

WINNING at CUSTOMER RETENTION



101 WAYS
TO KEEP 'EM HAPPY,
KEEP 'EM LOYAL, &
KEEP 'EM COMING BACK!
BY JOANNA BRANDI

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This version of the book has been altered only slightly from the original.

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ISBN 0-943210-40-2

INTRODUCTION

Profitability depends on repeat business from your customers. While “good marketing” may get customers in the door, only great customer care, consistent communication, and constant product or service improvement will keep customers coming back time and time again. *Winning at Customer Retention: 101 Ways* explores many of the opportunities you have to build and maintain better relationships with your customers.

A five-percent increase in retention of profitable customers can boost your bottom line by as much as 100 percent (depending, of course, on your fixed costs); it has the same net effect as a 10-percent cost reduction — or better. It's simple: increased customer retention and loyalty yields greater profitability. With more profits, companies can invest in better benefits and training for their employees, and experience a lower turnover rate as a result. Loyal employees build loyal relationships with customers — and so it goes, in a positive, appreciating fashion.

While companies spend a fortune on marketing and advertising to get a customer to buy in the first place, many forget that customer retention and loyalty require value rich relationships and an emotional connection to keep the customer coming back. While tactical, practical things-to-do are a vital part of “relationship marketing”; the customer in me cries out that they don't mean a thing, as far as real loyalty goes, if not coupled with genuine caring. Sure, I'll stick around for your frequent buyer points — but only until someone else offers me a relationship of real and caring contact. Then watch me defect!

Let's get down to the heart and soul of the matter: the core of relationship marketing is relationships. Not databases, not clubs, not giveaways, but relationships. Businesses consist of different sets of relationships — the ones we have with our customers, our employees (and their families), our suppliers, our community, our stockholders, and our environment. And one other very important relationship — the one we have with ourselves.

INTRODUCTION

The businesses that are thriving in the 21st century are those that recognize and nurture strong, trusting and value filled relationships. Investment in the growth of these relationships will deliver far greater returns than image advertising, marketing programs, and trade-show hoopla. When we begin to invest in people — in their positive growth as members of a team as well as of a larger community — we will see a return on our investment unlike any marketing program has ever yielded. When people bring their hearts, souls, and passion to work and are led by a clear, inspiring vision, miracles happen.

You will find in this book a diverse mix of relationship skills — some geared toward internal customers, some toward external customers, and some toward you, the individual. I've chosen not to outline or group the topics by category, although the tactically oriented ones seemed to fit best toward the end. Rather, these skills flow — like life, like relationships — in and out of stories, many making more than one point, some linked by a common theme, all designed to help you keep more of your customers..., and to keep you happier and healthier in the bargain!

Success is a choice. The companies that will be most successful in the future are those that choose to look closely at their organizational culture, values, and relationships, and create positive environments in which employees flourish and customers are active engaged participants.

Individuals have the same choices companies do. Each and every one of us can choose the kind of life we most want to live, the kind of person we most want to be.

This book offers options for creating a personal reality that suits the new marketplace. I sincerely hope you find a few ideas that speak directly to you and move you to make positive changes in your life. May they also put a smile on your face... and help you keep at least one additional, precious customer!

JoAnna Brandi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No work of mine would be complete without my acknowledgment of those who help and support me on my journey.

I would like to say “thank you” to:

Jeanine and Mark, for their unconditional love and support

Pearl and Frank, for helping me hold on to my dream

My family, for standing by me

Arjuna, who patiently and lovingly edited my original work

Linda, who made this book a reality

All the friends and colleagues who encourage me to follow my dreams and hold fast to my vision of making the business world a better place to be

Thank you, also, to Paula, Lois, Andy, Sally, Susan, Margaret, David, Jean, Gael, Richard, and Carl — an incomplete list, I’m sure

And a special thanks to Amy for her loving care with the endless revisions of work through the years

1

KNOW YOURSELF

Although most books on customer relationships (including this one) accentuate the importance of knowing your customer, I believe the person you should focus on getting to know first is yourself. Are you an introvert or an extrovert? Are you overly sensitive or routinely insensitive? Are you quick to anger or to get “stressed out”?

Routine self-evaluation (**not** self-flagellation) keeps us on our toes. Knowing more about yourself helps you learn more about your customers. Understanding what makes you tick (and what makes you explode) opens the door to personal as well as professional growth.

Before any of us — companies or individuals — can set goals for improvement, we need to conduct a “current state” assessment. This involves articulating who or what we are today. Then our plan can focus on who or what we want to become, how we expect to do that, how we will measure our improvement, and when we hope to accomplish it.

Take some time, even if it’s only a few minutes a day, to honestly appraise where you are. If you chart a course of change, remind yourself every morning what the changes are and how they will benefit you. Post notes on your fridge, bathroom mirror, or computer screen, or in your daybook. Remind yourself every day of the things you appreciate about yourself as well as the things you want to change.

2

BE A PERFORMER

What are you selling? Widgets? Geegaws? Your services? In away, we all sell the same thing: performance — our ability to perform to the customer's satisfaction. Service is, if you will, a performing art, and that makes you and me performers. Now, how does that change the way you think about yourself?

Exactly what are you required to do as a performer? Delight your audience with the perfect level of service? Amaze your clientele with your knowledge and expertise? Enthrall your coworkers with your ability to listen and understand?

Theatrical performers, professional athletes, and performing musicians know that preparation and rehearsal make the difference. They tune their instruments, step through their parts, even visualize their perfect performances. Stellar performers use every tool available to them.

What are your tools? The voice, the brain, and body language are the most important ones in any performer's repertoire. How much do you know about them, and how can they support your ability to be a top-notch performer? How can you use rehearsal and visualization to improve your performance? Practice still goes a long way toward making perfect.

In the relationship business, performance is the “core competency.” Be brave; ask others for feedback on your performance. Use any type of performer as a model. Disciplined, continual improvement in performance skills will take you even further than improved computer skills!

3

BECOME A RESOURCE

Resourceful people tend to be very popular. They're the ones who take the phone calls no one else can handle, who always have a good idea when the boss gets stuck, who people go to knowing that even if they don't get an answer, they'll be pointed in the right direction. (If you're the one headhunters call no matter what kind of job applicant they seek, you know what I mean.)

Become a resource by reading and listening and networking and collecting. Pay attention, absorb information, listen carefully. Nothing impresses a customer more than receiving an article and note from you — something like, "I know you've been thinking about day care for Kelly. I saw this article and thought it might be of interest. Hope it helps!" Now, *that's* added value.

Becoming more resourceful isn't hard. Buy some brightly colored file folders and start clipping articles that appeal to the types of customers you serve. If you deal with small-business owners, find out some of their concerns — professional and personal — and clip articles to photocopy for them. I never read a magazine without thinking who else would enjoy/benefit from this. People still love getting an article with a hand written note by mail or fax. For universal issues — such as the use of vitamins (everyone gets a cold sooner or later), stress management (my clients appreciate tips on this), and general management — you can make copies of an article for many people. Oftentimes, I follow up a client conversation by sending an article or cartoon, and it never fails to have a positive effect on my relationship with that person. It shows them I'm thinking about them when I don't have to be. And, it encourages them to use me as a resource when they need one.

4

BECOME A GOOD NETWORKER

Once you've become a good resource, the next step is becoming a good networker. Keep a database of contacts, including information on what each person does. Then, if a customer complains about a printing job, you can just say, "Gee, I know of three good printers in the area. Can I give you their numbers?"

As you meet new people, add them to your database, noting who they are and what they can do for you or your customers. More comfortable with a desktop card file? Fine. Even plain old index cards will work. Refresh your memory from time to time by scanning your database or card file, reviewing your contacts and what they do. Drop a note or make a brief call to catch up. "So, Betty, are you still giving those seminars on personal finance? A customer of mine might be interested in attending one." Or, "I hadn't talked with you in awhile, Bob, and wanted to check and see if you're still involved in personnel matters. I had an interesting inquiry recently..."

You never know when you'll make just the right phone call at just the right moment. Often, when making a call, I get the response, "Wow... I was just thinking about you! What a coincidence that you called." But through experience, I've come to feel that almost every call I make is "just the right call," and that coincidence is merely a myth.

Share the wealth of your network with your customers. Recently, I met a woman who was working on a huge funding project for women-owned businesses. I made copies of her fund-raising letter, attached a personal note, and sent it to my customers and friends. Many of my referrals participated in the project, and I was proud to be part of the effort. Even though my direct intention was not to build my "emotional bank account," I'll bet my actions spoke loudly about my level of commitment.

5

SAY “THANK YOU”

Your mother was right: thank-you notes *are* important. To this day, I always put the small envelopes with the handwritten addresses on the top of my “to open” pile of mail. Don’t you?

Other ways of saying thanks include:

- Sending a card or calling around Thanksgiving
- Writing “Thank You” on your next invoice, on the outside of the billing envelope, or on a box going to a customer
- Using tissue paper embossed with the words “Thank You” for wrapping customer purchases
- Sending a thank-you postcard after a sale

And if you don’t get the sale? Drop a note extending your thanks for the chance to present your product or service and promising a follow-up call in the future.

Remember, everyone in your organization works together to care for external customers. Say a sincere thank-you to the people in the office who support what you do. Surprising them with a bunch of flowers or a sweet treat will go a long way toward building good relationships with your internal suppliers and customers.

Everyone wants to be appreciated. Let your customers know — often and sincerely — that you appreciate them.

William James - “The deepest human need is that for appreciation.”

6

DON'T ASSUME

Too many people assume that “no news is good news” when it comes to customers. They assume that customers are happy if they don’t complain, that they’re loyal if they keep coming back, that everything is OK unless they hear otherwise. Ostriches, all!

If you’re in the habit of making such assumptions about your customers, get your head out of the sand! You’re setting yourself up for major disappointment.

Don’t assume anything — ask. Ask customers if your products and services are meeting their needs. Ask if you could deliver faster, better, or more convenient service. Ask if they are happy doing business with you. Ask if there’s anything you could do to make them happier.

Customers are moving targets, and if you don’t keep up with their ever-changing needs, expectations, dreams, and desires, you’ll be eating dust. Try asking them this question: “In what three ways could we make doing business with us easier for you?” I’ll bet many of your customers will tell you.

7

PAY ATTENTION

Customers are constantly letting you know what they want, how they would like to be treated, and what their needs are. This feedback is there for the taking — if you pay attention and listen carefully. You'll have plenty of opportunities throughout your relationships with clients to discover their values, what's important to them in buying, and what motivates them.

In conversation, listen carefully for lead-ins such as, “I wish ...” “I want...,” “If only I...” “I’d like...,” and “I’d prefer...” Pick up on nonverbal clues, too. Is your client reading a best-seller or wearing the latest fashions? If so (or not), what does that tell you about him or her? If certain clients are always impeccably dressed, right down to their just-shined shoes, what do you know about them? Perhaps it's that appearance, neatness, image, and attention to detail are important to them. How can you use that information to build your relationships?

Become a keen observer. Clients who use words like “see,” “imagine,” “perspective,” or “view” a lot probably are highly visual. Such individuals typically put great value on the way things look. How can you appeal to that quality?

Paying attention to clues like these will enable you to build rapport with clients on many levels and help you add value where others fail. Most clients don't really want to “shop around.” They're looking for the special combination of factors that equal value for them. Pay attention; most of the time, they'll tell you, in one way or another, exactly what that is.

Everyone wants to be appreciated. Let your customers know — often and sincerely — that you appreciate them.

8

GIVE ATTENTION

From the moment we're born, we crave attention. Don't babies cry even when they don't need a diaper change or a bottle? Of course! They're looking for attention.

One of the chief determinants of how often customers buy is how often they are contacted. Don't make your customers solely responsible for remembering your company. On the other hand, make sure you are not wearing out your welcome in their world. Too many people today feel they are drowning in the sea of information that some companies provide.

Make sure that your information is desired and that it's relevant to their lives. Ask what kind of information they want to see, how they most like to be contacted and how often.

Whether you're face-to-face with customers or on the phone with them, give them 100 percent of your attention. Too many of us were affected by the old time-management dictum preaching that unless we were doing at least two things at once, we weren't being efficient.

Give it up! Efficiency is being 100-percent present and concentrating on one customer at a time, so that the customer gets your undivided attention and feels it. Let's face it — most interactions are relatively short. Don't you want — and feel you deserve — full attention when you're in the customer role?

9

MAKE ‘EM FEEL WELCOME

During my first visit to the offices of Quick International Courier, I was asked to wait a few moments in the lobby. Since I had arrived early for my appointment, my wait was about 15 minutes. During that time, no fewer than 15 people walked by, and every single one said “hello” and asked if I’d been helped or if someone had been notified of my arrival. Not one of them knew I was on a selling — not a buying — mission, yet everyone made me feel welcome. That single incident revealed volumes about the company and the caliber of people who work there.

How welcome do your customers feel? Is visitor parking located near the building entrance? Does a trained person greet them as they arrive? Is the first thing they hear when calling, “ABC Company, please hold,” or is it, “Thank you for calling ABC Company”? Is the “hold” programming or music soothing or loud — possibly even offensive?

I recall being put on hold to the sound of a blaring “shock jock” and feeling stuck because I absolutely had to reach the company that day. By the time I was connected with a company representative, I was no happy camper. Far from feeling welcome, I’d gotten signals that said, “Stay away!” and “Don’t bother us!” I got the message alright, but probably not the one they intended.

Try to think of 10 ways your company can make customers (and suppliers and employees) feel more welcome. Put your list in the company suggestion box. No such box? Make a recommendation to get one.

10

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Details count. Walt Disney once said, ‘There’s no magic to magic; it’s all in the details.’ The companies with the best customer service pay great attention to details because they understand that, on some level, the customer takes them all in.

A great product fails the “Wow!” test if it’s shipped in shoddy packaging or if you forget to thank the customer. A great dinner out is scarred by mediocre service or food scraps on the floor. A retail-store interaction improves decidedly because of a knowledgeable clerk who takes the time to build rapport and offer help. A mail-order sale becomes memorable for all the right reasons when the phone rep checks to see if the items you want are in stock before taking your billing and shipping information.

And what if people left up-to-date voice-mail messages, stating specifically when they would return calls? For example: “Hi, this is Betty. It’s Friday, June 25th, and I’m out of the office until 1 p.m. Please leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back as soon as possible when I return. Thanks, and have a pleasant day.” This sure beats, “I’m either on the phone or away from my desk. Leave a message.”

Can you think of other details that could add the “Wow!” factor to your product or service? Remember — little things add up to big “Wows!”

11

FOLLOW UP

It's not enough to solve customers' problems — you need to follow up to see that they *stay* solved. My mechanic calls the day after he services my car to make sure everything is all right. This follow-up is very reassuring, and it also gives me the opportunity to let him know if a new noise or rattle appeared since the visit.

My periodontist called me the night after my surgery to see if I was in pain. Another time, he called from the airport to check on me before leaving town. Now, I've had a lot of dental work done in my day, but I'd never received this kind of treatment before. No wonder his patients rave about him!

A follow-up call, fax, or note says you care. It makes the strong statement that you're available and interested even *after* the sale.

I remember when I changed oil-burner companies, after many years with the same company, I got a call from the old company's owner asking why I'd left. I told him that the new company offered a great price and came highly recommended.

"But we've been serving your family for years. Weren't you happy with our service?" he asked.

"Since you asked, no. Sure, your people showed up within a reasonable amount of time, but their clothes were dirty, and they almost always tracked soot on my carpet. Plus, I often found them condescending and patronizing," I replied.

Taken aback by my frankness, he stammered, "Well, why didn't you tell us?"

My reply: "You never asked me."

Had this business owner followed up on a regular basis, he would have uncovered my feelings sooner. Did he make the mistake of assuming that I was satisfied because I was "loyal"? He sure did.

The greatest key to sales success isn't a secret: it's follow up, follow up, follow up. And, as the preceding example showed, you can use follow-up to build loyalty, too.

12

BE A PROACTIVE THINKER

What can you do to help make a customer's tomorrow even better than her today? How can you make it memorable? Delightful? Awesome? How can you make doing business with you easier for her? What can you do to close the gap between purchases, so a competitor doesn't sneak in and get a piece of her mindshare?

How might you use your creativity to assist a customer with a dilemma of some kind? Or help a customer take advantage of an opportunity? How can you really support your customers?

Being a proactive thinker means always being on the lookout for situations you can use to your advantage. Creative, proactive thinking involves stretching your mind — even using analogy and metaphor — to come up with innovative, inventive solutions.

A friend of mine who sells advertising was fertilizing his garden when he came up with the idea of getting his small retail advertisers together for a few hours, maybe one evening a week, and teaching them the most effective ways to promote their businesses. Once these retailers understood more about advertising and how to use it effectively, they placed more ads with him. And their businesses are growing. The “fertilizer” for those relationships was the time, effort, and education my friend gave his clients; the net result for everyone involved: growth.

So, try looking at everyday situations in new ways — ways that stretch your ability to think, to imagine possibilities you wouldn't normally consider. If your business were a sailboat and your customers the wind...?

13

THE POWER IN THE PRESENT

The past is gone. The future isn't here yet. All you have is the now, and your power is in this very moment. Forget things from the past that hold you back — like when that guy in the production department screwed up your big order. Have you been getting even ever since?

If you work in a typical company, you've seen some changes — including some unpleasant ones — over the past 10 years. Get over them; they're gone. The past is definitely not returning.

Your power exists in the now. What choices can you make this very moment to change something for the better? Think about it. We make thousands of small, seemingly insignificant choices throughout each day. What would happen if you became conscious of 20 percent of the choices you make?

Shortly after I quit smoking, a colleague of mine stopped me in the hall to congratulate me. She said, "I'd give my right arm to do what you did." My reply was simply, "No, you wouldn't, and it doesn't involve giving an arm. I learned that quitting smoking requires dealing with the discomfort of changing, of being conscious of my choices as I make them." I reminded her that I had nothing she didn't have, but that I had decided to look at my choices — choice by choice, minute by minute. The power was in each moment. Hard work? Yes, but certainly worth it.

What would you "give your right arm" to do? Now, replace trading the arm with giving attention to your decisions, one by one. All day, every day, we're offered opportunities to change our lives by changing our decisions. What choices would you like to make differently?

14

NEVER, NEVER STOP LEARNING

Develop a love, a passion, for learning. Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, believes we need to create “learning organizations.” He says, “At the heart of the learning organization is a shift of mind — from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something ‘out there’ to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.”¹

Today’s (and tomorrow’s) successful companies will be those that learn from everything and everyone. They will learn from their mistakes as well as their successes. They will learn from their customers, their employees, their suppliers, their competition. They will learn from the examples of others and from general trends. They will develop an insatiable curiosity that will keep them on the road to innovation and improvement.

Continuous improvement starts in one place — with you. Without your conscious effort and commitment to learn something new every day, and to continually improve the way you do things, your organization doesn’t stand a chance.

So, while waiting for your boss or coworkers to initiate a “quality program,” examine your own ability and willingness to improve. First things first.

As a seminar participant said to me recently, “You gotta wanna do it — you gotta *wanna* change.”

¹ Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline*. 1990, N.Y., Doubleday/Currency.

15

HONOR THEIR PERCEPTION

To customers, their perceptions are the only reality. These perceptions are the direct result of expectations they carry based on the image created by what you've promised them. You may think you delivered pleasant, courteous service while they claim you were rude.

So, who's right? It boils down to this: perception = reality ($P = R$). If, according to customers' current frame of reference, they're right and you're rude, that is their reality, and in the lexicon of today's teens, their reality rules.

Another way of putting it is that the customer's evaluation of the quality of service you deliver is the difference between what they expected and what they perceive you have delivered. For them, that's the truth. Again, $P = R$.

The $P=R$ rule exists in all human communications. If someone perceives that I've spoken condescendingly and they feel talked down to, that's pretty real to them. Even if doing so was the furthest thing from my mind, it's my responsibility to clear up the confusion.

I once (bravely) told a boss that I felt hurt and embarrassed by his behavior toward me in an important meeting. His response was, "That's nonsense! I was just having fun with you; I didn't mean anything by it." He didn't get the $P=R$ rule at all and revealed this by discounting my feelings completely. When I insisted that my feelings were mine, and real, he said I was being ridiculous. How do you suppose that impacted my feelings of respect for and trust of him?

The bottom line: always honor the customer's perception of reality.

16

CONTROL WHAT THEY EXPECT

Can we control any of the perceptions that go on in customers' minds? Yes, by understanding how customers form expectations.

Your company's formal communications, advertising claims, and catalog proclamations of "great service" combine with what customers have heard about the company to begin the formation of expectations. Mix that with customers' past experience with you (or companies like yours — people tend to generalize), their personal and professional needs, and their current state of mind, and *voila!* — an expectation.

Then you enter the picture, unaware of the many pieces of the mix yet instructed to "meet or exceed customers' expectations." A tall order, at best.

So, what do you do? Understand what your organization's formal communications promise and be sure to keep those promises, consistently. Ask people what they say about your company and what they have heard about you. Know the types of things that motivate your customers individually. Do they have a greater-than-average need for attention? Do they like being the "first on the block" to have something? Are they moved by appeals to status or their need to make a contribution? Do they just need to feel wanted? Probe for information, and become a perceptive student of human nature. Listen carefully for the clues people give to their state of mind and needs, then appeal to those.

A weary traveler may need empathy; a harried account exec, ease or convenience; a hurried mom, speedy service; a tired student some encouragement. Smart service givers make it their business to know.

17

GIVE ‘EM COMFORT

The classic service promotion shows a smiling flight attendant slipping a pillow behind the head of a weary passenger (sit-ting in business class). That says “comfortable” to me — although I travel on planes often, and someone has yet to slip a pillow behind my head. (Maybe next flight....)

Customers want to feel comfortable. What are you doing to assure that yours do? Is your building easy to find? Is your lobby easily accessible and pleasant? Does it offer comfortable chairs and assorted reading materials? What about phone customers? Can they get through easily? Do they reach a representative quickly, or do they have to listen to an endless tape loop of a message they’ve heard a million times before: “We’re sorry ... all of our customer-service representatives are currently busy serving other customers. Please hold, and...”

Are your customers comfortable with your ordering process, or do they find it challenging to spend money with you? (I’m amazed that some long-distance phone companies find it necessary to issue me an account number when others consider my phone number unique enough to identify me.) If you’re in the financial industry, do your customers feel safe with you?

Regardless of the business you’re in, are your rest rooms clean? Nothing makes a customer feel more uncomfortable than an unkempt rest room, especially in an eating establishment.

At regular intervals, check your customers’ comfort level and make any necessary improvements. How many ways can you think of to do that?

ZIG ZIGLAR

**If you help
enough people
get what they want,
you will get
what you want.**

18

EDUCATE YOUR CUSTOMERS

Retailer Sy Syms says, “An educated consumer is my best customer,” and right he is. The more consumers know about buying and using a product, the easier the sales and service process — for them *and* for you. High-tech companies complain that too many of the service calls they make are unnecessary:

“If only the customers would read the directions!” The fact is, some customers will *never* read directions. Many will, if they’re clear and easy to follow, but many manufacturers don’t provide directions the average user can understand.

I recently purchased a shelving unit that promised to be easy to assemble; no tools necessary. Suffice to say, the easy-to-assemble promise was a bold-faced lie. The instructions were incomprehensible to the three intelligent people attempting to put the unit together. Fortunately, the photo of the completed unit on the front of the packing box was clear enough so that, with a little common sense, we were finally able to assemble the thing. But, really....

Harry Quadracci, of Quadgraphics Printing, conducts “customer college” every year to teach the fundamentals of the printing process to his customers so they can make smarter printing choices. If you’ve ever tried to buy printing without knowing much about it, you understand how valuable that is.

A florist who has had to refund customers’ money because the plants she sold them died learns the importance of teaching customers how to care for their plants. Likewise, a health-food store that offers unusual foods (such as sea vegetables) is wise to offer preparation ideas to enhance customers’ buying confidence.

Home Depot offers free classes in tiling baths and installing cabinets and fixtures. Guess where home-improvement types buy their supplies after learning how to do the work?

It’s as close to fact as a slogan can get: an educated consumer is everyone’s best customer.

19

LET THE CUSTOMER WIN

There's an old saying in the selling trades that no one ever wins a fight with a customer, and it's true. For some people, winning an argument becomes a mission unto itself. We all know individuals like this, and we've all been sucked into their game. Once both "sides" are emotionally involved, the scenario dissolves into a match whose players are merely competing for victor status.

I recently witnessed this type of "win/lose" behavior in a hotel clerk who seemed hell-bent on proving that a guest had neglected to request a nonsmoking room when making his reservation. The guest, in turn, was determined to let the clerk know that his agent would never, ever neglect to book a nonsmoking room. This argument went on in full view of those of us unfortunate enough to be standing in the same check-in line. To prove that she was right (and that the guest was wrong), the clerk took time out to locate the original fax, which it turns out did not specify a nonsmoking room. Lo and behold, the clerk was right! So what?

The unhappy guest carried on until the clerk called the manager, who found him a nonsmoking room. In the meantime, the clerk had embarrassed the guest, herself, her manager, and the hotel — but, in her mind, she had "won."

Here's the really scary part: when I got to the front of the line, I was asked, "Do you want a smoking or a nonsmoking room?" After the scene I'd just witnessed, I began to think I was in the twilight Zone!

When interacting with customers, even if you're positive that they are mistaken about something, remember: there are times when having to be right is wrong.

I've read dozens of books and hundreds of articles on customer service, and some of them still claim that the customer is always right. ("Rule #1: The customer is always right. Rule #2: If the customer is wrong, see rule #1.")

Taken literally, this rule is not only extreme but untrue. Of course, customers aren't always right; no one is. But that doesn't mean it's our job to point it out to them when they're wrong. Customers have the right to feel the way they feel. Our obligation is to soothe them and mend our relationships with them when misunderstandings occur. We need to remember, however, that balance is the key.

The welfare of the customer and that of the company need to be considered simultaneously. Usually, they're compatible, but occasionally not. A company needs clear guidelines for dealing with the exceptional situations and a methodology for weighing the consequences of any actions they take.

I believe that a company should never condone a customer's abusive behavior toward any of its employees. Abusive individuals need to be dealt with firmly and assertively. Customers who "carry a lot of weight" occasionally try to throw their weight around. Make sure your workers know the company's position on handling such incidents. Advise them on finding a workable balance between customer satisfaction and the company's best interests. Delighting customers and bending over backwards for them doesn't mean taking abuse. Be just as clear about the kind of customer you want as you are about the kind of employee you want.

Today's demanding business climate requires great flexibility on the part of every businessperson. But flexibility can be more than a little difficult to manifest.

One of the body's defenses against the demands of a complex world is to put us on automatic pilot. Ever get to work and not remember driving there? Or space out the morning subway ride during rush hour? While this auto-pilot mechanism helps us cope with stress, it has one disadvantage: doing the same thing over and over in the same way fixes us in a pattern, and we lose our flexibility.

In order to maintain flexibility, we need to keep well stretched, mentally and physically. Physical means of stretching — such as yoga, martial arts, and ballet — work to loosen up the mind as well as the body. Because the mind often follows the state of the body, it isn't always necessary to deliberately stretch your mind. I find that some of my most creative moments come after a good yoga workout. There's a direct link between the workings of the mind and the body, so when you're stuck mentally, try loosening up physically.

Just as visualization helps athletes improve their performance, certain types of physical activity can help the "business athlete" adopt a more flexible mindset.

Customers demand creative solutions and innovative, cutting-edge products and services, so your job requires that you be as open and flexible as possible. Other ways of loosening up and expanding your horizons include trying a new food, listening to new music, meeting new people — doing anything that helps you stay open and fast on your feet. Your new-found flexibility will prepare you for the business challenges of tomorrow.

The majority of people I meet tell me they're not creative. I wonder where they got that notion? They were creative as children, I'm sure. Some created drawings, some created noise, some created music, some created chaos — but I never met a child who wasn't creative!

So, what happens during childhood that cuts people off from their creativity? Perhaps a parent, a teacher, or an older sibling ridiculed an early attempt at baking cookies or painting. Creativity in kids is often stifled in younger years by adults who tell them how things should be — for example, comments like these in response to children's coloring or drawings: "Johnny, the sky isn't green, it's blue," or, "That's a cute picture, Sally, but we all know that dogs don't have two heads." Such innocent remarks can stifle the creative impulse and send the recipient into lifelong exile from it. What a waste! We're all creative, and we need to remind ourselves so.

Maybe you will begin reminding yourself by building on the ideas in this book. Try this positive self-talk: "Creativity is my birthright. I am creative, and I express my creativity in all aspects of my life." Say this to yourself 10 times a day for 30 days, and record the results. Just watch your creativity — and your confidence — soar.

Respect. You know what it means — don't you?

Respect is sensitivity to people's varying needs — and it's essential now that many of us are interacting cross-culturally. It's giving others your undivided attention and acknowledging that everyone has a right to his or her feelings. Respect involves trust, appreciation, clear and honest communication, and strong ethics. Every human being longs to feel respected.

The importance of respect is given much lip service in the workplace, but actually changing the level of respect in an organization requires both individual and organizational introspection. To begin with, explore how you feel about the issue of respect. What behaviors and attitudes make you feel respected? What tells you someone doesn't respect you?

How do you demonstrate respect in the workplace? Do you interrupt people, or do you listen intently to them and make every effort to understand what they are trying to communicate? Do you think interruption can be perceived as disrespectful? Do you pay attention when people speak to you, or do you do things that can be construed as disrespectful, such as glancing at your watch, tapping your foot, or organizing your desktop? While you may not intend disrespect, your actions could be perceived that way.

Sometimes customers become angry or resentful because they sense disrespect in your tone of voice, body language, or manners. Practice behaviors your customers are likely to perceive as respectful. It's a two-way street. When we give respect, we'll get it.

Many misunderstandings occur because people aren't in the habit of really listening. Dr. Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says that in this culture, we listen to reply rather than to understand. His advice: "Seek first to understand."²

What would happen if we put aside our personal interests and agendas long enough to listen to each other, with the goal of truly understanding each other? Perhaps we'd have better marriages, better relationships with our children, better business dealings — and certainly fewer misunderstandings.

A marriage counselor once told me that when one truly understands another's position, one can argue convincingly for it even if still opposed to it. Think about that a moment. This means that even though I hold a view that's the opposite of my partner's and argue in favor of my view, I can, with effort, understand his view so well (including his motivations, intentions, and assumptions) that I could defend it to someone else. A powerful life lesson there!

Better listening skills develop out of the intention and commitment to become a better listener. It's hard work, but well worth the effort.

Listening is the master communication skill. If you master the art of listening, you're well on your way to overall communications effectiveness.

² Covey, Stephen B. *Principle-Centered Leadership*. 1990, N.Y., Simon & Schuster.

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SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

The ability to focus on one thing at a time is a gift. Today's culture can seem like one huge "sensory overload"; we're drawn to so many sights, sounds, and sensations, we're often unable to pay full attention to any one thing.

I remember when the old time-management gurus really got to me. They taught me to watch TV while exercising, read trade journals and newsletters while in line at the supermarket, sort mail while attending an employees' meeting, polish my nails or eat lunch while on the phone. Enough, already!

Since that era, I've come to understand that doing several things at once dilutes the integrity of each activity. Tuning into one task at a time can increase our effectiveness and the quality of the outcome. (Neuroscientists agree!)

So, when you're dealing with a customer, focus on that customer. When interacting with a coworker, focus on that person. Discipline your mind to keep it from wandering while someone is talking to you.

Isn't good listening an essential customer-handling skill? Yes it is, and one that's impossible without focus. Practice focus.

"That's a very interesting tie you're wearing? Is it (handmade, from another country, a Christmas gift)?"

"What exciting vacations you take! What motivates you to climb mountains?"

A curious nature is a wonderful thing, and it's valuable in business in a variety of ways. For one thing, you learn a lot of interesting stuff, and, for another, you have a better chance of knowing what's important to your customers — what they value, what makes them buy, even what makes them feel good.

I once had a customer in Chicago who had lived in New York for many years. Curious about her life in the Big Apple, I asked her about the things she loved and missed about New York. One thing on her list was a particular brand of potato chips not then available in the Midwest. So, every once in awhile, I'd find a big box, fill it with bags of her favorite chips, and mail it to her. "Squeals of joy" doesn't begin to describe the cries of excitement and thanks that pulsed through the phone line after she received the first box.

This customer remembered me for a long time and was still buying from my company at the time I left. Curiosity pays off — guaranteed!

While being appropriately curious with customers (in other words, don't pry), you can also share information of a parallel nature. "I know what you mean — there's nothing like a bagel from my old hometown of Great Neck!"

Swapping these not-too-personal tidbits is another way of building rapport. In doing this, you're using what's known as a "matching" technique. It's actually a sophisticated communication skill, but something that often comes naturally to us. If you think about it, every time we meet someone new, we look for things to match. Listen to cocktail-party chatter, and you'll hear and see lots of matching and mirroring behaviors. A typical conversation might sound something like this:

"So, how do you know Gary (the host)?"

"I work with him at Acme Soap. How about you?"

"Oh, we play tennis together. Do you play?"

"No, I never did get the hang of it."

"How about golf?"

"Nope. I'm into running, though."

"You run? Me, too! Run any races lately?"

"Actually,..."

At this point, the two people are unconsciously beginning to mirror each other's body movements and facial expressions. Relationship is an interesting dance, isn't it?

Relationships are like dancing. Next time you're in a restaurant, observe the nearby diners. Imagine you can turn down the volume and just watch their movements. Can you tell which couples are in love, or have a good rapport, with each other? Can you tell which couples are fighting? Sure you can. People with good rapport naturally mirror and match each other's movements. Without the words, their communication looks like a dance.

In fact, rapport itself is often defined as a relationship marked by harmony, accord, or affinity. Good rapport indicates agreement and alignment. When people in relationships slip out of rapport, it's most likely because they have begun to emphasize their differences rather than what they hold in common, or their similarities. When they again focus on what they share — for instance, common goals — they will fall back into the rhythm of the relationship dance.

Do you know everything you want to know about relationships? Probably not. Since you're in the "relationship business" (as is everyone who serves customers), make it your goal to understand more about relationships. Good books on making them work abound. Start your own study program, and watch your relationships dance.

Get excited — about your job, about what you service, about what you sell. Get enthusiastic and energetic, and let your feelings show! It's really simple to do.

There's a kid in all of us who can find wonder and excitement in almost anything — if we “grown-ups” allow it. Try thinking about what would make the kid in you happy; your answer might even make the kid in your customers happy.

If you were 7 years old, what would be exciting about your job? (Remember, 7-year-olds are really curious.) What would be the most fun part of your workday (besides lunch)? Solving problems? Designing things? Fiddling with the computer? Meeting new and different people?

Find something to get excited about in your job, even if it's your attempt to make the job better (continuous improvement). If you were writing your job description or an ad for your job, what would you say to make someone want it? Do *you* want it?

Get psyched and stay psyched by looking at your work from different perspectives. Remember, if the grass always looks greener on the other side, try looking at your job from that side!

Along with the “quality movement” came the concept of continuous improvement (the Japanese call it *Kaizen*), which means just what it says: never be satisfied with the way things are. Continually challenge the status quo, asking, “How can we make things better?”

The best way to start is to adopt the improvement mentality yourself. Ask yourself:

- “How can I get better at...?”
- “How can I become a better customer-service provider?”

Better yet, ask:

- “How can I show my customers I really care?”
- “How can I become a better employee?”
- “How can I become a better boss?”
- “How can I deliver our product faster, cheaper, better?”

Organizations improve because people do, and people improve naturally, as part of the evolutionary process. Why not make a conscious decision to be actively involved in your personal growth and your company’s evolution?

Describe yourself in ways that expand, rather than limit, your reality. Say, “I’m becoming more and more organized every day” rather than, “I’m unorganized.” If you define yourself as unorganized, guess how you’ll behave? Since we all create self-fulfilling prophecies, why not create ones that keep you growing, stretching, and improving? Your potential for improvement is unlimited.

What do you hear when someone says, “I love you, but...?” How do you feel when someone tells you, “You did a good job, but...?” Or, “That’s a good idea, but...?”

I call these statements “yabuts,” short for “Yeah, but...” What you are really saying is “Yes, but not really.”

But — B-U-T. As far as I’m concerned, it stands for Behold the Underlying Truth. “I love you, but (behold the underlying truth) not enough to...”

When the human mind hears “but,” it disregards whatever came before it and hears only what follows — only the “wrong” feedback. Practice substituting the word “and” for “but,” or breaking your thought into two sentences.

- “You gave an excellent presentation, *and* I would have loved to see some kind of map or graph with it.”
- “This report needs a few corrections. I’m so pleased you had it ready on time.”
- “I love you, *and* I’m concerned about your safety, so please be home before midnight.”
- “That’s a good idea, *and* I’ll bet as you continue to think about it, you’ll build on it, and it will become feasible after a while.”

Be thoughtful. Watch your “buts”!

Who wants to do business with a grump? Customer surveys routinely show that people want to do business with someone who has an upbeat, “can-do,” positive attitude. Not the bland and standard, “Have a nice day,” but a hale and hearty, “It’s a *great* day, isn’t it?”

Our attitude tells the world what’s going on inside us. If we always look for good, we always find good. If we look for the negative, there’s plenty of that around, too. We get what we focus on; it’s our choice whether to focus on the positive or the negative in our lives.

Here’s the rub: psychologists estimate that 78 percent of what we see and hear is negative, so maintaining a positive attitude in a negative world takes work. Your attitude — the way you look at the world around you — is created by your perception of situations. When you are stuck in traffic, you can interpret it as a terrible circumstance and get angry, or you can view it as an opportunity to spend a few moments in reflection. Once again, perception is reality.

Nobody but you controls your attitude. There’s an abundance of good books on developing and maintaining a positive attitude. Find the one that appeals to you and read it, then make a sincere commitment to improve your attitude a little each day. It won’t take long before you’ve crossed over to the sunny side of the street.

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USE ALL YOU'VE GOT

Every one of us has special talents — abilities or skills unique to us — yet many of us play them down instead of celebrating them. (This fact may have something to do with parents who warned, “Nobody likes a bragger.”) Although it’s true that boasting can turn people into bores, realizing your strengths and capitalizing on them makes good sense.

If you have a killer smile, use it. Make appropriate use of the power of eye contact if your eyes are expressive. If you have a pleasant speaking voice, volunteer to record your company’s phone messages, or teach coworkers to sing. If you’re the friendly, outgoing type, make memorable contact by warmly shaking a client’s hand.

Use as many senses as you can to communicate with your customers. Nothing is more convincing than someone whose body language, vocal tone, and words match. Congruity communicates that “all systems are go” and that you’re sincere. Your smile, posture, attitude, tone of voice — use all of them to express yourself. Be passionate about what you sell, those you serve, and what you do. Passionate people are irresistible (OK, we annoy a *few* people) because they stir something in others.

I love seeing people take pride in their work. It shows in their faces, their tone of voice — even in their posture. Pride shows in everything you and your company do, from the way you answer the phone to the way you present your final invoice. Are you proud of everything about your product or service? If not, why not?

The flip side of pride is shame. Who'd want to do business with a company that seems ashamed of itself? Not I — although a lot of businesses should be ashamed of the way they treat their customers. Are you proud of some aspects of your organization but ashamed of others? Which ones do you control or influence, and what are you doing to create pride in them?

My late friend Cary Zucker was president of Neutron Industries and the author of a wonderful book of quotations called *PRIDE*.³ The five letters that form this acronym stand for *purpose, recognition, imagination, dignity* and *excellence*. Pride is the single most important word in his highly successful company. Following his lead and setting those five standards for service will help any company feel proud of itself.

Aspire to excellence, and take pride in a job well done. We all want to be associated with winners, and winners are proud of doing a good job.

³Zucker, Cary. *PRIDE*. 1993, Lombard, Ill., Celex Group Inc./Celebrating Excellence.

CARY ZUCKER

**Opportunities are
never lost.
They are simply found
by someone else.**

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BE AN OPPORTUNITY SEEKER

Opportunities to shine present themselves every day. We may not recognize them as such since they sometimes masquerade as problems or crises. The Chinese character for crisis combines the glyphs “danger” and “opportunity,” because every crisis has the potential for both. If you focus on danger, you’ll look for evidence of it. If you focus on opportunity, guess what you’ll see?

I used to post this slogan on my office door: “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” People soon understood that if they came into my office saying, “I have a problem...,” I’d respond, “Read the sign on my door, please.” It wasn’t long before they came in, bursting with pride, saying, “I have a solution!”

Look for opportunities to add value, and you’ll notice them everywhere: chances to be a hero, a friend, a partner, or a solution provider. Opportunities to gain insight or create something new abound. Let me share an example.

One stormy afternoon, I stopped at my local copy shop to pick up an order. As I tried to rainproof the stack for the walk to my car, an employee noticed my struggle and offered a suggestion. She took my order to the shrink-wrap machine, usually reserved for large orders, and worked its packaging magic on it. Her solution took just a minute and produced a very happy — and doubly loyal — customer.

Seek opportunities to increase a sale. I hear, “While I have you on the line, would you like to hear about our specials?” more and more these days. I say, “Sure, if it won’t take too long.” And, more and more, I find myself appreciating the value of the specials and buying them, then tucking them away for future gifts.

What opportunities can you think of that would benefit your customers and your company?

A spirit of helpfulness and generosity abounds in companies that truly focus on the customer. With the credo, “We’re all here to help the customer” behind them, employees feel good about helping each other. Instead of competing, departments cooperate to serve the customer better.

These companies understand that if frontline people are to serve customers well, someone must serve them. Many have broken down the traditional cross-departmental barriers in recognition of their internal suppliers’ and customers’ needs. Individuals in these settings tend to contribute to others’ successes as well as their own and find joy in celebrating them. Here, an accomplishment for an individual is an accomplishment for the team.

In companies where departmental and functional barriers still exist, people tend to be fearful and stingy with help, even with information. (Because information is perceived as power in today’s world, withholding it becomes another source of power.) It always saddens me to see companies operating this way. They have failed to realize that a generosity of spirit speaks loudly and clearly to customers.

During my recent encounter with an air-freight company, a sales rep told me there was “no way” he’d call the collection department on my behalf, claiming they’d “yell at me and probably hang up.” Since my problem was the result of the company’s billing error, I felt entitled to better treatment. Still, in a disrespectful, unaccommodating way, I was told to handle it myself. Needless to say, I handled myself right out of their client base and told plenty of people about my experience.

The surest way to get what you want is to see that others get what they want. By supporting others’ needs and dreams, you ultimately provide support for your own. Over time, we build “emotional bank accounts” with people; when we in turn need their help, we’re able to draw from those accounts.

How you can help your internal and external customers get what they want?

If you really want to improve your level of service, visualize being stapled to an order that will go through all stages of your company's process. Few people, if any, see the customer's order from all of these perspectives — during the ordering and paperwork phases, from first contact through collections.

The order could come in through customer service or order entry, progress from dispatch and/or production through the warehouse, proceed to fulfillment, shipping, billing, and so on. If the order is handled by multiple departments, you can be sure the opportunity for screwups occurs most often at the handoff from department to department.

To improve service, find a way to manage across departments. Learn to look at your work differently, zeroing in on processes rather than tasks. When we think only in terms of tasks, managers and workers in different departments may find themselves at cross purposes. When that happens, the company runs the risk of letting customers fall through the cracks.

Structure management teams so they cross departmental boundaries, the same way orders do. Make managers responsible for the smooth running of the whole process. This gets people involved and working together interdependently.

I'll bet your customers will notice the effects of this interactive teamwork in no time flat — and appreciate them!

Having trouble solving a problem? Get up. Move around. Walk a few strides in one direction, then back. Shrug your shoulders. Shake out your hands. Inhale deeply, then exhale. Rotate your hips. Extend your neck. Balance on one foot for 60 seconds. Now, sit down and tackle the problem again. Chances are, you'll have a fresh perspective.

These activities are what I call “state changers.” Changing your physical state often changes your mental and emotional states as well, bringing in new information.

Like most adults these days, I wear many hats. In the course of a typical day, I function as a writer, a coach, a salesperson, a parent, and a performer. Sometimes it's difficult to slip gracefully from one role into another, and when that's the case, I take conscious steps to change my state.

If you're thinking, “Boy, this state changing seems like a lot of work,” follow that thought with, “Yes, so it seems. It takes discipline and thoughtfulness to learn the tricks of the trade, and it's worth it!” Then put on those jogging shoes, run up a few flights of stairs, rest a minute, and start back down.

If you decide to work on becoming more productive, supportive, intelligent, or self-reliant than you've been, the rewards — not the least of which is your increased worth in the marketplace — will be many. Enhance your capabilities as a “business athlete” by using your physical capabilities to support and energize your intellectual ones.

There is no magic formula for motivating yourself or others. Motivation requires thought, observation, curiosity, continuous learning, perseverance, hard work, and, above all, flexibility and a sense of humor.

Some of us have been lucky to work for a good motivator: someone caring, concerned, and gentle, yet relentless in his or her pursuit of excellence — *our* excellence. Others of us have had to create motivation for ourselves, cultivating our curiosity and the wonder that keeps us going, pushing, trying, and stretching. It's a little harder this way, but, for many, much more rewarding.

Once you learn the art of self-motivation, you become very mobile. Your success no longer depends on the external motivation of a good manager. Instead, it hinges on your inner coach — the little (or big) voice that says, "Keep going. It's all right. Relax. You can do it."

Motivated people determine their own life's purpose as well as the purpose of their work. They attach their work to a higher ideal even if their company hasn't provided one. Growing out of this sense of purpose is the ability to set and achieve goals. Motivated individuals monitor their successes and reward themselves for jobs well done.

You've probably noticed, too, that motivated people tend to have a lot of energy. Many know just where that energy comes from (often, a low-fat diet and regular exercise) and how to keep it coming.

Another habit common to motivated people is the use of visualization and self-talk skills. We see, in our mind's eye, what we want to have happen, and we give ourselves positive messages about achieving that vision. The motivated take risks. They study the situation, then convince themselves they can handle the consequences.

Motivated people know their stuff. They're both knowledgeable and persistent. And they really seem to enjoy life!

Many of the negative phrases we use, either as a matter of course or out of laziness, leave less than a positive impression in the customer's mind. "No" is the biggest offender. The statement "No, we can't deliver your order on Tuesday" sets up a negative association in the mind of the customer. Rephrasing that statement by eliminating the negative — "What we *can* do is deliver on Thursday, at your convenience — sounds a lot better. You're still saying "no," but without using the word. Does such a simple change make a difference? You bet it does!

Similarly, find other ways to say such negatively charged words as, "don't," "won't," and "can't." A stationery store adjacent to an ice-cream parlor in Portland, Maine, hangs a sign on its door that requests, "Please enjoy your ice cream before you enjoy our store." This sure beats the usual, unwelcoming "No food allowed" signage.

Think about how you can reframe your "no's."

Read more about the "Problem with No Problem" here:

www.returnonhappiness.com/the-problem-with-no-problem

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CHANGE YOUR THINKING

Famous motivator Zig Ziglar calls negative thinking patterns “stinkin’ thinkin’.” Such patterns can be even more damaging than negative language patterns because we act on our thoughts. If you say to a customer, “Have a nice day,” but mean, “Boy, are you a pain in the neck,” the customer will sense your lack of sincerity.

Through our thoughts, we create our experiences. The positive-thinking professional makes decisions for the good of the customer and the company. When employees believe, “We’re all part of this company, so we’re all responsible for what happens here,” a different effect is created than when they’re conditioned to think, “I’m not picking up his phone. If he’s not around, it’s his problem.”

Likewise, thinking, “If we treat each other with professional respect, it will reflect on our relationships with our customers,” works to serve the good of the customer. On the other hand, the response, “I can’t help it if those bozos in shipping didn’t get the package out the door in time,” does a disservice both to employees, who may have been doing their best, and customers, who want you to be thinking positively — and about them!

Begin to listen carefully to your own thought patterns, and banish all traces of “stinkin’ thinkin’.”

"MMeeting and exceeding customer expectations" has been the watchword of the '90s. In the coming decade, we'll be hearing more about anticipating customer needs — looking into the future and envisioning what customers have not yet envisioned.

I remember the days when only the highest-tech homes had VCRs or computers. If you asked nonowners whether they might want them in the future, many, if not most, said "no." The point is, sometimes customers can't visualize their future needs or wants. Try to engage them in conversation on this topic. Find out what's important to them. What are their goals? What are their dreams? Try to envision the needs your customers are likely to discover in the months and years to come.

If all we ever did was fulfill current needs, the market would never grow. Join those who are sharpening their ability to see beyond the obvious into the future. Carefully study demographic trends and read futurist authors. Brainstorm possibilities with colleagues and customers alike. Have fun with it. You're shaping the future!

Do you ever get off the phone with a tough customer, a difficult supplier, or an edgy salesperson in the field and feel a high degree of frustration? Don't go it alone! First, jot down the issues involved and the challenges they pose, then find a group to brainstorm with you. Brainstorming is a tool that involves generating a large pool of potential solutions to a single problem.

Quantity, not quality, is the key in brainstorming. So is a nonjudgmental environment. One rule for brainstorming is complete freedom in suggesting ideas — no censoring allowed. Once a good number of ideas has been put forward, sift through all of them for the best ones.

One of the most popular brainstorming techniques is called “topsy-turvy thinking.” I call it “looking at the upside-down side.” Get a group together and ask, “How can we treat our customers really badly?” or “What’s an example of the worst service we could provide?” After the laughing stops, reverse the suggestions offered to obtain some of the best “can-do’s” you’ve ever seen.

Today’s customers are looking for creative solutions. A group of customer-service people that has the freedom — even encouragement — to generate off-the-wall ideas is more likely to come up with a creative solution than one person alone at a desk “thinking.” Flex your creative muscle. (Recommended reading: *A Whack on the Side of the Head* by Roger Van Oech.)

Know why a football team calls a timeout? To break its flow, to break the other team's flow, to rethink a play, to strategize, to reenergize. There are a lot of reasons teams call a time-out. What are yours?

Customer interaction can be challenging. Sometimes we need to get away (physically and/or emotionally) to achieve a fresh perspective, to calm down, to be less defensive, or to reevaluate.

The first step in taking a breather is just that: take a deep breath. Oxygen clears the head and relaxes the body. Most of us take more than 25,000 breaths a day. How many of yours are purposeful? Learning to use your breath to relax, focus, calm down, energize, or clear out is a skill you'll share with winning athletes, public speakers, martial artists, and successful people in all walks of life.

Even if you can't leave your desk, you can sneak a time-out simply by taking a deep, deliberate breath and imagining your stress being squeezed out as you exhale.

Be a customer — go shopping! Take a notebook or tape recorder with you to capture the highlights (and low points) of your experience. Or, decide to order something and call a store for its current catalog. How long will it take to receive the catalog? How courteous was the operator who took your call? How knowledgeable was she or he? Did you like the way you were treated? Why or why not?

Evaluate every aspect of your experience as a customer. Record notes of what you learn and take them back to your office.

Can you anonymously shop your competitors? If so, do so. Can you shop your own company? Call in from the road and see how it feels. A company that once hired me to do some training knew its staff needed better customer-service skills when the senior vice president called in from the road one day and no one knew who he was. He was treated very poorly — as were, no doubt, the customers who called the company that day.

Seek enlightenment during your field trip. Keep notes on who's doing what and how successfully they're doing it.

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START YOUR OWN CIA FILE

One of the reasons your long-term employees are so valuable is that they know so much about your company and your customers. They've been working with them for years, have heard many questions over and over, and can quickly and easily answer those questions and provide solutions. This know-how is lodged in the minds of employees; if they leave, this customer intelligence (and sometimes the customer) goes with them.

Leaner companies are often lean on intelligence. Today's leaner companies are losing real intelligence at a time when customers want more of it — more knowledgeable contacts who have the power to solve their problems on the spot. How can you go about providing this?

Begin by starting a Customer Intelligence Action (CIA) file in your computer. This file will contain a dynamic list of your company's FAQs — Frequently Asked Questions. List them, and their answers, by category in a "FAQs file" that all employees have access to and are required to read.

Update this file regularly with suggestions from customer facing people so that even when the main customer contact is unavailable, the person filling in will have a good chance of helping the customer. In addition, customer comments and suggestions can be kept in this file, allowing reps the opportunity to offer "real-life" information about the use of a product or service.

Submit the updated CIA file to the marketing department on a regular basis, so they can update the "Frequently asked questions about our products (or services)" in the company's introductory packet, website or other communications literature. Also submit the file to those who write the technical manuals and "how-to-use" literature, since many questions arise from unclear instructions.

One software company I use has a recording of its customers' most frequently asked questions and responses to them as a selection on its voice-mail system. I often access this choice while waiting for help, and several times, my question has

been answered, eliminating my need to speak to a representative. This saved me time and money, which I really appreciated. This company's upgraded program and manual explain how to access specific functions better than the former versions did — further proof that the company is listening and responding to what its customers are saying.

Customer care is everyone's business. Ensure customer information is accessible to all staff members who need it.

Once upon a time, providing customer satisfaction was the only requirement for maintaining customer loyalty. Well, forget that.

Satisfaction isn't enough today, and definitely won't be tomorrow. In fact, at any given time, 25 to 33 percent of your satisfied customers are likely to leave you. A competitor who provides added value, a customer's friend or relative who's in the same business as you, a change of heart due to a negative experience with your company — any of these can shift the allegiance of a "satisfied" customer.

Starting now, propel your thinking beyond satisfaction to loyalty. Strive to understand what creates value for your customers. What's unique about your relationship with them? What keeps them buying from you? What could drive them away?

Customers evaluate their relationship with you based on a variety of criteria, all tied to their current needs. Find out what those needs and expectations are.

Nurturing and enhancing customer relationships lead to increased customer recommendations and other behaviors that indicate loyalty. When the customer becomes an advocate of your company, practically selling your products or services via recommendations, then loyalty is a good bet.

But even if we go beyond satisfaction, is customer loyalty ever a sure thing? Never! We must constantly evaluate how the customer is evaluating us. It's one of those never-ending stories...

I frequently shop at the local health-food store and spend between \$55 and \$60, sometimes more, every two weeks or so. My annual expenditure there has ranged from \$1,500 to \$1,800. If I stay in my current location as long as I stayed in the last one, I'm likely to be a customer of this store for at least 10 years. I figure that over that period, I'm likely to spend between \$20,000 and \$25,000 at this store. (Plus, I've already recommended the store to two friends and may recommend it to a few more.)

The \$25,000 I'm likely to spend there represents a simple calculation of my "lifetime value" (LTV) to the store. But I'll bet not one person in the store knows that. (Every staff person at my former health-food store knew its average customer's LTV.) And how do I know they don't know? Well, after one year of patronage, no one there has ever called me by name — in spite of the fact that I've placed several special orders and pay by check or credit card. I've yet to be greeted with, "How are you today, JoAnna?"

You can probably guess how this treatment affects me as a steady customer of the store. Let's just say that if a competitor with the same selection of fresh produce opened up in the area, I'd defect in a heartbeat.

Pay attention to your customers' LTV — their long-term worth to your business in plain dollars. Find ways of showing them how much they mean to you!

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ADD UP THE COSTS OF LOSING

Now that we have an idea of what lifetime value (LTV) is, let's see if we can figure out the cost of *losing* a customer. Lifetime value is only the cost we can see; what are the invisible costs of ignoring our customers' worth?

Not figured into the LTV is the loss of the growth potential of a customer's buying or the number of referrals he or she would make if truly satisfied (or perhaps delighted). In calculating the cost of loss, don't forget to include the potential loss of the LTVs of those with whom the customer shared negative perceptions about your organization and possibly better consumer options.

And while you're counting, what about the advertising and promotional costs of getting a new customer in the door to replace every one you lose? Have you even recovered your initial investment in the lost customer? Very often, it takes a company between one and three years to make a profit on a new customer, after recovering advertising and sales costs. Do you know when your customers become profitable? It would be wise to figure that out.

On average, it costs a company six to 10 times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep an existing one happy. What does it cost you to attract a customer? What does it cost you to lose one?

Doesn't it make sense to figure out what your customers are worth and the cost of not keeping them

Some companies never know they've lost a customer because they don't keep track of who their customers are or what they've bought. More and more, companies are developing databases to keep track of customers — when they buy and when they stop buying. The more you know about your customers' buying habits, the better equipped you'll be to know when they stop buying. That discovery is an opportune time to ask why.

Customers stop buying from companies for a variety of reasons, but studies continually show the foremost reason is that they perceive the company doesn't care about them or their needs. They leave because they perceive the company as indifferent to their patronage.

Your mission, then, is to seek out customers when they leave, or right after they leave, and ask, "Why are we losing you? Is there something we could've done (or could do) differently to keep you a loyal customer?"

Do the same with outgoing employees, and always remember to ask, "Do you think we do the best job possible of taking care of our customers?" Be open to learning something here. An employee on the way out is liable to be very honest with you on this subject.

YOGI BERRA

**If you don't know
where you're going,
you'll probably end up
somewhere else.**

Does your company have a vision? Does your department have a vision? Do *you* have a vision?

A vision is a picture of where you want to be. It's a picture of a desirable state in the future, something to which you aspire. There's an old story about three bricklayers that relates to the concept of vision. A man walks over to the first bricklayer and asks, "What are you doing?" The bricklayer replies, "I'm putting one brick on top of another." When the second bricklayer is asked, his response is, "I'm building a wall." The third bricklayer has a different take on his mission: "I'm building a cathedral that will stand in this beautiful place for all to see, to the glory of God!" Which of the bricklayers do you suppose went to work each day energized and excited?

A strong vision — one vividly imagined with all your senses (you can see, hear, feel, smell, even taste it) — pulls you along your path with purpose and enthusiasm.

What is it you're working toward? Education for your children? A beach house? A hunting lodge? A vacation getaway? A desire to make the world a better place to live? Whatever it is, create the vision and focus on it. Focus on what you want, not what you don't want. We realize the vision we focus on.

What is your company working toward? One hundred-percent customer satisfaction, 100-percent customer loyalty? Awesome, incredible, outrageous, unparalleled, knock-them-out-of-their--seats service? We all work better when we know what we're working together to create.

If I wandered into your office and casually asked staff members about your company's philosophy of customer care, would I receive consistent answers? I would if your company has a customer credo or service strategy. A compelling strategy that is written, embodied, reinforced, and rewarded directs the energy of all team members to deliver a specific brand of service.

According to Dr. Len Berry of Texas A&M University, the service strategy "captures what gives the service value to customers. Its value is in guiding and energizing; thus, the words serve their purpose only if they embrace a company's core beliefs, touch the human spirit of achievement, and are internalized."⁴ So, if you have to look it up, you don't have it yet!

I'd guess that fewer than 15 percent of the companies currently operating in the U.S. actually have a living, breathing credo or service strategy (while probably 60 percent have one hanging on their wall). That's a pity, for without a strategy that clearly defines what the value of service should be, people dealing with customers are on their own. Even though their intention may be to provide good or great service, without a precise definition of what that is, they can't be expected to provide it over and over again.

After considering customer feedback on what great service is, develop your strategy. Dr. Berry suggests answering these questions: Which attributes of service are, and will continue to be, most important to your target markets? Which attributes is your competition weakest at providing? What are the existing and potential service capabilities of your company?

Even if your company currently has a service credo or strategy, evaluate it periodically using this series of questions.

⁴Berry, Leonard L. *Great Service: A Framework for Action*. 1995, N.Y., The Free Press.

Public-speaking coaches advise: “Tell ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em, then tell ‘em, then tell ‘em what you told ‘em.” The same general advice holds true with customers. First, let them know what they can expect from you; then, deliver as promised (with value added whenever possible); finally, remind them of the service promised and provided — and any extras — so they view you as dependable and necessary to their mission.

Without being pushy or obvious, you can communicate your value to customers in a variety of ways, including those that follow.

- Print your mission or service credo (if you intend to live up to it) on the back of company forms.
- A stamp on the outside of a package that says, ‘This order was handpicked and personally supervised by Mary O’Grady. We hope it meets your every expectation. If there is a problem, you can reach Mary at 1-800-COMPANY,” can really stand out.
- Enclose a card with the customer’s order that carries the message: “It’s our goal to keep 100 percent of our customers satisfied. If for any reason you are not satisfied with our product, you can return it for a full refund.”
- Your invoice might state: “Customer satisfaction and loyalty are our goals. We’ll do everything we can to make it easy and pleasant for you to do business with us. We welcome your suggestions.”

Get the idea? How many ways can you tell your customers that you’re doing a better job of serving them than the competition would? If you deliver what you promise and diligently follow through on customer suggestions for improving your business, you’ll likely be way ahead of the competition.

Remember, the main objective isn’t to get customers — it’s to keep them. The more customers you keep, the more money you keep. That’s the bottom line.

A few years ago, I was placing an ad in a trade journal for a client, and one publication made numerous mistakes in our ad placement. When I called to complain and request a replacement ad, the sales rep blamed everyone on staff but herself: “the jerks in production screwed up again”; “those idiots in the art department must have loused up the color.” By the time she finished her blamefest, all my respect for her and the magazine she worked for was gone.

Blaming others for mistakes that happen is useless and gutless. Mistakes and mishaps will occur; take responsibility for them. Customers won't feel better if you blame someone in production, or art, or accounting.

Similarly, don't make excuses. Say directly and honestly, “There's no excuse for that, ma'am. I apologize, and I'll correct the problem immediately.”

Take ownership, take charge. Empowerment is about our willingness to take responsibility. Become a “no excuses” person and live a “no excuses” life.

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FIND POINTS OF ENCOUNTER

Identify all of your organization's point-of-encounter people — those who have direct contact with customers. Many of them aren't in the customer-service department. A security guard, a driver, an accounting clerk, or a service technician may be a point-of-encounter person just as a sales or customer-service rep is. Open the lines of communication between management and these all-important employees. Make sure point-of-encounter people are on the ball at all times.

Most of us have encountered situations where a company advertises a special offer, but when you call about it, the person you talk to is clueless. It's as if the marketing department simply forgot to inform the switchboard operators and other customer-contact folks about it! Whatever the reason, such an oversight makes the whole company appear customer-unfocused and downright stupid.

By the way, once you've identified a point-of-encounter position, add that designation to the position's job description. That way, appropriate interpersonal skills will be considered part of that job's qualifications in the future.

Seek out and destroy any practices that make you appear less than hospitable to your customers. The following scenario contains several such practices.

Between appointments one day, I dashed into a well-known department store to pick up a blouse because I'd stained the one I had on at lunch. No big deal, right? Hardly. After tracking down the blouse department, the appropriate rack, and a style and fabric I liked, I tried to remove a blouse from the rack to hold it up for size but couldn't — the \$35 blouse was chained to the rack!

The search began for a clerk with a master key, but no one was nearby to help me free such a moderately priced item from the rack. I finally encountered a clerk two departments away who was serving (and I use the word loosely) a customer at a cash register. "Excuse me," I said, "I'm in a hurry. There's no one in women's blouses, could you help me?" She lazily nodded toward her customer and said she was busy. I asked if she could call another clerk to help me. Not surprisingly, she said there wasn't another clerk around (which is obviously why such stores have to chain up their merchandise).

When my turn to be served by the clerk finally came, I put this question to her: "Why is buying a blouse so hard here? Do you assume we're all criminals?" She looked at me as if I came from Mars and sputtered, "Lady, this is New York. Do you have any idea how much stuff gets stolen here?"

What will it take before storekeepers figure out they need to put people — not chains — on the floor? I don't think I've been back to that store since then. I choose to be treated as a potential buyer, not a potential thief.

One company I call on has all of its "reserved for management" parking spots near the front door, but no easy-access spots marked for visitors or customers. A local department store allows its employees to take the choice parking spots, so no

matter how early you arrive for their one-day sale, you spend valuable shopping time walking in from the back 40.

How hospitable are you to customers? Is the first thing I hear when I call your company, “XYZ Company — please hold”? When I visit your facility, is there space set aside for my car, my hat, my coat? Is there a waiting area? Is there a friendly and informative message on your voice mail — or does the caller hear something like, “This is Bob. I may or may not be at my desk or in the office, but I’ll call in for messages later and will try to get back to you today or tomorrow, so leave your name and number”?

Be relentless. Look at every point of contact and ask yourself what type of treatment the customer has received. When you get down to basics, there are only three types of service — hospitable, indifferent, and rude. As a customer, which do you prefer? And as a businessperson, which do you offer?

There are, without a doubt, dishonest people in this world. And while a few customers may try to take advantage of you, by and large their number is minute compared to those who just want their fair share.

My brother recently returned a package of screws to Home Depot. He explained to the clerk he wanted to return them because “they weren’t right” and that he’d thrown the receipt away before finding that out. The clerk hesitated, then asked, “Without seeing your receipt, how do I know you didn’t buy these at another store?”

Angry and a little exasperated, my brother simply took the screws back from the clerk. He proceeded to fill his cart with the items he’d come to purchase, then approached the manager and described his encounter with the clerk. Armed with his basketful of imminent purchases, he got his credit.

The moral here is this: assume your customers’ intentions are pure. Assume a customer without a receipt did buy the returned item from you — and if you find out he didn’t, chalk it up to an innocent mistake. Assume the customer is not out to steal from you. The assignment of additional sales assistants to the floor will naturally reduce pilferage and provide better service, to boot.

Because many retail stores assume that a certain percentage of shoppers steal, they train their sales assistants to watch for shoplifters. These days, that seems to be a big part of what the on-floor personnel do. They’ve developed a keen eye for these thieves, making honest customers squirm under such scrutiny! When more employees are looking for shoplifters than for paying customers to assist, something’s wrong with the picture.

Train your personnel to service the heck out of customers, and the shoplifters will evaporate right out of the store.

Jan Carlzon, president of SAS Airlines, turned that once-failing organization around by teaching his 35,000 employees to recognize what he calls “moments of truth.” He describes such an instance as “anytime anyone has the opportunity to make a judgment about the quality of service you are delivering.”

Anytime — including:

- when your company’s phone is answered
- when a customer’s order is delivered
- when a catalog is requested
- when a visitor pulls into your parking lot
- when someone notices the cleanliness (or filth) of your delivery trucks, the disposition of your drivers, the driving habits of your drivers, or the attitude of the security guard at the gate
- when an invoice is received
- when a customer needs service, tries to use your product, or reads instructions enclosed with your product

See how many moments of truth you can come up with for your business. How well are they being managed? Make it a goal to identify them, track them, and turn them into *moments of magic*.

Every once in a while, a moment of truth turns into a moment of magic: a hotel employee gets you a cup of hot water for tea after the restaurant is closed; a compassionate flight attendant soothes a crying child; an understanding coworker says, “I can tell you’re really swamped — let me take care of this paperwork for you.”

If, according to Disney, magic is all in the details, what details could you focus on to create magic? How about making eye contact with a customer who’s feeling overlooked? Or, providing extra packaging for a fragile product? Or, summoning more patience if a customer doesn’t get your explanation the first time around? (This is especially applicable for technical-support people.) Or, showing more empathy for that customer with a complaint?

Think of MAGIC as standing for Making A Great Impression on the Customer, or even Making A Good Investment in Caring.

What are some examples of the magic you create? Some ideas for creating new magic?

You’ll find lots of examples of creating magic in this tip—

www.returnonhappiness.com/create-more-magic

People feel important when we ask for their opinions. Ask your customers for their opinions in as many ways as you can, and often. The obvious way is the formal survey, which I think should be part of every company's marketing/retention plan.

Formal surveys can be designed for a number of uses; one type may be administered throughout the year to various segments of the customer base, another on an ongoing basis, another as an annual or a semiannual event. Customer-satisfaction surveys can be used as a benchmark for measuring and then improving service.

What about less formal ways of gathering information? You can ask the customer, at the end of an interaction, "How did we do?" Or, enclose a feedback card in every billing statement or attach one to every packing slip.

Remember, feedback comes in many flavors. There are compliments, complaints, and comments. Make sure you give the customer the opportunity to give you all three. Those who are uncomfortable with face-to-face complaints, afraid that a confrontation might develop, may prefer slipping quietly away to speaking their minds on an issue. This is really too bad for everyone, because they probably have something very valuable to share.

The point is, if you don't make it easy for customers to provide all kinds of feedback, off they may go to a competitor. And if the competitor happens to ask for feedback right off the bat ("Why did you decide to switch to our company, Mrs. Smith?"), you may lose not only the customer's business, but also vital feedback concerning that customer's defection. The customer's complaint that "the service technicians at the other company were rude and always tracked in dirt; I hear your people are friendly and never leave a mess" is feedback that can't help you — and could hurt you — in your competitor's hands. If it's true, and the customer offers that feedback to you, a valuable opportunity for improvement exists.

In the preceding scenario, what could have been done to ensure that your company, instead of the competitor, fielded the customer's complaint? A feedback card could have been left on site after the repair was done, and a follow-up call could have been made to check on the quality of service.

Feedback. You may not get it unless you ask for it.

Formal research is an excellent way to get feedback from customers. Whether done through the mail or over the phone, it gives you the opportunity to ask a wide variety of questions and offer anonymity to the respondents.

There is one problem: you have no control over who will respond to your survey.

A portion of your customer base will not reply — perhaps the segment you want to hear from most. So, compose a follow-up letter to this group of non-respondents. With a well-written plea, you might boost your overall response rate by 20 percent and obtain valuable information from those who neglected to respond the first time around.

It's expensive, but worthwhile, to take this extra step.

HARVEY MACKAY

**The sweetest sound in
the world is the sound of
your own name
on someone else's lips.**

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MAKE ‘EM FEEL IMPORTANT

Feeeling important is a basic human need. We all want to be recognized and acknowledged for our role in life. What can you do to make your customers feel important? Remembering someone’s name or, better yet, the sound of her voice on the phone is an excellent beginning. Remembering details from your last conversation (a database really helps with this) will surprise and please them. “How was your vacation, Mrs. Rogers?” or, “How is Bobby, Mr. Gomez? The last time we talked, he was home from school.” Personal recognition scores big when building relationships.

Customers feel important when you take their calls quickly and remember personal details and preferences (“You prefer green, don’t you?”). If you’re in the middle of something when a customer walks in, acknowledge his or her presence as soon as you can. Even if you can’t assist the customer immediately, extending a greeting makes him or her feel welcomed and noticed.

Customers feel important when you send them personal (or at least personalized) correspondence, accurate billing, and when you say “please” and “thank you” when appropriate. They also appreciate receiving a handwritten note from you. It doesn’t require great effort to make a customer — or, for that matter, a coworker — feel important, but the payback in loyalty and continued patronage can be considerable.

Greet a new customer as warmly as you would a new neighbor. You’ve already spent a fortune on advertising to interest her in buying something from you. How do you plan to make her feel at home in her new relationship with you and your company?

It could be time to revamp your customer-orientation kit. A welcome letter from a senior executive, showing appreciation for the new customer’s trust in the company, is a good place to start. The letter should be personal, warm, welcoming, and — this can make a difference — signed by hand.

A brief company history is also worth including. Sharing your vision, as well as your service strategy, helps you establish appropriate customer expectations. Give customers a quick overview of what it will be like doing business with you.

Assure customers that you’re there to listen to them, whether they’ve got good news or bad. If appropriate, let them know the appropriate channels for submitting feedback or receiving support

— for instance, a hot-line number to call for immediate assistance. At P & O Containers, North America, a red telephone sits on the president’s desk. In the company’s welcome brochure, the service provided by this phone is cleverly called “Hell to the Chief,” but the joke ends there. Customers are actually encouraged to call the president directly with any complaints.

Other ingredients to consider for your updated orientation kit include: a list of your products, a free trial offer, a gift certificate, coupons, a card listing the direct-dial phone numbers of contacts within the company, a feedback card on services already rendered, another such card for the future, your customer-survey questionnaire, and a “for our records” card containing space for month and day of birth. Include something they can return — reply card, short survey, or the like — to participate in a “new customer of the month” drawing. Describe the winner’s prize — perhaps a basket of fruit or a tin of cookies.

Affirm your customer's decision to work with you. If you can find an industry-specific article about successes with your type of product, include a copy. ("The ABC Company reduced injuries in the workplace by using this product. Here's how...").

Good ideas for welcoming new customers are everywhere. Solicit input from a variety of people in your company while designing your welcome kit. And keep it fresh and current by updating it annually.

Good relationships are built on respect, trust, and open communication. Sounds easy, but pulling it off definitely takes work.

Whether you're talking about relationships with customers, coworkers, suppliers, friends, or relatives, the fundamental relationship skills are the same. People want to be treated well. They want others to listen to them and do what they say they're going to do. Trust has its roots in credibility, reliability, predictability, a mutual sense of valuing the common good, and an environment of emotional safety — a place where people's feelings count.

The dual nature of trust refers to one's ability to trust others and one's trustworthiness. Both are essential in a trusting relationship.

When a customer gives us money, it is an act of trust. He or she trusts us to deliver what we promised, when we promised (or sooner), how we promised (or better). Trust is the cornerstone in all relationships. Without it, there's nothing to build on.

Trust is neither a given nor a constant in a relationship. We have to earn another person's trust with every encounter. What are you doing every day to build trust in your organization?

"I’m sorry — I missed the mail pickup today and the literature I promised you will be a day late."

"I’m sorry — I underestimated the time it would take me to complete this project. I won’t be able to start on yours until tomorrow."

"I’m sorry — we goofed and sent you the wrong order. What can we do to make it up to you?"

Being able to admit that you made a mistake or let someone down is an important part of relationship building. When you promise someone a completed project by Wednesday, then realize you can’t possibly meet that deadline, call and let them know as soon as you do. That way, they can adjust their expectations, make any necessary calls or arrangements, and possibly keep their disappointment to a minimum.

An honest “I’m sorry” or “I apologize” goes a long way — just don’t overuse it. If you’re chronically late with orders, projects, or other deadlines, “sorry” loses its impact. Similarly, be aware of the difference between the sincere, one-time, “I’m sorry” and the “I’m sorry” that tries to excuse negligence in planning or scheduling. The first will build your credibility; the latter will destroy it.

Awareness is key. “I’m sorry” works for the isolated incident. It doesn’t work if you’re still doing what you were sorry for the last time.

One of the great customer-service stories that keeps resurfacing in business circles goes like this: A man was riding on a train, ate in the dining car, and found a cockroach in his food. He was so unnerved by this experience that he carefully penned a letter to the president of the railroad. To his delight, he received what seemed at first glance to be an appropriate response and apology.

The man's delight changed to anger, however, when he discovered that whoever mailed the letter inadvertently included his letter in the envelope as well. Scrawled across it was the president's note to his assistant, "Send this idiot the cockroach letter." The moral being: avoid interacting with customers in ways that lack sincerity, genuineness, and the personal touch.

Not long ago, I had some problems during a stay at a resort that was new at serving the business and conference community. (Businesspeople staying at hotels during conferences have very different needs from those of vacationers traveling with children.) I was distressed enough by the situation to send a four-page letter to the hotel's management, explaining, for their enlightenment, the specific needs of a business patron. Shades of the "cockroach letter," the response I received, more than a month later, was clearly a form letter — saying the hotel was sorry my vacation hadn't turned out as planned!

Letter #2 went to the head of the company, who never responded at all. Although the experience destroyed my respect for this leader in the entertainment/service industry, it did provide lots of anecdotal material for my speeches.

Be aware that the average angry customer will tell eight to 10 people about a bad experience with your company. (I'm far from average — I tell hundreds, sometimes thousands!)

My friend Don Libey is one of my favorite customer gurus. He writes and speaks passionately all over the world on customer retention. One of his trademark sayings is, “Solve problems dramatically!”⁵

Don puts things succinctly. He claims it costs money to get new customers and to replace lost customers, so when there’s a problem, solve it fast and with flair. For example, send an apology from the company president by overnight carrier. Or, have the VP of customer service (or another executive) call the customer on the same day as a follow-up. How about a telegram? A bouquet of flowers? Don’s style is passionate and dramatic. What’s yours? What’s it worth to you to keep customers and keep them involved?

Statistics show that 95 percent of customers who have a problem with a company will continue to do business with the company if their problem is solved on the spot. Give frontliners the education, and the authority, not only to solve problems but to do so dramatically, at the appropriate time. When all employees of a company understand the lifetime value (LTV) of each customer, they’ll realize the cost of losing one and be able to make timely

decisions that say “Thanks for your patience and understanding” in a way that shows you’re really interested in keeping their business. An employee who acts quickly to salvage a customer’s business will be well remembered and, most likely, well rewarded.

By the way, studies also indicate that customers who’ve had a problem that the company solved quickly, completely, and to their satisfaction are generally more loyal than those who never had a problem with the company at all. So, teach those recovery skills — with a passion!

⁵Libey, Donald R. *Libey on Customers*. 1992, Washington, D.C., Regnery Gateway.

Ever hear of buyer's remorse? It's the feeling of regret that creeps into a customer's mind after the purchase. One way to counter it is to reinforce your customers' wise decision to trust you with their money. Basically, that's how I see business: when they buy from you, customers are trusting you with their money.

Customers trust that certain things will happen when they do business with you. They trust that the product/service they think they're buying is what they're actually getting, that you'll be there if something goes wrong, and that you'll respond quickly and reliably to their requests.

Whenever you think of a way to do so, gently reinforce your customers' decisions to shop with you. When you hear "Thanks for getting me my printing so quickly," try responding with, "We always do our best. I'm glad you're pleased." When a customer asks, "Can you have that to me by next week?" offer a reassuring, "Of course — just like we promised. We know you're working under a tight deadline, and we want to help."

A recent article from my credit-card company, titled "MBNA — Helping Protect Your Credit," tells the story of how an astute representative foiled a thief who was trying to get a duplicate credit card illegally. The article goes on to tell of the many ways MBNA protects its cardholders. This constant reinforcement and reassurance speaks directly to a customer's security needs. It makes this customer feel good about doing business with the company.

Values. Everyone has them, but few people take the time to articulate what they are.

The word *value* derives from the Latin *valor* which means strength. Values are sources of strength, because they give us the power to take action. Values are the emotional currency in today's business world.

The first step in considering values as they pertain to customers is to identify our personal values. Our personal values drive our attitudes and behaviors. If your personal values are at cross purposes with the values of a customer-focused company, you may find it difficult to hold a customer's focus. When company and personal values are aligned and focused on the importance of delivering value to the customer, constant customer care is produced.

For example, in a customer-focused company, flexibility and fluidity are cultivated in order to meet customers' ever-changing needs. But if one of your personal values relates to maintaining control or preserving the status quo, you could find yourself painfully at odds with a customer. ("I'm sorry, sir, that's our policy, and there's nothing I can do about it" doesn't get far with many customers these days.)

Customer-focused companies value qualities such as integrity, honesty, respectfulness, fairness, open communication, diversity, and creativity. Clear, well-defined company values provide people with a common sense of direction as well as guidelines for day-to-day behavior.

What values do you hold that support or resist becoming more customer-oriented?

Do you enjoy your job? Would you say it's fun?

I know a great group of folks at a safety and maintenance materials company called The New Pig Corporation, located in Altoona, Pennsylvania. (Being in the factory-maintenance business, the founders related to their customers as “Partners In Grime” — hence, the PIG moniker.) These people have a great time. And their customers don't have to be asked to join the fun.

The company's porcine humor is everywhere — the street address is One Pork Avenue, the phone number is 1-800-HOT-HOGS. Customers are so wild about the “pig song” that they beg to be put on hold to hear it. Catalogs aren't mailed out, “pigalogs” are. The list goes on and on — not just because of an unstoppable, pig-crazy staffer, but because the founders value customer and employee relations above all else. They've created an environment in which customers have fun because fun is the driving force behind the business.

The environment at The New Pig is stimulating. Employees are challenged to grow and change. They work with their customers on developing new products and, in the process, have formed some of the best interactive customer relationships I've ever seen — no small task with a customer base that's 100,000 strong!

You don't need a slogan or a mascot to have a good time, but you do need a lighthearted approach. Does your company take itself too seriously? Do customers and employees alike have fun there? If not, why not?

Enlighten up — lighten up!

Have you ever gone into a department store, bank, or restaurant and been greeted by someone who was *acting* polite, but who you knew couldn't give a rip? It's a major turnoff for most people. (That's because it's a sure sign of insincerity and a lack of caring.)

But service providers can't be expected to be nice *all* the time, to be polite *all* the time, to care *all* the time, can they? No — not human ones, anyway. However, there's a skill that's easy to apply that can bridge the gap between the times you feel genuinely, positively involved in your interactions and those you don't. I call it acting “as if.”

What if you've had a tough day? Can you act “as if” you haven't? Or, if you feel confused about solving a customer's problem, ask yourself how you'd act if you weren't confused. Suppose you've just heard some not-so-encouraging words from a supervisor about the status of your big project, and now you have to get on the phone with a customer. Can you act “as if” the interaction with your supervisor didn't take place, muster faith in your ability to overcome adversity, and go on to help the customer? You have a headache; can you act “as if” you don't?

As a performer, you'll be called on to perform when you simply don't feel like it. Skilled performers — actors, speakers, service reps, and salespeople — have developed great confidence in their ability to “do what they have to do.” Many know the act “as if” secret.

As a performer and frequent traveler, I can assure you there are many times when a delayed flight, a night of fitful sleep in a hotel room, overwork, or a cold threatens my ability to do my best in front of an audience. But what are my options? Cancel the performance? Resign myself to giving a bad show? Beg the audience for forgiveness? I've never considered any of these acceptable alternatives. With faith in my ability to rise to the occasion, I act “as if” — as if I had a good night's sleep, as if I were feeling terrific. Very often, I find myself starting to feel just that way.

When I'm nervous, I remind myself how it feels to be at ease — how my voice sounds, how my face looks, how I stand. I try whatever I can to effect that other feeling. Very often, by changing something in my body, by acting “as if,” my mood changes and then my attitude and state of mind follow suit.

Begin right now to act “as if” you have faith in your ability to succeed as a performance specialist and relationship expert. (Of course, this includes taking action, not just harboring positive thoughts.) Remember, if you act helpless, you'll be helpless.

If you act creatively, on the other hand, you'll be creative. Acting resourcefully can make you resourceful. Cultivate the habit of acting like a first-rate, best-in-your-class customer-care expert, and it will be so.

I recently saw singer Billy Joel interviewed on TV. When asked if he'd ever experienced "writer's block," Joel responded, "Of course." When asked what he did about it, the singer responded that he acted "as if" he didn't have it!

The interviewer was curious about how one acts "as if" one doesn't have writer's block when one does. First, Joel said, he puts on clothes he's worn during previous creative periods. Then he goes to a small cafe — one of his favorite places to write — and imagines that his writing will soon start flowing easily. More often than not, his creativity soon kicks in, and he's able to write again.

Not unlike Joel's "creative clothes," my daughter has a "study hat" she used to wear whenever she had a project that required great concentration. She'd put it on, push it way down on her head, and plunge in. One day she phoned from college and confided she was having a terrible time getting started on a big project. She'd already tried acting "as if" the project was easy, but it hadn't worked. That's when I remembered the hat. I suggested she put it on, mash it down, sit on the floor with all her books, then act "as if" she was experiencing a productive flow. *Voila* — it worked!

What settings, props, or costumes do you identify with qualities you want to express? Whenever possible, use them to help boost your "as if" skill.

One of the best adages about keeping customers is: “Business goes to those who want it but stays with those who appreciate it.” Too often, we take our good customers for granted — the ones who are easy to deal with, rarely give us trouble, and like our products or services enough to recommend them to friends. How easy it can be to forget to show them we care. Like someone who wakes up to find his or her spouse packing (“But I thought you’d always love me!”), a business can wake up one day and find a seemingly loyal customer gone.

So, how do you show your customers you love ‘em? Let me count the ways: over the phone, in a letter, with a note on their invoice or delivery box, in fortune cookies, with balloons, with a cake, with a poem, via a story, in your newsletter, on a heart (whether it’s Valentine’s Day or not), by planting a tree (“We really appreciate your business and are planting a blue spruce in your honor”), or with a donation (“We’ve donated money to the Make-a-Wish Foundation in your name”).

“We love you and appreciate your business” should show in your every deed, because business stays where it’s appreciated. What five things are you doing on a regular basis to show customers your appreciation?

The phone can be both a blessing and a curse. Most of us live with a telephone practically attached to the side of our heads, but that doesn't mean we know how to use it well.

Know and master the phone basics. Sit up straight so your voice is clear. Breathe deeply and pay attention. Don't open mail, clean your desk, chew gum, or eat while on the phone. Speak distinctly — don't risk a muffled delivery by resting your chin on the receiver. And smile — believe it or not, it “shows.”

Use positive listening responses, even if it's just an appropriate “uh-huh.” Without the body-language cues present with in-person contact, we need evidence of understanding when talking on the phone. If you're unsure of someone's meaning, ask for clarification. Don't worry about how this makes you appear; simply explain to the customer that you want to make sure you're meeting his or her needs properly. Be honest, but if you have less-than-pleasant news for a customer, practice phrasing it in a way that creates the best possible impact. And, of course, remember to say thank you.

Try recording yourself as you practice your speaking skills. Say the same thing in many different tones of voice, noting the emotional state conveyed by each one. Change tones to reflect sternness, authority, condescension, respect, and indifference. Try to identify subtle variations that customers are likely to pick up on. Listen to others' speech carefully, as well, and soon you'll be able to recognize customers' emotional states simply by listening to them.

Use open-ended questions to obtain more information from your customers, confirm that you understand them, or find out how they want something done. A few of my favorites follow.

- “Is there anything else I should know?”
- “Can we go over this one more time to make sure I understand you correctly?”
- “May I call you back if I have a question?”
- “How, specifically, would you like me to handle this?”
- “What is it you’d like me to do?”
- “What would make you happy?”
- “How did you come to that conclusion?”
- “Can you share your thinking (on that issue) with me?”
- “Is there anything else I can do to help you make your decision?”
- “How is that important to you?”

And my all-time favorite:

- “If I could grant you three wishes, what would they be?”

Good questions elicit good information. Learn how to ask stimulating, thought-provoking questions. The more you know about what’s important to your customers, the easier it will be to provide it for them.

I've been a management consultant for years. During that time, I've learned to size up the culture of a company in a number of ways, one of which is to look at the company's walls. What do employees look at all day? What messages slip into their unconscious while they do their jobs? What story is told by the setup of offices, the layout of workstations, the decor (or nondecor) of various work areas?

In a customer-oriented, employee-affirming, results-driven business, you'll see framed letters conveying recent customer accolades. (Don't dwell on clients' praises from 1988; do those customers do business with you now? Will they still be around tomorrow?) As you tour the premises, you'll see the company's mission statement, customer-service credo, business principles, and code of values posted throughout the facility — not just in the conference room for outsiders to see. Photo collages of company picnics, clippings about community-based activities, order forms for Girl Scout cookies, motivational posters, teamwork slogans, and other visuals designed to inspire and uplift abound in such companies.

You'll see charts, graphs, and up-to-date records of "how we're doin'." You'll see standards posted for goal vs. actual numbers concerning orders filled on time, number of customer requests handled the same day, number of calls answered within three rings, in addition to the usual number of sales.

Some committed companies post moment-of-truth improvement standards and may even track customer-retention numbers (goal vs. actual). Posting measurements of quality standards on a regular basis focuses people's attention on those standards. It provides a constant reminder of what they're trying to achieve and how close they are to attaining or exceeding the goal and reward.

We get what we focus on. What are you focusing on? Take a closer look.

Just as our unconscious minds take in positive messages, they also take in negative messages.

We live in a society whose focus is predominantly negative (no statistics needed here; just look at the newspaper headlines and the shows on TV). Given that fact, we certainly don't need more negative messages — especially in a workplace geared toward caring for customers, both internal and external.

A too-common example of negativity in the workplace is those cartoon like posters bearing such sentiments as, “Don't mind me — I only work here!” I call these types of messages “subliminal sabotage,” and they have no place in a company that truly cares about its customers and employees.

My suggestion for companies seeking to promote better relations among service providers and customers — either internal or external — is to ban posters reflecting this “I can't be bothered with you” attitude. “You want it — when?” is perhaps the best known of these bad-mood monopolizers. “Poor planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part” is equally familiar (and insulting) to many of us. Others I've seen include: “Warning: trespassers will be shot, survivors will be shot again,” “I have only one nerve left and you're getting on it,” and “Happiness is waking up and seeing your boss' face on a milk carton.” (Yes, I actually saw that in someone's office.)

People — employees and managers alike — need to start thinking about how these messages — posted on their lunchroom, conference room, and cubicle walls — act as a potent, insidious form of negative conditioning. Consider hosting a ceremonial burning (or shredding) of such materials at your company. Replace them with images and slogans that affirm a flourishing organizational culture. Put the kibosh on negativity.

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REWARD FREQUENT BUYERS

P sychologists have discovered that people are more inclined to repeat a behavior if they're rewarded each time they exhibit it. That's the idea behind the "frequent flyer" programs. The airlines are attempting to build customer loyalty by offering bonus points — good toward free flights and vacations — with each paid flight.

What are you doing to reward your customers for their patronage? The following examples and ideas should get you rolling.

- A film developer gives customers a punch card; after 11 rolls have been developed, the twelfth is free.
- A frozen-yogurt store has a similar program, only punches are made to indicate the dollar amount spent; after every space has been punched, you get \$2 off your next purchase.
- A restaurant offers free dessert and coffee for continued patronage or referrals.
- A bookstore offers a "buying club," in which members get 10 percent off every purchase and/or a special, reduced-price catalog.
- The mail-order book club I belong to issues bonus points for purchases. After accruing a certain number of points, you can use them to "buy" books. I just received a great cookbook at no charge, and it felt like a gift! I've been buying from this book club for four years. Am I a loyal customer? You bet.

It's pretty simple: offer your customers a bonus for their patronage and get ready to welcome them back.

If your mother didn't give you this advice, listen up: "Mind your manners!"

Manners, invented by and for sensitive people, are the foundation of pleasant interactions. Old-fashioned common courtesy — even in today's progressive business climate — goes a long way toward helping people feel comfortable. Many people are offended by slang or casual conversation in business settings, and unless you know someone well, it's risky to ignore Mom's advice.

I'm not suggesting stuffiness, just sensitivity. In addition to remembering to use "please" and "thank you" whenever warranted, here are a few suggestions likely to win Miss Manners' (and most moms') approval.

- Address people formally — Mr. Smith or Ms. Jones — until they indicate they're comfortable being called by their first names. Many people from the "old school" believe that younger people show disrespect by using first names immediately.
- Avoid discussing controversial issues or expressing strong opinions. Stay away from remarks that might — even by a stretch — be considered sexist, racist, or offensive to any group. Many people are more easily offended than you might think.
- Jokes can backfire. Avoid telling them until you know a customer well enough to have a good idea of her or her likely response.
- When embarking on a new relationship, tread lightly while gathering information about that person's sensitivity level.

Have you heard about the businessman who several times a month, shows up at the restaurant he owns and declares that everyone will dine for free? What a surprise, what a thrill, to be there on one of those nights!

But doesn't the restaurant lose a lot of money that way? Yes and no; because of this tactic, the restaurant is almost always full. The owner doesn't appear on any regular or predictable basis, so people go there hoping it'll be their lucky night. Plus, they like the owner's offbeat attitude!

A client of mine holds monthly drawings for customers who complete and return the feedback cards he sends them. Each month, the winning company's card is pulled from the pile returned. A huge basket of fruit is delivered to that company for its entire staff to enjoy, along with a thank-you note for the company's feedback, participation, and patronage.

Many restaurants have a monthly drawing for a free lunch. But what if more free lunches were offered — say, one a week? What if you won a free lunch there the very day you entered the contest by dropping your business card in the box? How would that influence your decision to eat at that restaurant again?

What can you do to randomly reinforce your customers' buying behavior? Remember, behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated.

One day, as I dropped off a heavy load of clothes, my dry cleaner asked if I'd ever tried the Danish restaurant down a few doors. When I said that I hadn't, he gave me a coupon for a free bottle of wine, redeemable at the restaurant when dining there. A few weeks later, I tried the restaurant and loved it. The food was terrific, the service great, and the bottle of wine free!

The restaurant owner, who visits each table personally, asked for my name and address. Two days later, I got a postcard thanking me for my patronage and urging me to return — this time, for a free glass of wine with each dinner. My second visit was as rewarding as the first, and now those little postcards come often, promising a free dessert or some other bonus for going back. Now, *that's* great marketing. And to think I may never have walked in there at all if it hadn't been for the dry cleaner.

What ideas of cooperation does this example stimulate for you? Is there a business you can logically team up with — someone located near you, someone with a complementary product (paper for copy machines, food for picnic baskets, personal-care products after a haircut)? If certain names or businesses come to mind, check out whether they're interested in going the co-op route with you — in working together for your mutual advantage. The home computer salesman might give his customers a discount coupon for the phone equipment you sell, and vice versa.

Consider co-oping your marketing services as a benefit to your customers, your company, and a better-connected business environment.

When it comes to thanking your customers, never worry about repeating yourself. Find a way to say thank you every time you come in contact with your customers: “Thanks for calling the ABC Company,” or “Thanks for letting us know about that gap in our service.”

I once booked a great speaking engagement with someone who’d already decided not to use my services. Here’s how it happened: I sent him a sincere thank-you note after he turned me down. I thanked him for the time he’d spent with me and for the information he’d shared about his company and its problems and challenges.

Shortly after receiving my note, he called and asked me to write and deliver the wrap-up speech for his next sales meeting. When I asked what caused him to change his mind, he said it had something to do with my note. Apparently, my appreciation for the time he spent with me — and my expression of that appreciation — made him feel good about the way I conduct my business.

In how many ways, and at which points during customer interactions, can you add sincere thank-yous?

- “Thank you for calling.”
- “Thank you for shopping with us.”
- “Thank you for holding.”
- “Thank you for meeting with me.”
- “Thank you for your patience.”
- “Thank you for your company at lunch yesterday.”

How about your printed material? Does “Thank You” appear prominently on your invoices and billing information?

SEND CARDS FROM THE ROAD

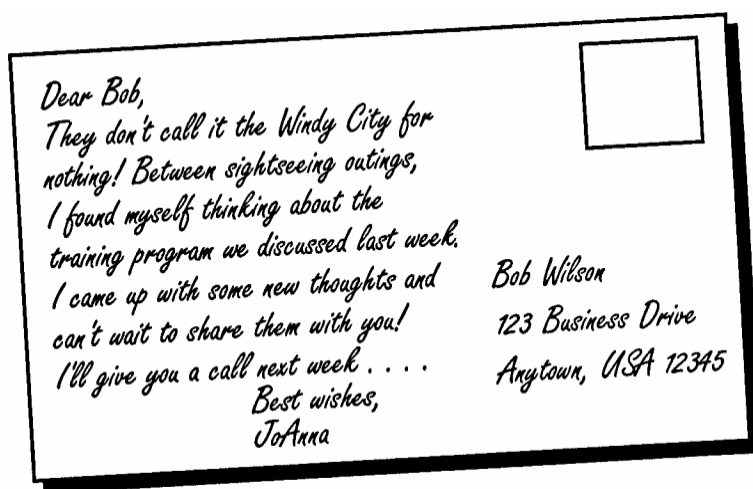
"Greetings from Fire Island," "Greetings from San Francisco,"

"Greetings from Munich" — no matter where the greetings are from, people love getting postcards, especially ones with pictures of interesting places.

I always keep postcard stamps in my purse. That way, wherever I go, I can let clients or prospects (whom I might otherwise be phoning) know that I'm thinking of them.

Does building customers' curiosity work? You bet. Does letting clients know you're thinking about them make a difference? Absolutely.

Maybe there are some people who get a big thrill from an E-mail message. Me, I'll take a picture postcard any day.



Design your own picture postcard and keep copies on your desk for quick notes. One caution: little excitement will be generated by a photograph of your building.

A scene near the water is always a good choice for a picture. So are cows in the nearby field, the palm trees in your courtyard, even local art. Every locale has something special about it. If you live in “the cranberry capital of the world,” commission a photographer to take pictures of those berries and turn the pictures into postcards.

Get everyone in the organization into the habit of sending postcards. Research reveals that the more frequently you contact a customer, the more often the customer buys. And what’s more personal than a picture postcard bearing a friendly, “thinking-about-you” note? Save the copywriting fees! A picture — and a handwritten “Thanks for your business” — is worth a thousand words.

WILL ROGERS

**Even if you are on
the right track,
you'll get run over
if you just sit there.**

My dentist always seems to know when it's time for me to come in; he uses a "bring-up" system.

Likewise, Viking Office Supply (my favorite office-supplies dealer) always seems to know when I need copy paper. Their sophisticated computer database tracks my buying habits and patterns, and their catalog's personalized cover note is always eerily on the mark. A recent one said: "A special offer on recycled copy paper for Integrated Marketing!" So, I asked my assistant, "Kath, do we need copy paper?" "Yeah," she responded, "I was just about to order some. Why?" And I'm "wowed" again.

Viking has invested a lot in their relationships with customers, and in their well-trained employees, and it shows in every facet of their operations. How can you let your customers know it's time for their next purchase, appointment, haircut, massage, or birthday present?

Try to think of six ways to make it easier for your clients to buy from you. How about a reorder-reminder card? Or, the option of automatic shipping? (Book clubs have been doing that for years.) Does your product or service lend itself to a flavor-of-the-month! flower-of-the-month/paper-of-the-month type of promotion? If so, give it a try. The easier you make it, the more they buy.

Membership.
Doesn't that word have a nice ring?

Create a membership club for your customers that comes with a card they can keep in their wallets. If your customers already carry your card, add a "Member since (date)" line to it. Every time your customers look at the card, it will remind them of the good that's in store for them through their relationship with you.

Most people like to feel they're part of something larger. Buying clubs, book clubs, VIP groups, gold-card memberships — all of these designations say, "You're special, and we'd like to reward you for it." Punch cards are great. Whether a photo shop is offering to develop the twelfth roll free or an ice-cream store is giving away the tenth double-scoop, customers will keep them handy.

The latest in wallet cards — and a super idea for customer retention — is the phone card. Here's how it works: you buy a series of cards, each of which is good for a designated amount of "banked" phone time. Then you distribute these cards to customers as bonuses for their patronage. For instance, you might give a card good for 10 minutes' worth of long-distance service with every customer order. To use this free time, the customer dials the 800 number plus the special PIN number listed on the card. This customer-retention strategy keeps on working, since each time the customer purchases your services or products, you add more phone time to his or her "account." Or, say you sell training services, you could "credit" a customer's account for every employee referred to your courses.

The phone card is a useful, practical way to build excellent relationships with your customers. How else can you "get in your customers' wallets" so that you're always with them?

What information do you store in your customer database? Chances are, most of your customers' fax numbers are logged there. What are you doing with them?

Why not use the "broadcast fax" feature to announce a new product or service to your customers, or to invite them to a trade show or seminar? Can you send your company newsletter or new spec sheets via the fax? How about faxing customers the cartoon you had specially designed to make them chuckle?

Research shows that customers often don't know about a company's entire product line. They'll remember a company for the product they bought from it — or the salesperson they worked with — but have no idea the company offers great geegaws to go with the widgets they're already ordering.

Sending faxes is an effective way to keep customers informed about new products, special sales, and time-sensitive offers. Aftermarket products — such as toner and paper for a copy machine — sell particularly well via the fax. Combine this feature with a personal note — "It's time to order copy paper..., and we just happen to have it on sale" — and they'll wonder if someone in your company is a mind reader!

Yes, a few of your customers may consider an unsolicited fax a "junk fax." If they ask you not to tie up their lines with your literature, by all means respect their wishes. Simply remove their numbers from your "fax to" list and mail their notices to them. By and large, however, your customers will respond positively to this timely communications method.

Note: Since the original publication of this book, most companies have made all of their communications electronic. I hear that some companies are reverting back to the use of fax as an additional channel of communication. Perhaps it will work for you. Try it.

Nothing excites me more than the possibilities for customer interaction using the new on-line technologies and services. Have you considered the many ways customers can access your business via computer networks? Answer the following questions relative to your customers and telecommunications capabilities.

- Can customers order electronically through an on-line catalog?
- Can customers check your inventory to see what's in stock?
- Can customers check your current price list?
- Can customers access and format their own user reports?
- Can customers communicate with you via E-mail?
- Can customers learn about your products/services on-line?
- How easily can customers link up to your Frequently Asked Questions database?
- Do customers participate in your newsgroup, user group, or advisory board? (They could.)
- Can customers file a complaint or talk to you via a chat line?
- Can customers make suggestions about better uses of your products or services?
- Can customers sign up for an extended contract or warranty?
- Can customers check their current account balance?
- Can customers pose a "what if..." scenario?
- Can customers meet with three of your regional sales reps through teleconferencing?

Many of your customers are ready and waiting to utilize these technologies. Their hardware, software, and on-line services are in place, and often their staff is already trained. Reach out to them and broaden the parameters of your relationships.

Note: Check the list carefully. Even though most of these features are common, I'll bet there are a few more you can provide.

Whether you still use an index-card file, a calendar, Outlook, or a sophisticated database, keep track of customers' birthdays and the date each customer began doing business with you. They'll be delighted that you remember those special occasions! Retail establishments often offer special deals on birthdays. Can your business do something similar?

And what about other holidays? For instance, consider running a special offer at Thanksgiving: "To let you know how thankful we are for your business, we'd like to offer you a 10% discount on your next order with us."

Or, "Happy Valentine's Day! To let you know how much we care, we're sending you..., a certificate for a free manicure with your next haircut," or "... a free box of pens with any order placed in February."

One of the nicest gifts I ever received from a business associate was a simple glass canister filled with chocolate hearts. It was a wonderful surprise, and I kept it on my desk thereafter as a reminder of the sender's thoughtfulness.

Find a way to stand out in the crowd. Instead of sending a greeting when everyone else does, pick a different event to celebrate with your customers — maybe the first day of spring, Arbor Day, or Groundhog Day. Better yet, make up your own day of celebration. Wouldn't your customers be surprised to get your First Outdoor Barbecue Day of the Year greeting?

Here's a fairy tale for this modern age. Once upon a time, there was a little software company called Intuit. Intuit's first product, Quicken, was a program for managing personal finances, writing checks, balancing checkbooks, and tracking expenses. It was written to appeal to the technologically challenged — like me.

Intuit's founder and CEO, Scott Cook, felt strongly about bringing his product to market inexpensively, with a maximum of customer support. He believed that if he provided good value in an easy-to-use product, he wouldn't need salespeople. His customers would sell the product to their friends via recommendations. His company's mission was to “make customers' lives better.”

Through the years, Intuit grew and grew and grew. We, the customers, told our friends, and they told their friends, about the wonderful products that were helping us manage our money and our small businesses. Easy to use and backed by unlimited, free technical support, Intuit's products were a blessing we couldn't wait to share.

Even when other companies' support costs skyrocketed, Intuit kept providing support for free, on the principle that if customers needed more backup than was provided in the manual, either the manual or the software wasn't good enough yet.

These days, by arrangement with Intuit, selected dealers have been commissioned to “follow customers home” and observe them as they open the package, install the software, and learn to use it. This practice has yielded dramatic results. For one thing, the company learned that the programs weren't as easy to install and run as they'd thought.

Relentlessly searching for ways to improve customers' experiences with your products or services is the key to keeping their business. How many ways can you “follow the customer home” and discover how to improve your products or services?

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ASK FOR REFERRALS

While you're asking customers about their needs and how your products and services can better meet them, why not ask for referrals? Don't fall victim to the assumption that customers who don't offer referrals don't have any. That can be a big mistake.

There are many ways to ask for referrals. "Bob, is there anyone you know who might also benefit from our customer-service seminars? I'd be happy to give them a call and fill them in on how we might be helpful to their company, too." Or, "Susan, you've told me how pleased you've been with our consulting service. We do most of our business with people we meet through satisfied customers, like you. Do any names or companies we might contact come to mind?"

Or, how about a paragraph in your newsletter, or other customer communication, saying, "If you know of others who might benefit from our service, please pass along their names, and we'll get some information out to them immediately!" or, "We'd like to increase the circulation of our newsletter. If you enjoy it every month, perhaps some of your friends will, too. Please fax us the names of three (or more) people you think would benefit from our newsletter, and we'll rush them a free copy — no obligation."

One unique and effective way to ask for referrals is to state your request in a letter you send to your regular customers. There's an example on the next page.

Dear Shawn,

We've enjoyed a great working relationship over the years, and I'm confident in our ability to serve you in the future. Like any company, we need to grow to stay strong. We'd like your help.

Once a year, we ask all our customers to share with us the names of colleagues who might be interested in using our service. By asking our existing customers for names of potential new customers, we accomplish two things: first, we're able to cut our advertising costs and spend more on customer support, and second, we bring more people like you into our "family" of clients, and we like that idea.

Would you be kind enough to provide us with the names of two (or more) people you think would benefit from our services? We'll send them a no-pressure letter of introduction, an overview of our services, and a free copy of our newsletter. To thank you for participating, we'll also send you a copy of our latest audiotape, "Doing Better Business," with our compliments.

I'd like to take this opportunity to say thanks for being a loyal customer and, in advance, for helping us grow so we can serve you better.

Best regards,

JoAnna Brandi

Get the point? Ask for those referrals!
If you're doing a good job for your customers,
they'll want to help you... but you have to ask.

Most of us get a kick out of seeing our names in print. It's a thrill to read an article that talks about the things we do well! Feature your customers, their stories, triumphs, and ideas regularly in your newsletter, company bulletin, or catalog.

When you're trying to create a business based on good, strong relationships, this type of publicity is a natural. Invite your customers to participate in company communications, and let them share their successes with you and their colleagues — especially when those successes actively involve your product or service. There's still something magical about print media. People like to see their names, and their faces, in print.

The New Pig Corporation is a catalog company with a dedicated, very participatory customer database. Feedback is actively solicited, and customers often write in with suggestions for both the use of and improvements to the absorbent and safety materials New Pig sells (mostly to manufacturing plants). Their catalog is full of interesting sidebar stories featuring customers' suggestions — and, of course, photos of those making the suggestions. Nothing sells product quite as effectively as the happy, smiling face of a satisfied customer!

While we're on the subject of profiling customers, why not feature some of your satisfied and loyal customers in an advertisement? If you're in the same industry as some of these customers, and such an ad would benefit you both, you could even split the cost. If the benefit would clearly be your own, extend the invitation anyway and offer free reprints to the customers for their own use.

How many ways can you find to feature customers who appreciate you in your promotional or informational communications?

Ever get into a bind and need a big favor from a supplier (internal or external) — the kind that could help you come out a hero with a customer? If this hasn't happened to you yet, chances are it will.

What are the odds of this supplier really pulling through for you? If you said “good,” it's probably because you've taken the time to invest in a strong relationship with that company or individual and developed a kind of “emotional bank account.” When relying on key suppliers for products or services that are critical to your customers' success and satisfaction, it pays to have strong relationships with them.

Returning their calls promptly, paying them on time, including them in your future planning, letting them in on your big picture, your goals, and your dreams, and trusting and respecting them will all increase your “account.” Also, letting them know how they're doing — praising them for a job well done and providing constructive, useful feedback when their performance falls below their usual standards — is part of the process. Be clear about your expectations and standards with these important business partners. Insist on periodic “check-in” meetings with your suppliers, even when things are running smoothly.

Treat your suppliers well, and chances are they'll treat you well. Then, when the pressure's on and you need help, odds are they'll be there for you.

How can becoming a partner with your suppliers help you take better care of your customers? You and your suppliers form a value chain to the customer. Your relationships with your suppliers directly impact your ability to serve your customers. By forming partnerships, rather than using a different vendor for every job, you and your suppliers can take a long-term view of customer needs.

The advantages of these types of partnerships are many. You can visit customers together, work jointly on research and development (and share the cost, or even ask a supplier to pick it up), and share the cost of advertising. You can even partner with suppliers to stage parties or events at trade shows.

When you incorporate a supplier's service into the service you provide your customers, it's natural for them to meet the customers and learn directly from them about their needs and their plans for the future.

Can you incorporate your suppliers' literature into your package? Can you arrange a meeting between suppliers and your employees, enabling the suppliers to explain the best way to use their services? Can suppliers add value to their services so that you can pass added value on to your customers? Do your suppliers treat you as well as you treat your customers?

Evaluate your relationships with your suppliers. Make sure they're active members of the value chain.

As I'm sure you've deduced by now, I'm a great fan of feedback. Without it, we're in danger of having a lopsided view of reality.

One valuable method for gaining qualitative feedback from customers is the focus group. A focus group consists of eight to 10 customers assembled by you to discuss a topic of particular interest to your company, such as, "How do you evaluate the value of our service to you?" or "What would make you loyal to a company, and what would make you leave?"

Focus groups can be used prior to a quantitative study in order to flesh out issues that should be used in the study. They can be used to gain insight into customers' views of the future of your industry as well as to ask customers to compare your products with a competitor's or experiment with a new product idea. They can even help you learn about the "language" customers use in speaking about your service or product.

Since customers tend to speak more freely in the absence of company representatives, focus research is usually conducted by a trained outside facilitator, while members of the inquiring company watch the interaction from behind a two-way mirror. Typically, customers are screened for specific demographic characteristics before being invited to participate in the group. They are offered honorariums and served a light meal upon arrival.

Focus groups usually last about two hours. They are particularly useful in gathering qualitative information for developing a questionnaire to be used over a larger sampling of your client base.

Focus research is a useful part of an overall feedback plan.

How can you get your customers even more involved in your business? Start a customer-advisory board and/or a user group. Once a group becomes a constituency, its members feel a different sense of involvement and responsibility.

At Matrix, a Midwest systems integrator, a customer-advisory board was set up to increase responsiveness to customer needs. The board works with the company to uncover and plan for future needs. Participants do site testing for new products and help Matrix stay customer-focused.

Since an installed system remains in place for years, both the customer and the manufacturer benefit by working together. They work together to develop user-friendly systems and hold manufacturing costs down. The result is the best products at the best prices. By making the customer's point of view an integral part of its growth strategy, a company has a much better chance of staying on target.

Another way to get the customer involved in your company is to form a group of "users," a term commonly used in the world of technology. Users get involved not only with the company but with each other. They swap ideas on using your products and work together to give you input on their needs.

At Direct Media, Inc. (DMI), a prominent direct-marketing company, users come together annually for the DMI Co-Op. The event features workshops and is punctuated with presentations by noted industry speakers who enlighten and inspire the avid participants. Industry notables and competitors come together to share information on how to grow their businesses, manage their people, and become more successful. They also come for the fresh air, golf, tennis, and delicious meals! Results of surveys taken before, during, and after the event are openly shared. Feedback? You bet! In more ways than one.

Despite the fact that customer-service consultants encourage employees to get out of the workplace once in a while and visit their customers, many non-frontline people don't get out enough, if at all. Since a real and personal connection with the customer is important to understanding and embodying the "big picture," here are several suggestions for getting customers' voices reverberating throughout your company.

- Make an audiotape of customer comments, suggestions, and even complaints to play at meetings.
- Have people in the field bring back stories and pictures of your products or services in action at customer sites.
- Invite customers to spend a day in your plant, shop, or office. Draw names of small groups of employees and arrange for them to meet with visiting customers.
- Author and consultant Barry Farber recommends the "customer-run meeting."⁶ These usually work best with two or more persons from a single company, at least at first. Ask the customer to set the agenda and run the meeting. (Ideas for topics include "Meeting customer needs in the health-care industry" and "The customer/supplier partnership: pros and cons.") These meetings will tend to generate information that would never surface during the sales process, especially if they're held in a roundtable fashion. I always advise serving food as well, since it helps to set the stage for sharing.
- Reserve a chair at your conference table for a customer. Whether or not a customer attends, the mere suggestion of representation should get people thinking differently. Don't have an imaginative crew? Dress up a mannequin and set it in the place of honor. Watch language change as people start acting "as if the customer were in the room."

- Have posters made of customer comments as well as photos of happy customers using your products or services. Nothing is more motivating than feeling part of what makes someone's life easier, or making them happy, or protecting them from harm. Connected in this way to actual results of what their products or services do, people feel better about their work and often perform better as well.

Have a Celebrate the Customer party, and celebrate with your customer. Celebrate the client company's successes and share ideas about how your relationship might grow in the future.

There are many more ways to saturate your company with the voice of your customers. Brainstorm with your employees or co-workers for possibilities appropriate to your company — and let us know how you do!

⁶ Farber, Barry J. and Wycoff, Joyce. *Breakthrough Selling*. 1992, N.J., Prentice Hall.

JOEL BARKER

You can and should
shape your own future,
because if you don't,
somebody else surely will.

Actually, getting a suggestion *box* is not enough — you'll need a suggestion *process*. Very few good ideas about a company's operations come from outside. The great ideas, the very best ones, exist in your head and in the heads of your fellow employees.

Of course, many managers and companies haven't figured out how to get those ideas out of employees' heads and into their hands (or into *managers'* hands, for that matter) so they can be implemented. This is really too bad, because companies that implement successful suggestion programs can save millions of dollars. These companies also have enough new product ideas to last well into the next century as well as employees who actively participate in the creative-thinking process on a daily basis.

When we're constantly wondering, "How can I improve this?" and being rewarded for our ideas and solutions, we're highly likely to continue questioning and resolving. What American business needs today is creativity, curiosity, and an innovative spirit.

Sure, some people have asked me, "Shouldn't we all be thinking like that on a regular basis, without the rewards?"

"Yes," I agree, "but we don't." And I do believe in the power of recognition and rewards — people like winning things! In a perfect world, everyone would be self-motivated; in the real world, some of us need a push. As Martin Edelston says, "Tapping into the skills and knowledge of workers who, day in and day out, handle the actual work in offices and factories is the most powerful — and underutilized — engine of growth, ideas, strength, and opportunity available to every American company."⁷

I say, let's get 'er started!

⁷Edelston, Martin and Buhagiar, Marion. *I Power: The Secrets of Great Business in Bad Times*. 1992, N.J., Barricade Books.

Whenever I hear managers complain about the stupidity of the people in their organizations, I counter with: “Well, why do you hire stupid people?”

Hire only the best and the brightest you can find. Look for them everywhere. Keep an eye out for superior service-givers, people who love to be with people. When you get memorable service at a local restaurant, bank, or dry cleaners, slip that service-giver a special business card that says, “Thank you for your superior service. Our company is always looking for people who care. If you are ever looking for a job, do contact us. Our number is.... My name is....” Sign the card and leave it with that person. This accomplishes two things. First, it recognizes good service, and second, it expands your pool of potential applicants. There’s nothing wrong with letting people know you’re interested.

Offer a reward to your employees for referrals of potential employees. Most companies that do this pay one fee (say, \$250) when the person is hired and an additional fee (say, \$500)* after that person celebrates a milestone of six months or a year. This practice keeps everyone on the lookout. And it’s one more way individuals can help shape the future of the company.

*Some companies in very competitive fields pay in the thousands.

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COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Too many people go home each night remembering only the negative parts of their day. It's become a habit for many people — a bad habit. Why would someone want to focus on what went wrong instead of what went right?

How would it change your state of mind, and the way you relate to your friends or family later on, if you spent the last few minutes of your workday focusing on its high points? What if you took the wonderful things, even if they seem far and few between, and focused your attention on them?

By counting our blessings, the positive moments, and feeling a deep appreciation for them, we help our heart — literally! Research documents that moments of caring and appreciation actually produce a more regular and balanced EKG and an increase in the hormones associated with immunity. Dwelling on anger, on the other hand, produces incoherence in the heart and lowers the rate of immunity-protecting hormones for more than six hours after the thought or remembrance of an angry occurrence.

So, instead of saying, “She made my day,” in that sarcastic, we all-know-what-that-tone-means way, find something you can focus positively on and say, “She made my day — special.”

If you want to be healthier and happier, focus on the blessings, not the bummers.

The entrepreneurs in a business always behave differently than others in the company. They're more passionate about their work, they set high goals, and they're willing to make sacrifices to achieve those goals. Why? Because they own the company.

How would you act on the job if you were self-employed? Well — guess what? Any day, you could be! In today's uncertain and fickle workplace, no one can count on permanent employment. The best career strategy is to be responsible and personally accountable for the quality of your own work and your own performance. Ownership means you're not passing the buck, transferring the customer into oblivion, or letting a teammate down by defaulting on a commitment.

Today, the word *empowerment* is big on business-college campuses, at executive-training programs, and in conference rooms. The bottom line of empowerment is that no one can be empowered unless he or she chooses to accept that responsibility.

Self-motivated, entrepreneurial, resourceful types are in demand all over the country. Are you one of them?

ARE THERE MORE THAN 101 WAYS?

Of course there are! There are probably 1,001 ways you can improve relationships with your customers and keep them coming back to you. Since customer retention and customer care are my business — and writing and speaking about them my passion — I'd love to receive your suggestions and your tried-and-true methods for improving customer relationships and customer experiences.

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ENDNOTE

I hope you enjoyed reading this book, and I also hope it will inspire you to keep reading and learning. We live in challenging times. A hundred years ago, we could get through a whole lifetime with the things we learned at mother's knee. Today, with the amount of information in the world doubling at the dizzying rate of every three-and-a-half years, we need to be lifetime learners just to keep up.

Committing to the life of the learner means forfeiting the luxury of remaining set in our ways or settling into "comfort zones." It means being open and flexible, even vulnerable. It requires great trust in our ability to adapt resourcefully and creatively. And it means not resting on our laurels or letting our egos grow out of proportion to the rest of our being.

I am reminded of a parable I once heard. A martial artist who had worked long and hard for his black belt knelt before his sensei (teacher) at the award ceremony. The sensei said: "There is one more test before I grant you your belt. You must answer this question: What is the true meaning of the black belt?" The student's response: "It marks the end of my journey. It is a reward for my hard work."

The sensei, quiet for a moment and clearly unsatisfied with this answer, finally responded. "You are not yet ready for the belt. Return to me in one year." A year later, the sensei again asked the question: "What is the true meaning of the black belt?" And the student replied: "The belt is a symbol of distinction of the highest achievement in our art." The sensei remained unsatisfied. "You still are not ready. Return in one year."

A year later the student once again knelt before his teacher and stated clearly: "The black belt represents the beginning — the start of a never-ending journey of discipline, work, and the pursuit of an ever-higher standard." "Yes," replied the pleased sensei. "Now you are ready to receive the black belt and begin your journey."

And so we are all students, beginning our journey.

Wishing you good fortune along the road.... - JB

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JoAnna Brandi is the Publisher of The Customer Care Coach®. A self study leadership training program in the "The Art and Science of Exquisite Customer Care" as well as "Monday Morning Motivation," a tool to keep employees focused on keeping the customers happy.

President of JoAnna Brandi & Company since 1990, she is a consultant, a public speaker and the author of two books on customer loyalty, as well as a book on positive thinking *54 Ways to Stay Positive in a Changing, Challenging and Sometimes Negative World*.

She is a graduate of Dr. Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness Coaching program – one of only 850 trained worldwide, and is a founding member of the Positive Workplace International.

JoAnna serves a diverse group of clients in large companies and small alike. Working as a resource for TEC/Vistage, an international organization of CEOs for over fifteen years, JoAnna has coached, consulted and served as the "Chief Inspiration Officer" for CEOs, their executives and staffs nationwide.

As a highly rated lively and energetic speaker, JoAnna Brandi challenges her audiences to challenge the choices they've made in their personal lives as well as the ones they make in business. Her down-to-earth style demystifies complex business theory and gives people an opportunity to laugh at "how hard we've all made it." She encourages her clients to "Do the Basics *Brilliantly*."

In her workshops and keynotes she motivates entire organizations to get passionate about customers and raise their "Positivity Ratios" at the same time. She uses email, telephone classes and video to keep her inspiring message and practical how-to's in the forefront of minds of the leaders and customer facing employees. She specializes in creating more positive, strengths based workplaces where employees are motivated and customers are happy and loyal. She teaches Customer Loyalty, Positive Leadership and Creating Happiness.

Her FREE bi-weekly newsletter delivers insight and wisdom on creating positive, customer caring cultures to thousands of people worldwide.