor. He could have answered Neil to the unit.

He was not on the ticket.

The answer that went out came from the macro, which used Neil’s first name and expressed empathy.

“We appreciate your patience, Neil. We will need the screen recording so that we can move forward regarding your concern.”

The case was paused.

THREE CLICKS

On Sunday evening, when none of those addresses had answered, Neil went looking for someone at Ampersand with a name.

He found the Hand on a professional networking site, where the Hand's title was Product Lead, Custom Domains. The Hand worked in a different building, in a different city, and had never been to the fourteenth floor and did not know which floor it was. He had no tiles and no macros. Nothing in his job description mentioned customers.

Neil's message was short and had the domain in it. At 7:31, Neil's time, the Hand wrote back.

"Hi sorry about that I'll look into it!"

He typed the domain into a tool that showed him everything about it. The tool had no field for an invoice. The binding log showed a timeout within minutes of Neil's purchase, and then a cleanup. The cleanup had marked the domain *Available*, which was true.

At 8:00 he wrote again.

"Perhaps try this first (unless you already have): Please open your site's Settings, then Domains, and connect alittlehelpalongtheway.org once (keep 'Set up both' ticked). It should be live within a few minutes. What happened here: When you bought the domain, our system tried to connect it before the registrar had finished setting it up, then gave up and removed the half-finished connection. Sorry for the trouble!"

"If it still doesn't work, do let me know!"

Neil did it at the kitchen table. Settings. Domains. Connect. He counted afterwards. It was three clicks.

He texted the volunteer, and she sent the launch email.

At 8:51 he wrote to the Hand. “Works beautifully. Really appreciated the help. Your platform is amazing… your supposed processes, not so much…”

The Hand reacted to this with a small yellow face shedding one tear.

At 9:24 he wrote: “Working on the processes part, thanks for the feedback.” He had put the same face in the middle.

At 9:25 he added a postscript, in brackets, with a face crying harder at the end of it: “(tho just for the record my main responsibility is the product features… I’m helping out customer support when it’s obviously not handled well)”

“I run a large product team,” Neil wrote. “I know that pain.”

That night the Hand changed one setting, so that the platform would wait for the registrar before it tried, and would try once more on every domain it had already given up on. It was a configuration change and not a release, so it went out without a release note. Then he went to the kitchen and ate a granola bar standing up.

RESOLUTION

Neil did not go back to the support chat. On Monday evening, forty-eight hours after the last pause, the case closed itself under the code CUSTOMER UNRESPONSIVE, which counted toward the floor's resolution rate.

That week QA sampled the case. The Companion's reply failed Item 3, *Uses customer's first name*, and was flagged for coaching. The last macro, which had used Neil's first name, passed.

On Thursday the operations deck was presented to the leadership team. By then the All-Seeing had rewritten slide 23. The new headline read *Custom domain contacts down 97% since Sunday night. Cause not identified.* The deck template had two fields for every result, *Win* and *Driver*, and *Driver* could not be left blank. The deck owner filled it in from the last domain initiative on record: *Continued enforcement of evidence requirement (April)*. The All-Seeing could see the drop to the minute. He could not see what had caused it.

The Hand was not at the meeting. He did not know there had been a meeting.

On Friday Neil received an email from Ampersand asking him to rate his recent support experience. There were five faces to choose from, running from a frown to a smile. The email said it would take less than a minute.

The survey closed itself after forty-eight hours.

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