

Take This Job and Love It!

—How to Become a “Fire-Proof” Asset to Your Company

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Part 2: Keeping Customers Happy by Giving Exceptional Customer Service

I Believe that offering good customer service begins and ends with both the business owner, as well as each individual employee. Not only is Exceptional Customer Service critical for any business to reach its full potential, but it is mandatory for any employee who desires to reach his or her full potential.

The attitude and disposition that each individual employee reflects not only determines whether he or she shows good customer service, but also impacts the bottom line of the business. An employee with a bad attitude can drain the life right out of a business.

If a business owner does not hire quality people who reflect a good attitude toward Exceptional Customer Service, the business will almost certainly fail, because eventually the customers will go somewhere else where they are treated better.

Consider my own personal experience in this regard in *Case Study 1*. Incidentally, a Moment of Truth occurs anytime a customer forms an opinion—positive or negative—about you or your company.

Analyze the net result of my pizza ordering experience: First off, yes it is true, I have ordered from this same place (in different locations) for many years and don't remember too many bad experiences. But Moments of Truth add up and over time form a *Total Cumulative Experience*, be it positive or negative. It is just too much trouble to deal with a business that really doesn't care about its customers. And yes, I understand very well that things like this happen completely unintentionally and without malice. Fine. But here is the kicker: If this type of poor service were to become the custom, in other words, if my Total Cumulative Experience became negative, there would come a point that I would never go back.

Even after four negative Moments of Truth in the span of less than a week, I am sure that I will order from them again, *someday*. Nevertheless, the next time I want a pizza, guess who I won't call first? With all of the competition out there, why would I call them again?

Many books, articles, and presentations outlining the benefits of good customer service are available,

Case Study 1

I recently ordered a pizza for delivery from a local national franchise. When I called in, the person told me that they did not have a delivery person that night, so I would have to come pick it up. **Moment of Truth #1—negative.** Even though inconvenient, no real problem. Just as I hung up the phone, some unexpected guests arrived and I called the pizza place back right away to order another pizza. I was asked to hold on, so I patiently held on...and on...and on. After five minutes, I gave up and hung up. **Moment of Truth #2—negative.**

When I went to pick up the pizza, I told the Shift Manager that I had called back right away to order another pizza and that I was put on hold for five minutes, finally hanging up. She explained that a waitress had taken the call, but clocked out and didn't tell anyone that I was on hold. Even though the Shift Manager was cordial, she could have gone a lot further in turning my negative moments of truth around to positive ones. But because she did not even *try* to do this, I formed **Moment of Truth #3—negative.** Trying to do her a favor, I told the Shift Manager that the business had just lost money because of it. I can only hope that the Shift Manager fully comprehended the impact this type of service could have on her business, and by extension, her job security.

To make my overall experience worse, and to further cement my own negative Moments of Truth, my wife Tracy had a negative experience a few days later with this same place. She had ordered a couple of pizzas one evening (I was out of town), and was told the pizzas would be delivered in 30 to 45 minutes. Two hours later and still no pizzas, she called back to cancel the order. She was told that they only had one delivery person, and he was already on his way. The delivery person was very apologetic when he arrived—which helped—but it was too little, too late. My wife didn't vent frustration on the delivery person, but decided then and there that she wasn't ordering from them again. The irony of the matter is that this restaurant could have done something very simple and not have lost a customer—communicate (but more on that later).

When she told me of her experience, guess what? **Moment of Truth #4—negative. Total Cumulative Experience—negative.**

and one would think that some of it would start to catch on. But apparently, the concept of providing good customer service is something that only few businesses regard seriously. And the ones that do recognize the importance of good customer service also recognize that it is a result of the attitude of both management and employees together.

Exceptional Customer Service Defined

The bottom line of Exceptional Customer Service is: *To meet and exceed the wants and/or needs of a customer so that the customer:*

1. *Is Delighted;*
2. *Comes back; and*
3. *Recommends your company to others.*

These are the cardinal rules of business. If a customer is satisfied, they will very likely come back. If a customer is treated right and comes back, they will, in turn, recommend your business to their friends. What does this mean? It means that the business will grow. And what does this mean for you, the employee? It means your job will be more secure, and this is the foundation of fulfillment in your chosen work.

It is no secret that it costs far less to retain a current customer, than to get a new one in the front door. Aside from the simple propriety of giving Exceptional Customer Service, it just makes good business sense.

But we can even go deeper than this by looking at the human side of the business equation. What any human being is really looking for is to be treated with kindness, dignity, and respect—you and I included. This is true even if you simply cannot meet the customer's needs or solve their immediate problems. Regardless of how ornery a customer is, it pays to treat them humanely for the sake of the company as well as yourself.

Characteristics of Exceptional Customer Service

In addition to displaying an Ownership Attitude (which is a recurring theme in this article), I believe that two other qualities are paramount when it comes to Exceptional Customer Service: communication, and the little things you do.

COMMUNICATION

Without a doubt, communication is one of the most important and effective tools you can use in giv-

ing Exceptional Customer Service. Human beings need to feel a sense of control over their lives. You and I are no different. When you communicate with your customers, you keep them "in the loop," as it were, and consequently, they feel a measure of control. As an example, consider *Case Study 2*.

Case Study 2

I recently had to replace two tires on my car, so I went to a well-known tire dealer that I had used previously to get the work done. The counter person told me it would be about an hour before they could get to it. "Not too long," I thought, so I decided to wait. And wait I did—for hours. **Moment of Truth #1—negative.** But what made it so frustrating is that not once did anyone communicate with me about the delay. When I asked how much longer it would be, I was told that they were just about to get to it, but they didn't. In other words, they over-promised and under-delivered. **Moment of Truth #2—negative.**

I felt out of the loop, and therefore, out of control over my day. Worse yet, when I did inquire the one time as to how much longer it would be, I got the feeling that I was being a pest (which I wasn't) due to the attitude of the counter person. **Moment of Truth #3—negative.**

If I had known at the outset that it would take as long as it did, I would have made arrangements to drop my car off, so I could do other important things while it was being worked on. **Moment of Truth #4—negative.** Four hours later, the job was done—much longer than I had been told. **Moment of Truth #5—negative. Total Cumulative Experience—negative.** I am never going back.

As I mentioned earlier, I *know* and *accept* that unexpected circumstances arise in business. This is not a problem. What is a problem, is a lack of communication when unexpected delays do come up. Remember my wife's pizza ordering experience from Case Study 1? All that the pizza place had to do was call and explain the situation. This would have given my wife the option of continuing to wait, or canceling and ordering elsewhere—in other words, control. Even if they lost the business *this* time, they would have done the right thing by showing Exceptional Customer Service, which would have led to getting the business next time. By communicating, they would have engendered customer loyalty, because the customer would likely be understanding and discern that his or her needs were more important than the business making a buck (from the customer's perspective).

Whether you are in sales, or handling a customer problem, communication is essential to displaying Exceptional Customer Service. *Don't leave your customers hanging! Communicate with them!* And when you do, 1) Be honest and up-front; 2) Don't lead a customer to unrealistic expectations, i.e., don't promise what you can't deliver; and 3) Communicate!

As important as communication is, doing it alone and ignoring other factors will not get you happy and satisfied customers. More is required, such as *how* you communicate.

LITTLE THINGS

There is very little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative. — Clement Stone

Meticulous attention to the *little things* you do, and *how you do them* can atone for a multitude of "sins" in business. Never underestimate the impact that the little things you say or do can have in delighting a customer.

For example, imagine a customer walking up to you at work for some help. Now try saying the following out loud with no emotion or enthusiasm: "Can I help you?" Sounds so cold and indifferent, doesn't it?

Now try the following with a smile on your face and a song in your heart: "Good Morning! How are you!" Sounds so warm and inviting! Do you even need to ask, "May I help you?" You can, but if you greet the customer properly, he or she will naturally tell you how you can help them.

Personally, I am not a proponent of the standard questions that are used to find out what a customer wants, such as, "Can (or, May) I help you?" or "What can I do for you today?" I have never heard an employee or salesperson say those words without sounding mechanical or somewhat indifferent. No matter how you say those words, the message they convey is "Let's get down to business NOW!" On the other hand, a proper greeting allows for relationship building, which is crucial for keeping happy and loyal customers. As an alternative, you might ask, "May I answer a question or help you find something?"

Case Study 3 – Continental Airlines

Recently, I flew on Continental Airlines to Chicago and was fortunate to see Exceptional Customer Service in action. It was totally unexpected. As I was writing this very article, I heard the most pleasant and cheerful, "Can I get you something to drink, Sir?" When I looked up, I saw Mike, a Flight Attendant, with a great smile on his face. **Moment of Truth #1—positive.** The way in which he asked was so exceptional that as I asked for a soft drink, I found myself smiling and spontaneously letting out just a little giggle, again, entirely because of the way Mike asked. In fact, every time he asked me any question, he was smiling, very cheerful and called me "Sir." **Moment of Truth #2—positive.**

I must say that this was one of the most positive customer service experiences I have ever had. It left me with a very positive Moment of Truth about Continental Airlines and one that Mike's superiors should be proud of. Mike's ability to extend that level of Exceptional Customer Service is also something that others—regardless of vocation—should learn from and emulate.

After the meals and beverages were all served, I took the opportunity to ask Mike about Continental's customer service training. As he discussed the training they must go through, the real reason for his excellent customer service began to come through—he loves doing what he does! **Moment of Truth #3—positive.** He is excited about the company he works for, and obviously gets fulfillment from it. People like Mike are in high demand. **Total Cumulative Experience—positive.**

Let me illustrate the power that little things can have on a customer with the following personal experience with **Case Study 3.**

So what was it that Mike did that made such a difference? I can tell you that it was not one singly significant thing. *It was the little things he did!*

1. He had a great attitude, disposition, and *a smile that showed in his voice*;
2. He really cared about doing a superior job;
3. He loves doing what he does—his enthusiasm really showed;
4. He was very courteous, attentive, and eager to help.

What makes it even more impressive is that Mike does this flight after flight and rarely, if ever, sees the same face twice. It can be argued that there is added impetus to showing Exceptional Customer Service to customers that you have to face again tomorrow, i.e., in the near future. But what about showing Excep-

tional Customer Service to customers that you personally never see again, as in Mike's case?

It is clear that Mike really "gets it"—he understands the true nature of customer service from a higher, universal perspective. What is this "higher perspective"? This: Showing Exceptional Customer Service because it is the right thing to do. Mike doesn't just have a "good" attitude, he has the epitome of an Ownership Attitude. He cares about customer service *as if* he owned the Airline.

What was the net result of these positive Moments of Truth for me, the customer? Frankly, this positive experience completely changed my entire perspective toward Continental Airlines. I had had problems—negative Moments of Truth—flying with them before. But with this one intensely positive experience on the part of one employee, I can't hardly even remember the negative experiences I had with them! Continental had redeemed itself, and again, because of one single employee out of the thousands that work there.

Do you see what this means? The "sins" of a company *can* be forgiven *if* and *when* Exceptional Customer Service is shown, resulting in an intensely positive experience for the customer. In fact, customers can be *very* forgiving if treated right. Moreover, an intense, positive Moment of Truth can take a customer's opinion of the company to new heights! What does this mean? The customer comes back and refers others. What does this mean? The business prospers. And what does this mean for you as an employee? You also grow, prosper, and advance. This is what self-empowerment is all about. Is life good or what?

Results of Exceptional Customer Service

As a rule, when you display Exceptional Customer Service, you hit the target dead-on. The target is:

1. Customer is delighted;
2. Customer's needs are met and exceeded;
3. Customer's problems are solved;
4. Customer comes back—loyalty is fostered;
5. Customer refers others to your company.

But something else much more profound occurs—the *Customer's belief system is validated*. How? Whenever a customer makes a decision to do business with a particular company for the first time, they

have taken a certain risk. And depending on the nature of the product or service they need, they could be taking a big risk. For instance, entrusting your life savings or retirement nest egg to a financial advisor you know nothing about is a huge decision and carries certain risk.

When a business shows Exceptional Customer Service and satisfies that customer's needs, the business in essence validates the customer's common sense, good judgment, and decision-making ability. In turn, the customer feels better about him or herself. And when a customer feels better about him or herself in connection to your company, he or she will be more apt to recommend your business to others. By showing Exceptional Customer Service and satisfying a customer's needs, you validate in the customer's mind that he or she made the right choice to do business with *your* company.

Perspective: "Problem Customers" or "Customers with Problems"?

As long as there are customers, there will be customers with problems. And if you don't solve a customer's problems expeditiously, that customer with a problem can quickly turn into a problem customer.

Is it possible to please everyone? No. As much as I wanted to satisfy every customer in my past businesses, there were still times when I could not satisfy them in the way they wanted. And this is an important point: As much as we might want to be all things to everyone, sometimes we are simply not the right choice in meeting a customer's needs.

Furthermore, some customer's demands are simply too extreme to meet, but we should always endeavor to treat them with courtesy, dignity, and respect.

Okay, let's assume you see the value of showing Exceptional Customer Service. Furthermore, you really begin to work at displaying Exceptional Customer Service diligently. Now comes a customer with a grievance, and you are the first one he or she sees. What do you do?

Incidentally, most of the time when a customer is shown poor customer service, he or she won't say anything and won't come back. Occasionally, a customer will do you a favor by saying something or complaining. When this happens, you now have a "Customer with a Problem." How you choose to

"The 'sins' of a company can be forgiven with Exceptional Customer Service."

handle the situation from this point forward will determine whether you gain or lose the customer.

I have already espoused the benefits of Exceptional Customer Service, and by showing such, you will likely gain the customer. On the other hand, if you throw Exceptional Customer Service to the wind and show an attitude of indifference, you now have a “Problem Customer.”

Do you know what a customer's problem is like? It is like a balloon. It starts out flabby, without any form, and then slowly takes on a bigger size and shape, until it is fully inflated to colossal magnitude; and then it begins to rise higher and higher in the air for the whole world to see. More often than not, the problem was exacerbated and inflated due to poor customer service—and unnecessarily, I might add.

Let's put this in practical terms with a hypothetical situation:

1. Customer walks in with a problem—real or imagined—and he is already a little miffed.
2. The balloon already has some air in it.
3. If the customer is treated poorly, what happens to his problem? More air goes into the balloon and the problem gets bigger.
4. If the customer is not handled professionally, with courtesy and respect, what happens to the problem? More air goes into the balloon and the problem gets bigger yet.
5. And to top it all off, if the customer is treated with indifference, *a lot* more air goes into the balloon and the problem becomes enormous. And then all it takes is some little and insignificant thing—like the tiny head of a needle—to make him pop. If you haven't already lost him as a customer, you almost certainly will now.

Of course, the objective here should be to dissipate any air in the balloon (problem) at the outset when the size of the problem is manageable. But what if you find yourself in front of a customer who is about to pop (whether your fault or not)?

When dealing with any customer—especially a problem customer—keep the following points at the forefront of your mind:

1. Smile.
2. Be courteous and eager to help.
3. Be empathetic and try to see things from your customer's perspective. After all, they may just be right in their grievance, and you should accept it as such until proven otherwise.
4. Tell them that you will do all you can to help them solve their problem—and mean it!
5. Make an honest effort to solve the problem.
6. Above all, treat them with courtesy, dignity, and respect.

At times, we humans tend to blow things out of proportion. And at times, this can happen easily if a customer believes that he or she was not treated right, or was somehow wronged. If you as an employee do not handle the situation properly, the problem doesn't get smaller, *it gets bigger.*

When faced with a difficult situation, you may still be able to salvage the customer by utilizing the characteristics of Exceptional Customer Service and responding properly. Here is an example of how you might respond to a customer who is angry over some problem:

1. **Identify with the customer's frustration:** “Sir, I'm so sorry this has been a problem, and I will do everything I can to take care of this right away.” By responding in this way, you are letting air out of the balloon and the problem gets smaller.
2. **Treat the customer with courtesy and respect;** more air escapes and the problem gets smaller.
3. **Embrace the Ownership Attitude by honestly and eagerly trying your best to solve his problem.** Most—if not all—of the air dissipates and the problem is now much more manageable.

But does providing Exceptional Customer Service mean that the customer always gets what they

"Problems are like balloons. They start out flabby, without any form..."

want? Again, no. The fact is that you will not always be able to solve every problem—especially if the problem is not on your end. But at least the customer will leave knowing that you treated them professionally, with dignity and respect, and did all you could to help them. And if you do this, at least they will know that you honestly tried to help them. In turn, they will *tend* to come back and say good things about you and your company.

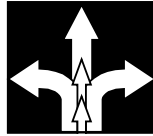
Another Equally Important Type of Customer

You may be unwittingly under the impression that your only customers are the ones that walk in through your door to buy something. This is not en-

tirely true. You also have another type of customer you may not be aware of—your co-workers.

There are only two positions in any company: 1) Those who serve the customer; and 2) Those who serve those serving the customer. These two positions are also known as External and Internal Customer Service, respectively. Which one are you?

Exceptional Customer Service begins from the inside out. In other words, a company can never display Exceptional Customer Service, unless it first shows Exceptional Customer Service to itself. Each employee must show the same high level of regard toward fellow employees that they would show toward customers. If there is dissension the ranks, customer service will suffer.



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