

“Micah Solomon has cracked the code of world-class customer service. This book will guide your transformation in putting the customer first.”

—DANIEL H. PINK, author of *WHEN* and *DRIVE*

**THE SIMPLE PLAYBOOK
FOR DELIVERING THE ULTIMATE
CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERIENCE**

IGNORE YOUR CUSTOMERS



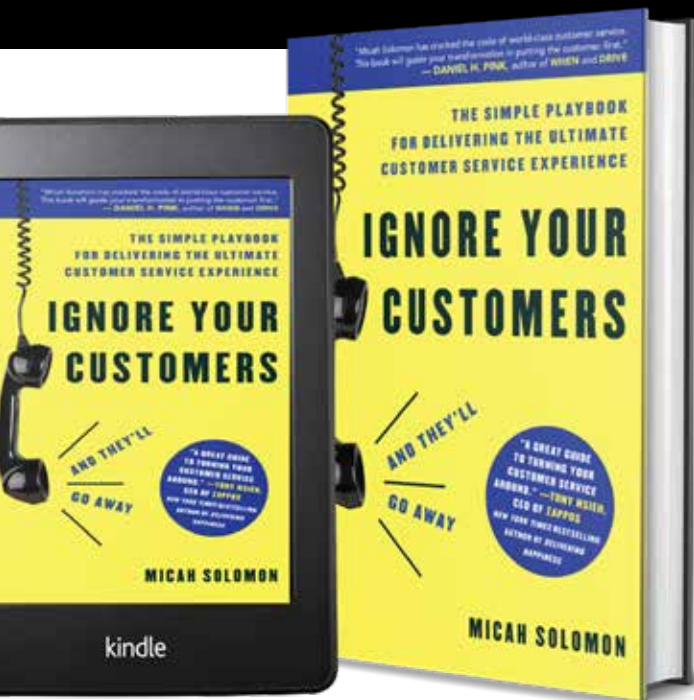
AND THEY'LL

GO AWAY

**“A GREAT GUIDE
TO TURNING YOUR
CUSTOMER SERVICE
AROUND.” —TONY Hsieh,
CEO OF ZAPPOS
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Micah Solomon has cracked the code of world-class customer service. *Ignore Your Customers (And They'll Go Away)* will guide your transformation in putting the customer first.

Daniel H. Pink, Author of *When and Drive*



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MICAH SOLOMON is a bestselling author, consultant, and keynote speaker. A thought leader and expert on customer service, company culture, customer experience, innovation, entrepreneurship, and intrapreneurship, Micah is a regular contributor to Forbes.com and Inc.com and his expertise has been featured in Bloomberg BusinessWeek, Harvard Business Review, ABC, CBS, and NBC.

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Borrowing from myself: Some material in this book is adapted from the author's previously published articles. In addition, this book owes debts to two of the author's previously published industry-specific or limited-release books: *Your Customer Is the Star* and *The Heart of Hospitality*. Quotes and paraphrases from the author's articles and from these two works will not be individually noted in the upcoming text.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD (MINE!)

Being a mystery shopper is harder than it looks. (“*Sure, Micah, sure it is.*”)

Bear with me and I’ll explain.

When, say, a luxury hotel hires me to revamp their customer service, I often start by going undercover.

It’s loads of fun, of course. But the challenges are unique.

For example: When I’m at the hotel’s boutique spa getting a facial (for research, of course!) and have both eyes covered by cucumber slices, it’s a real magic trick finding a discreet time to peek out and observe the customer service interactions that are going on around me. And it’s just as difficult to take notes on the sly while submitting to a massage or a mani or a pedi.

(I do draw the line at getting waxed, even for professional reasons.)

Not all of my workdays are equally glamorous, as a customer service consultant/mystery shopper/customer service keynote speaker/customer experience designer/customer service trainer (there are a lot of slashes in my job title). It’s just as likely that you’ll find me onsite at a law office, retail store, financial services firm, insurance agency, plumbing supply company, or—no kidding—a mortuary. Regardless of the setting, though, I’m doing essentially the same work: evaluating the customer experience and polishing the customer service until it shines. And even though I sometimes like to complain (I am a professional fault-finder, after all), I know that I *do* have the greatest job, the greatest work life, that I could imagine.

This isn’t just business to me. *I love this stuff.* I love helping businesses rethink their relationships with customers, I love contributing

to their prospects for sustained success, and I love seeing the ultimate results.

I intend to be a good companion and guide to you throughout these pages, and I appreciate that you've chosen to join me here. If you'd like to reach me for more direct assistance, I invite you to do that as well. Please email me at micah@micahsolomon.com or text or call me on my phone, (484) 343-5881, if you're struggling with a particularly thorny customer service problem or customer experience conundrum that could benefit from my involvement. (You can also use the live chat feature that you can find front and center on my website, micahsolomon.com, which will connect you with me directly—and it's me who does the chatting, not a robotic, simulated Micah.)

INTRODUCTION

SHOOT FOR THE MOON: WHY THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF CUSTOMER SERVICE IS THE ONLY ONE WORTH AIMING FOR

When the Guruphone rings (it's like the Batphone, but for consultants) and I slide down my firepole to assist, the call is often from a business that was once thriving but has since lost its way with customers and needs help turning the relationship around. The first thing I do after arriving onsite is to pore through whatever records and relics I can find from those earlier, happier days, looking for hints as to what might have changed. What I'll find, nearly invariably, are clues suggesting that the care taken with customers in those early, golden days was superior to what's going on now in a variety of predictable ways: the level of personalization in each customer interaction, the number of customer follow-ups and the care invested in each one, the thought that went into hiring, and other similar key markers.

Unfortunately, the focus and attentiveness that are common when a business has only a few customers tend to slide when the customer roster begins to balloon. Employees stop signing their thank-you notes by hand. Managers busy themselves with paperwork in their office hideaways rather than coming out into the open to greet even longtime or VIP customers—and they're certainly nowhere to be found if a customer conflict ever erupts and needs smoothing over.

Jackie and Joanne, the quirky, charismatic telephone operators who knew the name and backstory of every customer who called in, are edged into retirement and replaced (although, in reality, they're irreplaceable) with low-paid rookies or a voice jail system.

Is such lowering of standards inevitable? Decidedly not—if you stubbornly stick to your guns. The mantra that's needed is this: *If you would've done something for your first customer, you'll find a way to keep doing it for your ten thousandth*, without rushing, without cutting corners, and without doing anything that would make a customer feel less than fully valued by your business.

The secret, in other words, is to *never stop believing in the importance of the individual customer* and the importance of every individual interaction, no matter how many customers your organization has grown to serve. Don't fall into the trap of thinking there's an infinite supply of new customers out there for the taking if only your marketing and sales departments would do their jobs, seeking out and converting more leads. Tell yourself instead that not only are customers a limited commodity, there's *no such thing as "customers" in the plural*. Rather, there's just one customer: the one who's being served right now.

Advocating and sustaining this attitude of treating each customer like the only one in the world is one of the most important leadership responsibilities in any organization, and it's one of the key weapons in the battle to avoid losing customers through perceived (and, perhaps, actual) indifference.

If you *do* neglect your customers, it's probably going to hurt *you* more than it hurts them. In most every industry today, there are scores of businesses eager and able to accommodate any customer of yours whom you inadvertently send their way through your neglect.

But enough with the negatives. I'm too much of a natural optimist to stay in this fearmonger role for long. And the ultimate reason I want you to develop or renew your customer focus is much more positive. It's that customer-by-customer excellence is the best way to build a business, sustain a business, and reach for the stars.

It's also the most **cost-effective** way to grow your business. For comparison: *How much did you spend on marketing last year? Advertising? Sales?* Developing a true customer focus is far and away the most effective, affordable way to keep the revenue flowing. And the secrets of doing just that? You now hold them here in your hands.

Getting the Most from This Book

If you want to absorb and retain as much as possible of what you're about to read, here's my suggested approach.

1. **Read it with your team at work.** The best way to get the full benefit is to read *Ignore Your Customers (And They'll Go Away)* as part of a group. Get your colleagues and direct reports and, yes, your bosses, to read it together with you. A book is a super-affordable way to get five

or fifty or five thousand people on the same page; it's what the term "on the same page" is all about. As legendary business thinker Seth Godin puts it, "Books are vessels for ideas, but the ideas in them are most likely to change people and organizations when they're spoken out loud and when promises and commitments are made."

2. **Make use of the "Get to the Point, Micah!" *Cliffs-Notes*-style cheatsheets that you'll find at the end of each chapter to help you review what's been covered.** Make notes and highlights here as well as you see fit.
3. **Ask your team at work the questions in the Reading Group Guide that's included at the end of each chapter.** Answer out loud and have someone take notes. (If, on the other hand, you're reading by yourself in a shared space, proceed with caution on the "answer out loud" part.)
4. **Pay attention to the "Diversity and Inclusion Notes."** They are at the ends of chapter 3 (provided by diversity guru Michael Hyter, Managing Partner at Korn Ferry and author of *The Power of Inclusion*) and chapter 5 (provided by Jan Jones Blackhurst, Caesars International Board of Directors, former Caesars Vice President for Public Policy and Corporate Responsibility and the first female mayor of Las Vegas).
5. **Mark it up!—unless it's a copy from the library.** I'll be flattered rather than offended if you mark up this book, unless your comments are catty and I discover your copy for sale later on eBay. If you're reading an e-book, you can do something similar to marking up a physical book by making use of the highlighting/notes function and then digitally filing, or printing out, your highlights and notes when you're done.

6. **When you've reached the end of the book, review your notes and your highlighted passages and scan the chapter cheatsheets one final time.** Then file your takeaways somewhere that you're sure to see them again. (My personal approach to doing this is inelegant but effective: I paste the most valuable nuggets from the books I've read on every available surface of my office. It's a ludicrously messy way of working, but I always know where to find the stuff that matters to me.)

A Glimpse of the Payoff

What I'm going to challenge you to do in this book isn't easy: to build an organization that is centered on your customers in fundamental yet sophisticated ways. But it will be an incredibly fruitful venture, resulting in a multipart payoff:

- You'll retain a higher proportion of your existing customers . . .
- You'll increase per-customer spending . . .
- You'll attract new customers . . .

. . . and you'll do it all in a way that is *almost entirely immune to being knocked off by competitors.*

If this last claim, "immune to knockoff," sounds farfetched, let me explain and defend my reasoning. I'm making this claim because I have a strong hunch that if you do the work suggested in this book, you can sleep easy knowing that it's unlikely that your competition will buckle down and do the same. Although your competition may copy your pricing, ape your innovations, duplicate the look and feel of your website, and so forth, they're unlikely to muster the vision,

energy, and follow-through required to replicate the customer-centered organization that I'm here to help you build.

I'm not going to pretend that the fruits of your labor will fall off the vine and into your hands overnight. As a businessperson myself, I know all about the challenges of getting through the grind of making payroll week by week while striving to move forward strategically. But I know it can be done, and I've done it time and again for the companies I work with. The serious stakes I play for are the growth, improved profitability, and ultimate survival of the companies and business leaders for whom I consult, train, and speak.

Which now, through the magic of the printed word, include you.
Let's get to work.

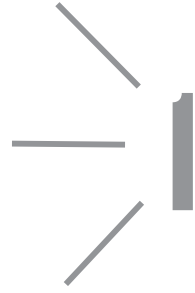
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AUTOMATIC POSITIVITY

Stop me if you've heard this one already. An agent in the Zappos call center once spent a staggering amount of time (ten hours and twenty-nine minutes) on the telephone with a customer who'd called in for help deciding on the perfect pair of Uggs. This topped even the previous record at Zappos, a similarly jaw-dropping eight hours and forty-seven minutes.

The ten-plus hour Zappos phone call quickly became legendary. Late-night host Jimmy Fallon even covered it in a human-interest segment where he brought in an actor to play the Zappos employee, whom he then united on air with the Uggs-seeking customer.

When I first heard about the marathon Zappos phone call, there was one detail missing that I felt compelled to track down, so I put the question to Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh the first chance I got.

Did the employee get a bathroom break? For that matter, did the customer?

I wish I'd used my wristwatch to time the silence that followed, but eventually Tony (who had clearly expected a different line of questioning) responded.

“I’m not actually sure,” he told me, peering back from beneath his new Mohawk hairdo—the first Mohawk I’d seen on a gainfully employed master of the universe. Eventually, Jamie Naughton, the Zappos chief of staff, rescued the conversation by confirming that both the Zappos employee and the customer on the other end of the line did, in fact, take breaks in the course of the phone call to use the bathroom.

“Well, that’s good news—but, even with empty bladders,” I persisted, “what did they talk about for ten hours? Was it really Uggs for all that time?”

Tony looked at me with growing exasperation. “They talked about whatever friends would talk about.”

Point taken.

And even more to the point: Although talking with a customer for ten straight hours is indefensible by traditional call center logic (where a call is supposed to only take five to eight minutes) it makes business sense if you think of the ten-hour phone call as a flag that Zappos has hoisted high in the air to illustrate to its employees just how far they should be ready to go to make an emotional connection with a customer.

The marathon call is now an important part of Zappos company lore, akin to the tire-refund legend at Nordstrom: an illustration that no matter what a customer wants from an agent at Zappos, it’s the agent’s job to make sure that the customer gets it, even if it takes ten hours.

And twenty-nine minutes.

Automatic Positivity

Don’t worry; the way that I myself go about building great, customer-oriented companies does *not* require indulging in ten-hour phone calls à la Zappos, but it does require that you apply focus, passion, and even theatricality (a Zappos specialty) to create what I call

“automatic positivity.” This is where an organization’s go-to position is to say yes to customer requests, rather than defaulting to an easy “no” or one of the many synonyms for no.

In other words, here’s the sentiment that should be on the tip of every employee tongue, straining to come out:

The answer is yes! Now what was your question?

That you should strive to tell your customers “yes” might seem self-evident. Yet a single misguided employee can easily find a dozen opportunities, every single shift, to say no to your customers. That is why it’s essential that employees get the message from their leaders, loud and clear, that the goal is to try to find a way to accommodate their customers, whether or not a manager is around to approve it.

When Your Attempts to Say Yes Slam into Reality

But what happens when an attempt to say yes slams into the obstacles that inevitably come up in the rough-and-tumble world of serving customers, the scenarios where the answer must in fact be no? When this is the case, there’s almost always a way to soften the blow.

The solution, generally, is to restrain yourself from delivering this final no without having a yes to offer in the same breath. Offer an alternative solution and an apology that is likely to make your “no” easier to accept: “I’m sorry, Mr. Henderson. Although we are unable to ship all eight pieces of luggage you ordered on our website to Madagascar without charge, would it help if we shipped the suitcase you plan on giving to your wife overnight at our expense?”

Look at the lengths that Joanne Hassis, a salesperson *par excellence* at Nordstrom, will go to avoid disappointing a customer (i.e., me) with a “no.” Not long ago, my favorite short-sleeve shirts, which I had been buying from Nordstrom for years, were discontinued by Nordstrom’s supplier, and, as a result, Joanne was no longer able to sell them to me. Rather than just saying, “Sorry, Micah—that’ll be a

no,” she found a solution, even though it came from a competing site with private label shirts that Joanne felt would work as a substitute. While this didn’t make any money directly for Joanne or Nordstrom, you can bet that I’m now more faithful than ever about buying the rest of my wardrobe from Joanne—and about recommending her services to others as well. (As, in fact, I’ve done here.)

HEALTH, SAFETY, AND SECURITY EXCEPTIONS TO “YES”

There is a set of scenarios where you shouldn’t even be trying to get to yes. This is when the request has risky safety, health, or security implications.

So, please don’t misapply this chapter’s advice in any of the following ways:

- **“Sure, I’ll bypass our passcode verification procedures and get you into your account, since you’ve forgotten your password.”**
- **“Feel free to keep drinking at our bar far beyond the point of sobriety.”**
- **“Yeah, that’s fine if you prop open our swimming pool safety gate to make load-in and load-out easier for your kid’s birthday party.”**
- **“We don’t mind if you move your chair in front of that marked emergency exit.”**
- **“I’ll be happy to drive you to the airport even though I’ve had a few after-work drinks.”**

. . . and so forth.

Though providing alternatives if you have to say no is important in every industry, in the hospitality industry it’s *officially required behavior* at any hotel that is striving to achieve a rating of five stars from *Forbes*. At Ocean House, a double five-star (Forbes-rated),

double five-diamond (AAA rated) resort in Rhode Island, situations where they aren't able to deliver a yes to a guest are rare indeed, but here's a hypothetical one: a guest wanting to have breakfast in their restaurant when the hour is pushing noon. I asked Daniel Hostettler, the president of Ocean House, how he would handle this situation: "First off, we wouldn't tell them the dining area is closed unless absolutely necessary. And if that *is* necessary, we would offer to serve them by the fireplace in the living room area, or on the outdoor verandah, if the weather is suitable."

Even when the "no" is due to external circumstances rather than the limitations of their property, Hostettler's team tries to create "alternative yeses" to accommodate their guests.

Not long ago, the Ocean House staff learned that a couple was headed their way who had planned to honeymoon in the Caribbean until their intended destination was all but destroyed in a hurricane. As a consolation, the couple was redirecting their travel plans to the Rhode Island coast for a non-tropical, but just as beachy, honeymoon trip. Hostettler and staff anticipated the couple's arrival by gathering sand and seashells from the hotel's own beach (a chilly task—it was November in New England), digging two margaritas into the sand and placing the resulting tableau on the nightstand with a note that read, "We're bringing the Caribbean to you," further setting the scene with calypso music on the guestroom sound system, intended to put the couple in a tropical mood when they walked in.

HOW ONE TECH COMPANY MODELS AUTOMATIC POSITIVITY BY SAYING YES EVEN TO *NON-CUSTOMERS*

Tomas Gorny, cofounder and CEO of Nextiva, one of the fastest-growing business communications companies in the US, tells me that in order to make sure his employees are delivering Amazing Service (a concept so

central to the company that they've actually trademarked the term; I've looked it up: it's US Trademark # 4574257), Gorny encourages his team to provide amazing service even to people who aren't, realistically speaking, prospects, people with no current ability to use Nextiva's services.

Here's how far Nextiva will go to provide support even to those who aren't yet customers: When a tweet appeared in Nextiva's twitter feed asking about a service Nextiva didn't even offer (VoIP service in a particular country overseas), within minutes a response appeared back from Nextiva—and it wasn't simply a reply tweet, like, "Thanks for asking. But no!"

Rather, an employee took it upon himself to fire up a video camera and send, as his response, an engaging, brief video explaining why the company doesn't offer this at present in their service area and thanking them for their inquiry. Needless to say, the original tweeter was floored, as, I expect, was every Twitter user who noticed the exchange.

How to Build Automatic Positivity

If you want to work toward a default position of yes in your company or department, start by supporting "yes behavior" in the following ways.

- **Model "yes behavior" yourself.** If you aren't willing to make yes *your* default, why should anyone else? Be aware of what comes out of your own mouth when employees are listening, and of how you behave when they are watching. If you hear yourself frequently telling customers some version of, "I'm afraid we cannot accommodate that request," your employees will follow suit and find opportunities to likewise refuse to accommodate customers.
- **Spell out your commitment to yes.** Write the default of yes (including the nuances of what to do when you *can't* say yes) into your company standards—and *publicize* those standards throughout the company.

- **Preach the gospel of defaulting to yes, starting in the very first minutes of employment.** Make it clear, from the first days of an employee’s tenure, that the way things are done around here is with customer-focused flexibility; that working here involves an ongoing attempt to maintain, in almost all situations, a default of yes. Then, continue to remind employees about the importance of “yes” in your daily Customer Service Minute (see chapter 2) and via any other creative means you can think of.
- **Support your employees in getting to yes.** From their first fledgling, awkward attempts to find a yes for customers to their later, more-refined performances, employee efforts at yes deserve encouragement and applause.

THE DANGER OF SITUATIONAL TYRANTS: THE “NO MONSTERS” WHO CAN SABOTAGE A COMPANY’S BEST EFFORTS

While most anti-yes behavior is served up by well-intentioned, if misguided, employees, there is a more unsavory scenario to watch out for. Any organization or department can become a breeding ground for what I call *situational tyrants*—employees who have the power to say no within their tiny fiefdoms, and who exercise that power every chance they get. When a customer is looking for even a tiny bit of flexibility, a situational tyrant will slam the rulebook down with sadistic glee.

Here are four ways to avoid breeding and empowering situational tyrants.

1. **Hire appropriately.** Strive to select applicants for customer-facing positions who have the requisite personality traits for superior customer service. (More on this in chapter 3.)
2. **Don’t misunderstand, and don’t let your employees misunderstand, empowerment.** The kind of empowerment that great

companies embrace (see chapter 4) shouldn't be misinterpreted as a license to kiss off a challenging or "noncompliant" (as they say in healthcare) customer. On the contrary, the kind of empowerment you should be encouraging employees to exercise should almost always be *in favor of* a customer. Going *against* the customer, if it's necessary, should require deliberation and team or management involvement. Consider adopting Commerce Bank's approach: "It takes one employee to say yes, two to say no."

3. **Trust but verify.** The way that a situational tyrant behaves in the presence of a person in power, such as a company leader, may be far different from how they act when they're out of earshot of the boss, especially if the tyrant's alone with a customer whom they believe to be powerless. So, it's important for leaders to have an ear to the ground, listening to what other employees may be saying, since a leader may have trouble witnessing and uncovering situational tyranny themselves. And once you *do* witness the tyrannical behavior, it's essential to act quickly, as your other employees will be watching for your response.
4. **Counsel (very directly, if necessary).** Some tyrannical employees will never recognize the need to change until you're extraordinarily direct with them. I wouldn't rush to assume that any employee is permanently set in their tyrannical ways until you lay things out for them in black and white. And this way, if they do fail to improve after the situation is made clear to them, at least you'll know you gave them every opportunity.

One final note: it's outside the scope of this chapter, but *situational tyranny in the treatment of employees by a supervisor* is a similar, and similarly serious, problem in many organizations.



“GET TO THE POINT,

MICAH!”

READER’S CHEATSHEET FOR CHAPTER 1

The default employee attitude in a customer-focused organization should be, **“The answer is yes! Now what was your question?”** rather than defaulting to no and its variants.

When you can’t say yes: In scenarios where the answer must in fact be no, there’s almost always a way to soften the “no blow.” Try not to say no without having a reasonable alternative to offer.

IMPORTANT NOTE: There is a category of scenarios where you shouldn’t even be trying to get to yes. **This is when saying yes to a request has potential safety, health, or security implications.**

How to build automatic positivity: Here are ways to build support for a default of yes:

- **Spell it out.** Write the default of yes into your company standards and publicize it throughout your organization.

- **Preach the gospel of defaulting to yes, starting with new-employee onboarding.**
- **Support your employees in getting there.** Employee efforts at yes deserve applause—and require it, if the yeses aren't going to fade out as quickly as they emerge.
- **Model “yes behavior” yourself.** If you aren't willing to walk the yes walk, why should anyone else?

The danger of situational tyrants: Any organization, location, or department can become a breeding ground for *situational tyrants*—employees who have the power to say no within their tiny domains, and who exercise that power every chance they get. Avoid harboring and breeding such people, and keep a close eye and ear out throughout the organization to find out if, in spite of your best efforts, you have. (There is a parallel kind of tyranny to also guard against: the tyrannical treatment of *employees* by certain supervisors that is a problem in many organizations as well.)

READING GROUP GUIDE FOR CHAPTER 1

Note: I've compiled all of the reading group guides into a single document you can download for free at guides.micahsolomon.com.

1. What are some examples of times when people in our organization have exhibited an attitude of “*The answer is ‘yes!’ Now what was your question?*” What about examples from other companies we have personally enjoyed doing business with?
2. As a rule, is “automatic positivity” happening right now in our organization—do we truly have a default of yes?
3. If not, or if not entirely, what are the roadblocks? Are they immovable or can they be shifted toward yes?
4. If the roadblocks don’t seem immovable, would doing the work needed to create a default of yes be worth it? How so or how not?
5. On a more somber note, this chapter delves into the issue of “situational tyranny.” Do we have our eyes out for this kind of behavior within our organization, both as it applies to the treatment of customers and as it applies to the treatment of employees, particularly when nobody powerful may be around to observe it?



THE SECRETS OF BUILDING THE WORLD'S BEST CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE—YOURS

Company culture is currently a smoking-hot topic of business discussion, dilating a lot of pupils and inducing a lot of heavy breathing in the boardroom. Laying my own cards on the table, I can tell you that, in terms of feeding my family, this has been an excellent development: Culture has always been one of my favorite topics, and the opportunities to consult and speak on the subject have certainly been invigorating and welcome.

Yet there have been some odd, even bizarre, angles to the experience.

Out there working the “culture circuit,” I’ve run into people whose ideas about culture change are comically distorted, kind of a mashup of

“Let’s hang some off-road bikes on the wall to illustrate our commitment to work-life balance!”

—and—

“Maybe what we need are trendier-sounding job titles—
‘Ninja of the Backup Plan,’ ‘Goddess of the Interwebs,’
‘Demigod of the Mailroom,’ ‘Queen of the Cloud’?”

—and—

“Hey, wouldn’t a beer tap in the breakroom be a good
idea? Or, hey, I’ve got it: Would a *vodka* tap be even better?”

I blame these dubious ideas about culture on the coverage the business press has given to successful companies that happen, *coincidental to their greatness*, to exhibit these types of flashy “cultural” elements. Although this sideshow gets all the attention, it’s tangential to, or at odds with, the crux of what matters. (In the “at odds with” category: No, a beer or vodka tap in the break room is not a good idea. In fact, if you look in the Dictionary of Culture that I’m going to write someday, you’ll find this under *N*for “No freakin’ way is this a good idea.”)

The essence of a strong customer service culture is simpler and more straightforward than you might think if you’ve let yourself get distracted by superficialities and hype. It is, in fact, relatively easy to understand and to get a start on implementing. It just takes the interest, a drive to succeed, and a little of what’s (ironically) called common sense.



Defining Customer Service Culture

My definition of *customer service culture*—the practical, working definition I use on the jobsite—is as simple as 1 and 2 (there’s not even a 3). Your customer service culture, for better or for worse, has two primary elements:

1. The way your company treats its customers.
2. The way your company treats the people whose job it is to take care of these customers: employees, as well as vendors and subcontractors.

The fundamental complication with this two-part definition is that there may not be an all-the-time way that you treat your customers or an all-the-time way that you treat employees, vendors, and subcontractors. So, to get the full measure of a culture, we'll need to subdivide items 1 and 2 and look separately at:

- How you treat your customers, employees, vendors, and subcontractors on a normal, stress-free day (when money is flowing, nobody's called in sick, you've got your "A team" working [my Canadian clients call that their "eh team"]), and
- How you treat these entities when you are under stress (in the face of tight resources, hurricanes or other freakish weather on the horizon, demanding customers, intensive shareholder demands, difficult personal times for yourselves as employees and leaders, and so forth). In figure 2.1, *the goal is for the treatment in all four boxes to be equally positive.*

	When Stress Is Low 	When Stress Is High 
How We Serve Our Customers	?	?
How We Serve Those Who Serve Our Customers*	?	?

*Our employees, our vendors, and our subcontractors

Figure 2.1. The Solomon Service Culture Matrix™
 For a printable copy, please email culture@micahsolomon.com

Unfortunately, some organizations differ dramatically in the treatment they offer in stressed versus unstressed scenarios. And it's here that cynicism can grow quickly: when customers and employees see you inconsistently deliver on your principles. (Just as bad, if a first-timer happens to catch your company on a bad [stressed] day, their *only* experience with you may be negative. In other words, they'll experience a defect rate of 100 percent!)

By contrast, when your culture is well-conceived and *consistently* implemented, an atmosphere settles in where service is *a way of life*, where it's *the standard position*, something that is continually lived, pursued, and refined. In such a culture, employees can perform practical magic that doesn't happen in lesser, internally conflicted organizations. In a positive service culture, employees are often to be found taking the initiative to care for their customers, and they're well known for how fair they are in their dealings with vendors and other stakeholders in every type of circumstance. Customers and other stakeholders learn over time that the company has their interests at heart regardless of whether skies are fair, threatening, or raining down buckets.

In a poorly conceived and inconsistent customer service culture, things will be askew in some or all of the following ways:

- The company will only *intermittently* uphold its commitment to providing good service (generally only doing so when times are low volume/low stress/nobody's called in sick/the customer in question is a VIP, and so forth) rather than being a company that always does its very best for customers.
- The company will, at least some of the time, fail to support the people serving its customers—it will fail to empower employees, fail to give them creative leeway in how they go about their duties, and maybe even flat-out mistreat them.
- The company will, at least when times are tight, beat up vendors in brutal negotiations as well as openly devalue, even mock, their contributions.

You can get a hint of these out-of-whack scenarios when you see companies whose consumer reviews (such as on Yelp) and employee reviews (such as on Glassdoor) don't match up, with employees and customers having such disparate impressions that it seems as if they are describing entirely different companies. In a sense, they are.

Five Steps Toward Creating a Customer Service Culture

Here are five steps to take toward establishing and sustaining a customer service culture:

1. Define your purpose in a sentence or two.
2. Set down a short list of principles that are fundamental to your desired culture.
3. Express your cultural expectations at every possible junction, from recruitment onward.
4. Maintain a repeating ritual for cultural reinforcement.
5. Develop an obsession with talent management.

Define your purpose. Write a sentence or two that defines the purpose of your business and describes the type of behaviors you'll be expecting from every associate, manager, and executive in your organization.

This statement of purpose should be:

- Written in clear language
- Short enough to be memorable
- Long enough to be meaningful

One of the most powerful definitions of purpose that I know of is the one that guides the Mayo Clinic:

The needs of the patient come first.

Mayo's statement is exceptionally brief (seven words), uses language that is easy to understand (the only word longer than one syllable is the central word, "patient"), and is clear in the expectations it lays out for everyone who works there.

Another powerful statement of purpose guides Safelite AutoGlass:

We exist to make a difference and bring unexpected happiness to people's everyday lives.

The Safelite statement is only fourteen words long, and the only words that stray beyond two syllables are the salient ones: "unexpected," "difference," "happiness," and "everyday." Note in particular the "unexpected." Safelite associates tend to come into a customer's life on a day when happiness is the last thing they're expecting, yet the company devotes itself to the idea that its team will be able to bring happiness—unexpected happiness, in fact—in the course of their duties.

"You could think of us as being in the 'negative services' category," says Tom Feeney, Safelite's president and CEO. "Customers aren't in a good frame of mind after a rock hits their windshield, or, even worse, after someone breaks into their car, shattering the glass on the way in. So this is a very specific goal that we've embedded in our purpose statement, to 'bring unexpected happiness,' which suggests that we're going to wow customers even in the face of something that has them very frustrated."

Few definitions of purpose are *quite* as concise as these two, but concision and precision are exactly what you should be aiming for. It's essential to avoid the kind of flowery, jargon-infested statement whose inevitable fate will be to languish, unremembered, in somebody's desk drawer.

As you start to work on your organization's definition of purpose, it's certainly fine to *begin* by writing down something that's longer and more jargon-laden than you want to end up with. Just be sure to then whittle it down, taking out everything that is jargony, mealy-mouthed,

or that you simply can't make yourself believe. Once you've done this, you'll have an expression of your culture's core purpose, defined in appropriately muscular and memorable language.

THE NORDSTROM “DO-IT-NOW” SERVICE CULTURE

Joanne Hassis, the Nordstrom retail professional we first met on page 3, tells me she defines the Nordstrom culture as being a “do it now” culture, as long as the “it” is a pro-customer activity.

Here's an example I personally encountered of this “do it now, for the customer” culture.

When my Nordstrom shoe delivery was left in the rain by a common carrier (UPS or FedEx or DHL; I no longer remember) and my \$200 shoes were ruined before they even got to me, it put things in a legal grey area. The responsible party *might* be me or it *might* be the trucking company, but to my understanding it's *not* Nordstrom.

Yet, when this happened to me, not for an instant did my salesperson, Joanne, even *consider* saying, “You need to file a claim with the trucking company.”

Instead she told me, without hesitation, the following: “I'm so incredibly sorry that happened, and I'm bringing over a brand new pair of shoes—will you be home in forty-five minutes?”¹

When I recently asked Joanne to tell me more about this “do it now” culture, she obliged. The Nordstrom culture “isn't something we spend much time defining or carrying on about,” she told me. “Yet it is undeniably something you can feel in the air.” A particularly inspiring aspect of the Nordstrom culture, she continued, is its circular nature: “The people who want to work here have been attracted by what they understand the Nordstrom culture to be. Then, once they get here, their enthusiasm drives all of us to live up to the best of what we can be—to *truly be as they believe us to be*.” Finally, she says, the circle takes another fortuitous turn when *future* employees are attracted to the now-strengthened Nordstrom culture that has been created.

Set down a short list of fundamental cultural principles, a sort of Constitution or Bill of Rights for what your culture will be. I would suggest you limit yourself to no more than ten or twelve essential principles. Here are examples of what three such principles might look like:

- **We value every individual's input and creativity.** Everything we do here, from addressing defects to finding better ways to work, depends on employees' sharp eyes, input, and creativity. Every one of us here is valued for more than our labor, for more than what it says in our job descriptions.
- **We respond both to the stated requests of our customers and to opportunities to serve them in ways they may not directly request.** We can't always count on the customer to know what to ask for, nor to know what we are able to offer them.
- **Service is the responsibility of everyone here.** We seek out every opportunity to serve our customers and to improve their experiences, and we rise to the occasion to serve customers even when it pulls us away from our regularly assigned duties.

Passionately express your cultural expectations at every possible juncture from recruitment, hiring, and employee onboarding onward. Let employees and potential employees know, *from the first moment they come in contact with your organization*, what matters most in the culture you are striving to create. This is essential, and is often overlooked: recruiting, hiring, and onboarding so often get bogged down in forms to fill out and other mundane details that the new or potential employee never hears—or at least doesn't hear loud and clear—what the company they're joining, or are on the brink of joining, is all about.

Introduce and diligently maintain a repeating ritual for cultural reinforcement. Setting up the framework of a great service culture is only the start. *Reinforcing* it is what ultimately makes the difference. Time is your great enemy here or can be your dearest friend; time can either chip away, daily, at what you've built, through the relentless force of entropy, or time can be your dearest ally as you methodically reinforce and add texture and bulk to what you've built. Your best hope for having your service culture persist over time is to find an opportunity to reinforce your cultural focus every single day. Without this intentional daily rededication, the seed of cultural greatness that you're striving to plant may never take root, or may ultimately get washed away by competing goals and by the frustrations and challenges that employees endure each day in the course of serving customers.

One powerful ritual that works in many types of organizations is what I call a daily **Customer Service Minute**. (In spite of its name, it will more likely require five minutes, but keep it under ten.) Hold your Customer Service Minute at the beginning of each workday (or at the beginning of each shift, if you run more than one shift a day). Some of my consulting clients call this their “huddle,” or “lineup,” or “standup meeting” (I'm not a fan of this last, disability-insensitive term); whatever you decide to call it, it will be a ritual that involves employees—ideally, *all* employees—who gather in small groups at the same time each day to kick off the workday, or shift, on the right note.

Each Customer Service Minute should be devoted to a single aspect of providing great service. This typically includes sharing examples that illustrate that single service principle as well as going over helpful techniques, pitfalls encountered, and challenges overcome. I recommend that the Customer Service Minute be led by a *different* employee (not necessarily a manager, by the way) each day; if you take this approach, your employees, in rotation, will be learning and teaching at the same time, and you'll avoid overburdening any manager or single team member.

(Not exactly a repeating *ritual*, but having similar utility, is printed collateral—as long as it’s well thought out and you keep it up to date. Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company employees swear by the value of the pocket-sized accordion card of key principles and behavioral guidance that they keep on their person and can refer to in the course of their workday; Jason Bradshaw and team at Volkswagen Australia have had similar success keeping their dealers inspired through their brief, illustrated book, designed for internal use only: *100 Ways to WOW*.)

Develop an obsession with talent management. Talent management is the term I use for the recruitment, selection, and development of employees. As much as anywhere, this is where culture lives or dies. It’s essential that you implement a successful approach and mindset for finding, keeping, and developing employees who have an affinity for service: employees who are selected for their interest in and suitability for your company purpose and whom you support and guide in their further development. (Talent management is one of the central disciplines of cultural and professional success when serving customers. There’s a longer treatment of it in chapter 3.)

RESOURCES FOR READERS

If you’d like additional help in creating and sustaining a customer service culture, I have a printable document that can help. For a copy of “Eleven Powerful Customer Service Culture Catalysts (That Can Transform Your Company Results),” let me know by email at culturelist@micha.solomon.com (careful—my URL is very error-inducing) and I’ll hook you up.

Ten Elements Shared by Outstanding Customer Service Cultures

In the time I've spent studying, and working with, companies with truly outstanding customer service cultures (such as Nordstrom, USAA, Southwest Airlines, The Container Store, Zappos, L.L. Bean, Mayo Clinic, MOD Pizza, and Bob's Red Mill) and these companies' equally excellent but lesser-known business-to-business (B2B) counterparts, I find each company's culture to be, on the surface, quite distinct. For example, an employee whose early career is spent in the straitlaced but excellent Member Support environment of USAA in San Antonio and then moves to Vegas to join the wild-and-woolly world of the Customer Loyalty Team at Zappos is *definitely* going to need an adjustment period before feeling at home. Yet, just below the surface distinctions, these cultures have a lot in common.

I've gone ahead and distilled a list of ten characteristics that I believe to be shared by all great customer service cultures. I recommend reviewing this list and considering how your *own* company culture stacks up. Then, wherever you find yourself lacking, get ready to roll up your sleeves.

1. **Culturally consonant employee selection (hiring) practices.** Sustaining a great customer service culture is much more possible if employees have a natural predisposition to serve. While there's no complete guarantee that every employee hired via a trait-based selection approach (which I will discuss in the next chapter) will fulfill their potential and advance the company culture, great companies understand that this is the right place to start.
2. **A commitment to ongoing improvement via customer service training and retraining, from orientation**

(onboarding) onward. Training can take many shapes, from the initial inspiration and guidance that new employees receive at the time of orientation, to the Customer Service Minute, to more elaborate training sessions, workshops, and all-hands keynotes with a customer service theme. All of these are ways that great customer service cultures maintain themselves and ensure that they continue to grow. This way, service greatness isn't left to happenstance and doesn't plateau or diminish over time from inertia and entropy.

3. **A culture of empowering every employee to take the initiative in service of their customers.** Once employees are properly selected, oriented, and trained, they require empowerment to flourish. All of these primed-to-be-great employees can't do their best work, or contribute to the greatness of a service culture, until they're given the power and leeway to do so. And all great customer service cultures *do* give employees such power and leeway. In fact, it's understood, in a service culture such as predominates at Nordstrom or Zappos or the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, that as an employee it's *your job* to be empowered: to take positive, creative action on behalf of others.
4. **Employee control over how they carry out their duties.** In a great company culture, not only are employees empowered to assist customers in proactive (and, at times, inconvenient or expensive) ways, they also have a level of creative control over how they carry out their day-to-day duties. Although great companies provide comprehensive guidance and training, they don't excessively script or regiment employees in how to carry out their interactions with customers. Employees are not, in other words, just interchangeable cogs, nor are they serfs to be exploited solely for

their labor. They are fully dimensional human beings who are both expected to and supported in making full and unique contributions.

5. **A common language.** At Zappos, employees refer to themselves as Zapponians; their lobby gift shop is the Z'Boutique, the contact center is called the Customer Loyalty Team, and so forth. Southwest Airlines creatively spells words such as “luv” in its mission statement and internal documents. This kind of common language, though it may seem goofy to outsiders, is useful in bringing a company together and making everyone who works at a company feel like they're part of the “in crowd.” (Be careful here: internal jargon shouldn't be allowed to slip into conversation or correspondence with *customers*, as it will likely confuse them or make them feel like outsiders.)
6. **Legendary stories.** Tales of over-the-top customer service are valuable in making a point to prospective, incoming, and even long-tenured employees about what an organization's culture consists of and what it places a value on. Southwest Airlines has many such stories, often about assisting passengers in distress; similarly, USAA Insurance has many inspiring tales that get told internally, often stemming from work they've done for their members in flood recovery and other disaster assistance. Each such story serves the same purpose: to show what is valued in the company's culture and the lengths to which employees should be willing to go in terms of investing empathy, resources, and creativity.
7. **No “not my job.”** There's an understanding within great company cultures that every employee will pitch in wherever needed, regardless of an employee's particular job description and level in the organization. This can manifest itself daily, as it does at Disney

parks, where employees (“cast members”) from each and every level of the organization can be found interrupting whatever else they may be doing to pick up stray trash wherever they encounter it. Or this pitching in outside of an employee’s daily functions can come up primarily on special occasions, the days or peak hours when help is needed to handle additional volume. For example, during the holiday rush, every Zappos employee, including CEO Tony Hsieh and other members of the executive team, spends time working the phone lines shoulder-to-shoulder with the regular call center employees. Similarly, at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, when there’s a time-sensitive need to convert a meeting room setup into a banquet room arrangement or vice versa, it’s “all hands on deck” until accomplished.

8. **Pride.** At Southwest Airlines, which is frequently rated at or near the top within aviation for customer service, employee pride is palpable. Case in point: Once, when I told a flight attendant what I do for a living, she asked for my address and mailed me *her own copy* of *Nuts!*, a classic book about Southwest. Inside, scribbled throughout the book, were forty or so of her own notes, comments like, “So true! We really *do* try to do this for our passengers,” and “Yes! This is *exactly* how we aim to treat each other!” and “This is what makes working here amazing!” Again: This was not a publicist trying to gain an advantage with me. This was a flight attendant promoting her own company on her own initiative, and at her own expense.
9. **Humility.** The same companies that exhibit such pride are also, paradoxically, humble in ways that keep an organization both solidly rooted and open to learning and growth. Case in point: In response

to my articles covering Nordstrom's customer service prowess, people from a variety of levels of the Nordstrom organization have written to me and posted various comments. What's notable to me about these comments is how uniformly they include an element of humility and eagerness to improve, rather than patting themselves on the back for the positive coverage I've provided in the published piece. These responses fall essentially along the lines of, "Thanks for the recognition in your article. We're just striving to provide the best service we can and to improve every day."

10. **Support for customer-focused innovation.** A great customer service culture can't be static. Happily, employees within a positive culture, simply due to their pro-customer inclinations, will find multiple areas for improvement, each and every shift they work. While this, of course, is a great start, it's ultimately not enough. Customer-focused innovation thrives when a progressive attitude is supported by processes and systems to harvest employee ideas and bring them to fruition. *(Please see the USAA sidebar immediately below for more on this subject. You may also enjoy a document I have available to support innovation in your organization. For a free copy of "25 Essential Innovation Prompts," email me at innovation@micahsolomon.com.)*

HOW USAA BAKES CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE INNOVATION INTO ITS COMPANY CULTURE

Here's a jaw-dropping illustration of what a culture that's focused on customer experience innovation looks like: the ideas proposed by a *single security guard* working at USAA, the insurance and financial services giant, have resulted in *twenty-five patents* for the company. These patents, each

designed to improve a portion of the customer experience provided to USAA customers (“members” in USAA parlance) are just a few of the 10,000 ideas submitted by employees each year, with over 900 suggestions resulting in US patents so far.

How does USAA, which regularly ranks at or near the top for customer satisfaction in all of its markets, propel customer-focused innovation? There are some clever processes involved, and I’ll get to those in a moment. But what it requires, first off, is a mindset.

“You have to realize,” says Darrius Jones, vice president for innovation, “that every employee here is a customer—a member—of USAA. You get your membership with your initial onboarding documents. [USAA membership is otherwise restricted to current and retired military and their families.] This, combined with serving members every day, keeps employees in constant touch with how USAA does business” and keeps them acutely aware of ways that USAA could potentially improve its service to members, including themselves.

INNOVATION COMES TO THE AID OF HURRICANE-FLOODED CUSTOMERS

Some innovations proposed by USAA employees come in response to heart-wrenching developments experienced by an employee either in their own life or encounters in the course of helping out customers. That’s the genesis of the aerial imaging tool that was developed in the wake of Hurricane Harvey: “Our claims adjusters heard from members who couldn’t get home and were desperate to see what damage would be awaiting them,” Lea Sims, USAA’s assistant vice president for employee and member innovation, tells me. “Within twenty-four hours, several teams here working together constructed an online portal with ‘before’ and ‘after’ aerial photos using existing satellite imagery and post-storm imagery from NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) to determine the extent of damages. This gave our members the ability to remotely search and view damage to their homes during the hurricane, which helped them begin the

rebuilding process before they had a chance to physically get back to their homes.”

GETTING CLOSE TO THE CUSTOMER—IN THIS CASE, DEPLOYED MILITARY AND THEIR FAMILIES

In addition to innovations that arise from employees’ own experiences as USAA members, there are those that come out of employees’ understanding of the experience of USAA’s broader member base, in particular, deployed military and their families. Every new USAA employee goes through an onboarding experience for military-life awareness that includes preparing and eating MREs (meals ready to eat) and drilling with a retired drill sergeant. (I understand that he takes it somewhat easier on them than he does on real troops!)

How this plays out on the banking side is instructive. USAA’s banking operation is, for the most part, branchless, in the belief that phone- and digitally based experiences are most appropriate for a far-flung membership. Being largely branchless and serving a unique population led USAA to become the first major US financial institution to roll out voice and facial recognition, technological innovations based in part on an employee contribution that was ultimately awarded a patent.

HARVESTING AND REWARDING INNOVATIVE IDEAS

The systems USAA has set up to harvest innovative ideas include its “Always On Ideas Platform,” a portal that’s available to all employees, as well as what USAA calls challenges, competitions, and hackathons. “Challenges are where business sponsors within USAA present a problem or challenge and ask employee innovators to provide ideas for solving it,” says Sims. “Competitions are volunteer-based and more involved, taking about eight weeks to complete with sessions over lunches. Hackathons are

sponsored by particular departments within USAA and are designed to be rapid-fire problem solving over a day or two.”

The rewards? While employee ideas (considered “work product”) do remain the property of USAA, the company does provide recognition and rewards, including monetary rewards for winners of hackathons and competitions as well as recognition at innovation ceremonies, and, for those whose inventions are awarded a patent, the immortality of being featured on a leaf of the Patent Tree, which has grown to take up an entire wall of the company’s innovation lab.

Serving the People Who Serve Your Customers

Nothing boils my blood quicker than a company leader who shows superficial interest in my service culture matrix (see page 15) yet manages to pass over the “how we serve those who serve our customers” row as if it somehow doesn’t apply to them. *Great* companies and *great* leaders don’t do this. Rather, they strive to give both columns in the matrix—*servicing customers* and *servicing those who serve our customers*—equal, or nearly equal, weight.

But rather than go on ranting about the culturally hypocritical corners of the business world, let me highlight two companies that walk the walk: independent insurance company Starkweather and Shepley and the fast-growing casual restaurant chain MOD Pizza.

If the insurance industry doesn’t sound like a hotbed of cultural leadership to you, that might be because you’ve yet to come across a company like Starkweather. The sustained growth of this firm, one of the top independent insurance agencies overall in New England and one of the largest independent agencies nationwide for the personal insurance sector, is based on the systemic, culture-building decisions that the 140-year-old company has made over the course of many decades.

Strikingly, their employee focus is built into their company charter, and it forms an essential part of who they are. Uniquely, Starkweather

is an insurance company that's held in trust for the benefit of its employees, and with a stated commitment that the firm will never be sold. "The intentions and interests of the trust are not based on returns to shareholder stock," says Chairman and CEO Larry Keefe. "Instead, the trust structure ensures the firm's existence in perpetuity for the benefit of our clients and our associates." This is a rare position and structure in an industry environment that's so rife with consolidation that employees elsewhere in the industry are commonly fearful that they'll come into work one morning and find an entirely different corporate parent in charge.

"Operating for the sake of our stakeholders [employees] and our clients is woven into the structure of how we do business here," says executive vice president and national sales manager Andy Fotopulos. "I used to go to annual meetings [at previous companies], and the person on the podium would be up there talking about 'making decisions that are best for clients,' or 'making decisions that are best for employees.' The sad truth, though, is that while many companies talk this talk, it wasn't 'til I got to Starkweather that I had the beautiful 'aha!' moment: 'My gosh, here it is absolutely true.' Every decision we make is what's best for our employees and our clients—and they are considered hand in hand."

MOD Pizza: Second Chances for Employees; First-Class Service for Customers

Maybe a quick-service pizza chain seems like another unlikely place to uncover a superior service culture, but I'd beg to differ, having spent time with MOD Pizza, the chain of pizza restaurants that is spreading across North America like a river of melted mozzarella. MOD is already operating more than 400 restaurants (a figure I've had to revise five times in the course of writing this book, they're growing so quickly), after only ten years in business.

But growth isn't thought of at MOD as the goal. Rather, it's considered an *aftereffect* of MOD's central purpose, which I would distill down to three words: "*Putting People First.*"

"Putting People First" is pursued with great passion by management and employees companywide, who are empowered to make special efforts to hire "second chance" employees (former prisoners and people who have suffered from addiction) and those with special physical and intellectual needs, as well as making other accommodations that fall under the umbrella of putting people first. "It is our feeling and our strategy," says Ally Svenson, who cofounded the company with her husband Scott in 2008, "that the employees we treat so well" after their years of bad breaks previously, "will have an innate passion to serve. In some cases, MOD means even more to our employees than it does to Scott and me, and because of its importance in their lives, our employees have a passion that comes out in how they serve their customers in every interaction, day after day."



“GET TO THE POINT,

MICAH!”

READER’S CHEATSHEET FOR CHAPTER 2

My definition of *customer service culture* has two primary elements:

1. The way your company treats its customers.
2. The way your company treats the people whose job it is to take care of these customers: your employees, vendors, and subcontractors.

To make it trickier, we need to subdivide items 1 and 2 between how you treat your customers, employees, vendors, and subcontractors on a normal, stress-free day and how you treat them when your organization is under stress. In an ideal organization, the difference will be minimized between the behaviors you’ll find on display at stressed and unstressed times and times when it’s serving external customers versus when it’s serving those *who take care* of customers (see the matrix illustration on page 15).

Five Steps Toward Creating a Customer Service Culture

Here are five essential steps for establishing and sustaining a customer service culture:

1. **Define your purpose** in a sentence or two.
2. **Write down a brief list of fundamental cultural principles**—sort of a Constitution or Bill of Rights for what your culture will be.
3. **Express your cultural expectations (items 1 and 2 above) during recruitment, hiring, and onboarding**—so that they are known to employees and potential employees from the get-go.
4. **Introduce and maintain a repeating ritual for cultural reinforcement** such as a **Customer Service Minute**: a very brief meeting (shorter than ten minutes) at the beginning of each workday, or the beginning of each shift, if you run more than one shift a day. Focus each of these sessions on a single aspect of providing great service.
5. **Become organizationally obsessed with talent management.** Devote yourself to finding, keeping, and developing employees who have an affinity for service, whom you then support and guide in further developing their cultural affinity.

Ten Elements That Great Customer Service Cultures Share

1. Culturally consonant employee selection (hiring) practices.
2. Customer service training and retraining, from orientation (onboarding) onward.
3. Employee empowerment to serve customers creatively and to the best of their abilities.
4. Significant employee control over how to carry out their jobs.
5. A common language.
6. Legendary stories.
7. No “not my job.”
8. Pride in the company and its place in the world.
9. Humility about the company and its place in the world.
10. Support for customer-focused innovation.

READING GROUP GUIDE FOR CHAPTER 2

1. One point that's emphasized in this chapter is that a great customer service culture treats those who serve customers (employees, vendors, subcontractors) every bit as well as it treats the customers themselves. To what extent is our own organization succeeding—or failing—to uphold this standard?
2. Just as important, a great customer culture strives to treat customers and employees just as well during times when the organization is *under stress* (when resources are tight, the weather is threatening, customers are introducing challenges in the workflow, and so forth) *as it does in times of ease* (when money is flowing, nobody's called in sick, the sun is shining, and the phone queues are short). To what extent is our attitude and our behaviors uniform regardless of whether our organization is under stress?
3. This chapter includes a list of ten elements that Micah has found that all great customer service cultures share (culturally consonant employee selection practices; customer service training and retraining; employee empowerment; creative control that is entrusted to employees; a common language; legendary stories; no “not my job”; pride; humility; and support for customer-focused innovation). Do we agree with this

list? If so, does it match what's going on at our organization pretty well, sort of, or absolutely not?

Reminder: All of the reading group guides are available as a single document you can download for free at **guides.micahsolomon.com**.



THE POWER OF “WOW”: CREATING STORIES THAT CUSTOMERS WILL REMEMBER—AND SPREAD

One message I don't enjoy delivering to my clients (although some of them seem convinced that it gives me some kind of sick pleasure) is my tough-love mantra that *satisfactory customer service isn't enough*. Although it's essential to consistently offer competent, reliable customer service—and to invest in the standards, systems, and training that it takes to pull this off—don't sell your company short by stopping there. If you want to create the kind of passionate customer engagement that will turn your company into a legend of service and win you customers for life, you need to take your efforts one step beyond. You need to pursue what I call “wow.”

As I define it, a wow experience is *when service goes beyond fulfilling basic customer expectations and does so in a creative, unexpected way*. By creating a wow experience, you give rise to a story in the mind of your customer. Since humans tend to think

and remember in terms of stories, the wow approach is one of the most effective ways to build lasting connections with customers. These *wow stories* have a good likelihood of living on in memory, encouraging customers to not only return, but to share their memories of the experience with friends, family, and coworkers—and, through social media, the world.

Rob Siefker, the senior director of the contact center at Zappos, a company whose stated purpose is “to live and deliver WOW,” offers the example of a Zappos employee who took the initiative required to create a wow moment—and build an indelible customer memory:

Not long ago, two of our customers—a newly married couple—were packing up their belongings to move to a new home, and, in the rush of the move, the husband packed his wife’s jewelry inside one of her purses and then packed the purse inside what he thought was a spare Zappos box. His wife, it turns out, was intending to return that purse to Zappos using that very box, which she then did, having no idea that inside the purse now were several thousand dollars’ worth of her jewelry!

When the couple arrived at their new home and started to unpack, bedlam broke out as the wife figured out what had happened—and as it sunk in that her jewelry was, perhaps irretrievably, missing. The rep she reached out to at Zappos decided to reroute the box directly to his own desk and then, fearing for the safety of the valuables in transit were he to ship them, purchased a plane ticket [yes, Zappos repaid him] so he could hand-deliver the package himself.

When he and the jewelry arrived, the grateful couple invited him in for dinner. They’re now customers for life, as you can imagine.

Wow Isn't Always a Grand Production; How Zappos Creates “Everyday Wow” on Every Call

The story of the purse and jewelry is a particularly dramatic example. And not all moments of wow need to be as over the top. A wow connection can also be achieved less theatrically through the use of the right words in conversation with a customer, words that make an emotional connection that transcends the transactional. Although this is a less dramatic form of wow, it can be similarly powerful.

Even in the Zappos context, for every Hollywood-ending story like the jewelry rescue, there are hundreds more instances where what I call “everyday wow” is delivered, typically over the phone, the humble vessel that Zappos considers to be its most important connection with customers. In fact, Zappos commits itself to delivering wow, or at least a wow attempt, on *every* phone call fielded by an employee in its contact center.

“We want to distinguish the service experience for every customer, on each and every phone call,” says Megan Petrini, a customer service training facilitator for Zappos. “The connection can be anything, as long as it authentically relates to the customer. If you hear a dog bark [in the background on the customer’s end of a call], you can connect over your shared love of animals. If you hear a kid in the background, ditto.” Or (and this is perhaps most common), you can connect over the details of the customer’s order or the particular question or difficulty that has them calling in—by taking the conversation somewhere beyond a “just the facts” approach.

Eavesdropping on Zappos

Let’s listen in on Madison, an experienced and proficient Zappos employee who’s working the phones. A customer calls in who is at her wit’s end over the challenges of finding a comfortable shoe in

a narrow size for an upcoming family wedding. Madison responds with great sympathy and passion:

Honestly, “narrows” are the worst! It’s almost like the whole industry has conspired against people with narrow feet. My aunt has narrow feet like you, and I swear it seems like every other conversation I have with her is about her miseries related to them.

As you can imagine, the two of them are soon besties. And, ultimately, Madison’s customer regains hope that the upcoming wedding will be something other than a torture-fest for her feet. Then, browsing together while still on the call, Madison and the customer manage to find a new, likely candidate for pain-free but dressy footwear.

On calls with other customers, Madison will, depending on the customer and context, deliver wow by upgrading shipping so that shoes will arrive in time for a special event, or by gifting a customer with a duplicate order of shoes they’ve received, so they can donate them to a favored charity or give them to a friend, rather than going through the hassle of returning them. And, she can occasionally be caught sending flowers to a customer who is bereaved—or, who is celebrating a happy occasion.

The Importance of Breathing Space When You’re Striving to Create Wow

What Madison does for her customers—taking all the time needed to bond with them on the phone; maybe sending them a small gift or comping them one of the items in their order—may or may not cost Zappos any money; certainly, it doesn’t cost them a lot. And, as a general rule, “everyday wow” customer service doesn’t

have to cost money, at least not directly. But what it does require is *breathing space*.

You can find the kind of breathing space that’s conducive to creating wow moments reflected in the metrics of the Zappos contact center. Zappos runs at just 60 to 70 percent agent occupancy rather than following the industry norm, which is somewhere in the 80s. (Agent occupancy is the percentage of time that call center agents spend—or are predicted to spend—handling calls, as a percentage of the time they are on the clock.)

Why is this contact center overstaffing so important? When your bottom line is, as it is at Zappos, to make an emotional connection with each caller, the resulting conversations create great *variability* in call length. An emotional connection can take just a moment: maybe a quick second of bonding “over both being named Megan without an *h*—which is the sensible spelling, of course!” which is an example that Megan (no *h*), the workshop facilitator, is fond of sharing from her personal experience. It could be an *extended* discussion of a tragedy recently experienced by the customer. (This situation crops up more often than you’d expect, particularly when a Zappos employee ends up on the line with a grieving widow or widower who’s not sure what to do with recently ordered shoes intended for a spouse or partner who has died since the order was placed.)

Breathing space is an essential element in what happens *leading up to* that wow moment as well, the moment when the agent makes the connection with a live customer on the line. When you’re “hiring for wow,” you need the breathing space (time) to find people with an aptitude for making emotional connections with customers, and “training for wow” requires ample time before you can put employees face to face (or voice to voice) with customers.

Extraordinary, Elaborate “Wow” Creations

A few hundred miles from Zappos, wow is also on the agenda at Dove Mountain, a Ritz-Carlton resort in the Arizona desert, where a family of three is wrapping up its weekend getaway.² Asked to come down to the lobby “for a minute,” the guests find themselves escorted out the door and into the desert twilight by a group of smiling employees, for what reveals itself to be an elaborate, *Hobbit*-themed quest, clandestinely put together for them by these very same employees. The staff, it turns out, made note of two specific details about the family back when they checked in: that their kid is celebrating a birthday, and that she’s passionate about everything having to do with J. R. R. Tolkien. Working with just those two pieces of data, “the hotel employees used them to completely transform our stay,” says the mom of the family, “to make us feel like the most special people in the world.”

The scenario was as follows: Setting out on a path that runs through the sprawling property, the questing party would happen upon ancient-looking scrolls along the way that had been done up with hand-drawn calligraphy, each scroll providing another clue or instruction. The quest culminated in a dramatic moment where they witnessed wooden barrels, filled with what look like dwarves, fly down a waterfall (just a water slide at the resort’s pool, but in the deepening twilight, the illusion worked) and were invited to shoot arrows at a “dragon” (actually a piñata) from which a large pile of gold (foil-wrapped chocolate coins) poured out on impact, all of which mimicked famous scenes from *The Hobbit* and left the guests awestruck.

There’s solid business logic behind such elaborate, creative efforts (which is good, because the efforts required *can* be extensive: In the case of the *Hobbit*-themed adventure, it required the employees who created it to take time away from their general duties, read up on Tolkien, recruit other employees to help stage the adventure on the property, and conspire to gather the family together at just the right time—twilight—to enjoy the magic.) “Our goal is to create

indelible marks through the work we do at the property level,” explains Lisa Holladay, vice president and global brand leader for the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, as well as other marquee brands in the Marriott luxury lineup, “that will live on for our guests and become family lore or legend.” Over and over, “we see the power this has in bringing guests closer to our brand in a way that lasts for years, even for a lifetime.”

This culture of striving for wow benefits employee morale and retention as well, through what you might call a spillover effect. Says Holladay, “We also have ‘wow’ stories that happen internally. We’re not famous [among the general public] for these,” unlike the customer-facing wow stories, “because they’re internal, but I hear many times that ‘these are the reasons I stay with the Ritz-Carlton as an employee.’” For example, she’s heard many comments along this line: “When my wife was coming through surgery, my friends who work here stocked my fridge and helped me with the driving; my work colleagues are some of the most hospitable people in my personal life as well.”

IS WOW EXPENSIVE? ONLY IF YOU'RE LOUSY AT MATH.

Any time someone tells you that wow customer service is too expensive, ask them how much they paid on their marketing and sales efforts last year. Creating an emotional connection with your customers is the most direct route to getting your customers to *do your marketing for you*. And I'm talking about powerful, credible marketing that, unlike many traditional marketing approaches, tends to grow and grow, rather than to fade out without additional infusions of cash.

In spite of this, one of the main reasons that a wow approach fails to take root or be sustained at most companies is that success here requires the support of an entire organization, all the way up to the highest levels of leadership. Consider how attractive it will look to a shortsighted leader or

manager to *understaff* a contact center, or to loosen up on hiring requirements, or to shorten the training period before newly hired employees encounter a live customer.

To a penny pinching manager or shareholder, the elements required to create wow look expensive. *But c'mon!* The reality is that winning and retaining customers this way is one of the only true bargains around, because of the word of mouth it inspires.

It's hard to find good data on the percentage of customers who rely on word of mouth, especially digital word of mouth. The most credible recent numbers go as high as 93 percent* for percentage of customers who rely, at least to some extent, on word of mouth.

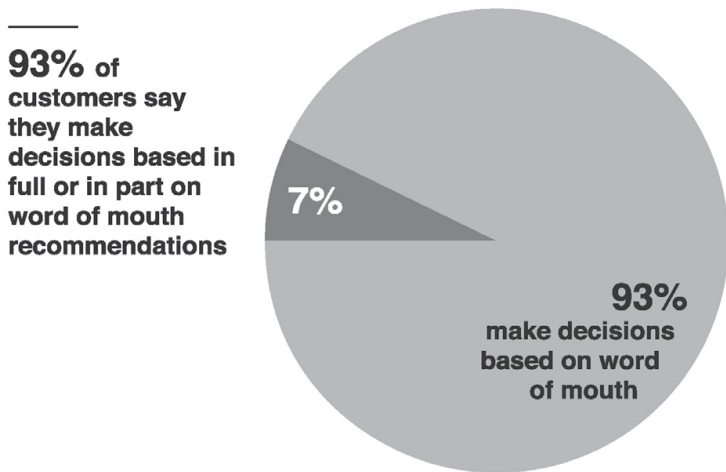


Figure 4.1

That 93 percent figure sounds about right to me. But quickly I started wondering who the holdouts could possibly be, the stubborn 7 percent who *never* listen to word of mouth.

Then I figured it out—it's just one guy; it's my uncle! He might occasionally check *Consumer Reports*, but that's it; other than that he listens to no one.

* (There is some nuance to coming up with such a number, which I've distilled from several sources; I admit it's art and opinion more than it's pure science.)

... and,
apparently,
7% don't

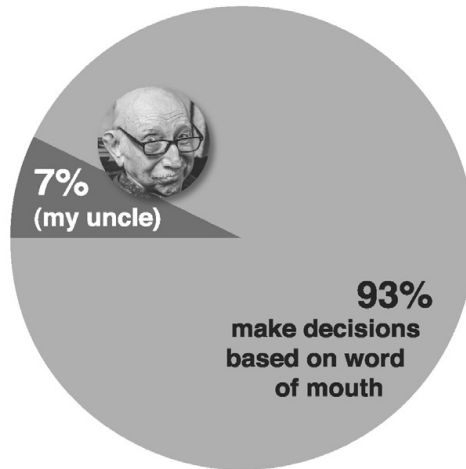


Figure 4.2

When “Wow” Is Achieved via Simple Human Thoughtfulness

It’s a mistake to think that wow customer service is always a dramatic “reveal” like the *Hobbit*-themed birthday surprise. Wow can also be achieved *even if the customer can see the magic as it’s being created*. This next case is an example of this. It again takes place at a Ritz-Carlton property, but this time, the main ingredient required to pull off wow is simple human thoughtfulness.

A friend of mine is the father of a nine-year-old boy with multiple, potentially life-threatening, food allergies. These are the kind of allergies that require my friend and his wife to bring an EpiPen—and a lot of parental anxiety—along with them wherever the family travels.

The family decided to set off for Hong Kong recently, a destination much farther from the family’s native San Francisco than the family had ventured previously. (*Note: I’ve changed a few identifying details to protect the son’s privacy.*)

The wrinkle was this: How, in a land of exotic cuisines, would they manage to keep their son safe, while also allowing themselves a bit of relaxation as a couple; a chance to let their guards down?

It occurred to them that perhaps the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Hong Kong, where they were planning to stay, would have a solution. So, they sent a letter to the property, outlining the details of their son's multiple allergies and asking if he could be accommodated.

They were *floored* by the response they received: a detailed letter from the office of Peter Find, the hotel's executive chef, with a comprehensive listing of the foods that could be prepared to meet their son's needs, dishes that ranged from exotic local Chinese recipes to familiar foods like pasta.

"It was encouraging and actually kind of amazing—the chef's personal attention in responding and in providing that list, and the thoughtfulness of the food options it contained," my friend tells me. "This was *good* stuff—stuff that our son would actually be likely to enjoy. And, in fact, at mealtimes in the hotel, enjoyment is exactly what I saw: our son enjoying himself, not being stuck eating something austere, but really digging in and being a kid, a happy kid, enthusiastically chowing down."

Thermos-Enabled Day Trips

The culinary staff's thoughtfulness improved the family's enjoyment beyond the confines of the hotel as well. "The kitchen staff prepared a Thermos for us each day, full of hot food that our son could eat, which allowed us to take day trips all over Hong Kong. That may not sound like much, but it transformed our visit, taking a huge worry off of our shoulders as parents and freeing us up to have adventures as a family in this city that was foreign to us."

It's Not About the Glitz and Glamour

I hope my friend's story will help clarify what wow customer service is all about—and what it's not. Although the story took place in a

luxury hotel, I want to point out that *nothing in the story depended on glitz and glamour*. And, in talking with the family about their experience in Hong Kong, I didn’t hear a peep about sparkling swimming pools, blown-glass chandeliers, or the billion-dollar views commanded by the hotel. What mattered is that their kid was able to be a kid, they were able to relax as parents, and they all felt cared for. Now *that* is a wow.

Anticipatory Customer Service: A Powerful (and Magical) Force

The other point I hope to convey with this example is the power of what I call “anticipatory customer service,” which means answering a question or fulfilling a need that a customer *hasn’t even voiced*, perhaps because the customer “doesn’t want to be a bother” or doesn’t know enough about the subject to formulate a request in words, or doesn’t even realize that they have such a need.

Anticipatory customer service is what the culinary staff was providing in Hong Kong when they packed the daily Thermos *without* being asked to do so, *without* the guest family even quite figuring out that this was a need they had or that this was a service that, realistically, the hotel could be asked to provide. *Striving to be anticipatory elevates your service level in a way that is memorable and meaningful, and it’s very likely to be a direct path to wowing your customers.*

Selecting “Wow-Capable” Employees

At Zappos, when employees are hired to work with customers it’s not the employees’ existing skill set or previous work experience that matter as much as their natural affinity for people and service. The same holds true for the culinary staff that served the boy with allergies at the Hong Kong Ritz-Carlton and for the junior employees

who created the *Hobbit* quest at the Dove Mountain resort. By hiring employees who are equipped temperamentally for delighting customers (as discussed in the previous chapter), an organization takes an essential step toward the creation of “wow.” Recruiting and selecting such employees, the ones who have an affinity for making connections with—and making a difference for—every customer they encounter, provides the raw material necessary to give wow a chance of happening.

IT'S NOT ALWAYS THE RIGHT TIME FOR “WOW”

Once you task your employees with creating wow, you should *ready yourself for some awkward and not quite appropriate applications* of the principle until they understand the nuances required for success.

For starters, it can be hard for newly energized employees to understand that *customers don't always have time to be wowed*. Customers are often in a rush, and it's important that employees learn to tone down or cut short their efforts to turn every basic interaction into a wow experience, if they're getting signals from a customer that they're under time constraints. It's also important that employee efforts at wow don't run afoul of a customer's desire to stay within their own private bubble, a bubble that an employee *shouldn't even attempt to enter* if a customer is glued to a personal communication device, interacting intently with their family or colleagues, trying to get work done, or otherwise occupied or preoccupied in such a way that an extended interaction would be seen as intrusive.

Recognizing and Rewarding Employees' Efforts Toward Wow

It's important to reward the efforts that employees make toward creating wow, yet I hesitate to bring up the subject of rewards

for fear of being misunderstood. I’m *not* primarily talking about a scheme of financial rewards and prizes. While small, targeted prizes can be fun, a complex system for financially rewarding wow is likely to quickly become nothing better than a distraction. Plus, employees are smart people (often smarter than their bosses), and reward systems along those lines are often gamed faster than the boss can blink.

What I mean by “rewarding wow” is more as follows: *take a look at how you react when employees go the extra mile for your customers*. You can either express your disapproval by punishing employees for what they did, on the grounds that the extra assistance they provided to a customer took extra time and reduced the employee’s (narrowly defined) productivity, or you can *celebrate* their actions and recognize them as heroes. The choice is yours, and it can make all the difference.

For a good model, look at how employees at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company are recognized for their efforts and creativity after they create a memorable experience for their guests. Twice a week (Monday and Friday) at every Ritz-Carlton hotel and resort, the company shares a “wow story” from one of its more than one hundred properties, something striking that an employee at one of these hotels recently did for a guest. The intention is to inspire other employees to find ways to do something similarly memorable for their own guests, to say to themselves, “You know what? That wasn’t that difficult. I could do that too,” says Holladay, the Ritz-Carlton vice president.

And look at what *doesn’t* happen: In the *Hobbit* example, the Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain employees *aren’t* criticized for going off-property to buy items needed to create the Hobbit quest; in the case of the boy with the serious allergies, the Hong Kong culinary team *isn’t* chided for paying too much attention to the needs of a single boy, such as taking time out of their morning routine to prepare a travel Thermos for him when that same time could certainly be applied to working on the morning rush of room service orders.

Empower Your Employees if You Want Them to Create “Wow”

Any efforts you make to encourage the creation of wow will quickly run aground unless you empower employees to take the initiative (creative and sometimes financial) that can be required. The employee at Zappos who traveled personally to return the customer's lost jewelry, the employees at Dove Mountain who developed the *Hobbit*-themed quest, and the chefs in Hong Kong who created the allergen-free menu were all acting out scenarios that would have been impossible without empowerment.

Employees can only pull off extraordinary acts on behalf of a customer if they have a meaningful level of on-the-job autonomy: *the power to make decisions in favor of a customer*. Most of this empowerment manifests itself in nonfinancial ways such as the choices that employees make for how to invest their time on the job. However, an element of fiscal autonomy is important as well if employees are going to be able to deliver wow on the spot, without hesitation and without having to ask for the approval of a manager. At Zappos, this financial leeway is relatively modest, yet sufficient to allow, for example, comping a modestly priced pair of shoes or providing coupons for free or discounted items. At the Ritz-Carlton, the financial empowerment of *every employee* is much greater. The company both allows and even *encourages* its employees, once they're fully trained, to use up to a theoretical \$2,000 per guest to solve a problem or to improve a guest's stay.

A TRICKY THING ABOUT EMPOWERMENT

When every single employee is empowered to solve absolutely any customer issue, you'd think all customers would be similarly delighted, no matter which employee they happen to be talking with. The problem is that, for decades, crummy, overly hierarchical businesses have trained consumers that the only way to get satisfaction is to demand to be

transferred to a supervisor. When this happens at your (non-crummy) business, how should your frontline employee react? Saying over and over, “There’s no need to be transferred to a supervisor; I have the same tools and leeway my supervisor would have to assist you, Ms. Smith,” doesn’t really work if Ms. Smith continues to demand, more and more emphatically, to talk to a supervisor. Better is to do what Zappos does: create a “resource desk” that customers who refuse to let an empowered frontline employee solve their problems can be transferred to. The employees at the resource desk don’t have any additional leeway beyond what the frontline Zappos employees have, but they can offer a new voice and a new set of ears, which is sometimes all that a customer needs to hear and be heard by.

Before you throw my book against the wall, let me repeat: This \$2,000 figure is truly just theoretical. *No Ritz-Carlton employee has ever needed to make use of the entire amount of their discretionary spending ability.* But *the openness and relaxed attitude* that come about when any Ritz-Carlton employee—a housekeeper, a landscaper—knows that the company’s leaders trust them so completely that they could, if need be, spend \$2,000 on a customer’s behalf, without retaliation (or even raised eyebrows), is a massive boost to employee engagement and sparks great creativity among the employees in the organization, on behalf of their customers.

Herve Humler, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company’s cofounder and chairman emeritus, put it to me this way: Ritz-Carlton employees “have total power, and all the resources of our organization, to create these moments, these stories, on their own, without needing to ask permission, without needing to involve management, without needing to worry that they’re going too far. The time spent creating these stories isn’t time *taken out of* their job; this time spent *is* their job.”

Can you picture the words you’ve just read being spoken, sincerely, within your own organization? Do the top leaders at *your* company encourage employees to get busy finding opportunities to

do *more* work, on the clock, for your customers, and perhaps spend *more* of the company's money to take care of them? I doubt it, which is too bad, because, if they would only try it, they'll be sending a very powerful message.

Now, if discretionary spending of up to \$2,000 a day per employee per customer sounds impossible—ridiculous, even—in the context of your own business, I encourage you to find a different limit that works within your own business context. *The amount of money involved isn't the point.* What matters is that employees be broadly empowered to assist customers and to do so immediately, without the need to ask for approval from those higher up in their organization.

Such is the case at CHROME, a federal credit union in Washington, Pennsylvania, that's frequently ranked at the top in its market for member satisfaction (“member” being the term for customers in the credit-union world). Not long ago, two CHROME employees, Jon and Sarah, headed out to a member's home to help him get signed up, in person, for a new online banking service. They had tried previously to work through the online setup with this particular member on the phone, without success. But having him come in to the branch to get signed up wasn't going to work either, as the mountainous area where CHROME is located was suffering through a period of extreme weather.

When they arrived at the member's home, he confided that he'd been having “a rough time” with the recent rainstorms and flooding, both because they were limiting his ability to get around and because his basement was prone to flooding. “We peeked in the basement door,” says Jon from CHROME, “and saw what I'd say was a *foot* of water that he'd been trying to bail out using buckets. He did know there was a better way and, in fact, showed me an ad for a Shop-Vac pump that he was going to buy once his next Social Security payment went into his account, which wouldn't happen for another two weeks.”

Jon and Sarah decided on the spot that they were going to buy him the Shop-Vac and then drove to the local supply store to get what

turned out to be the last one still in stock, which they were able to buy using the CHROME company credit card that is available for such occasions. According to Robert Flanyak, the president and CEO of CHROME, “This solution did require a financial outlay, and when a solution does require one, the use of the company credit card is intended, even encouraged, as a resource. There’s no set limit; we just request that our employees use sound judgment.”

“I want to take pains to mention, though, that there are cases I’m equally proud of where our employees made an exceptional effort for our 17,000 members by investing something other than money: a bit of creativity and expertise, applied where it could make a difference. For example, we’ve had employees roll up their sleeves and work side by side with a member on family budgeting after their income had dropped precipitously. *Something like that doesn’t depend on cash at all, but it can make all the difference to a member.*”

“WEDDING RING OVERBOARD!” WOW CUSTOMER SERVICE, A HUNDRED MILES FROM SHORE

Seabourn Cruise Line, a Seattle-based operator of luxury cruises, finds ways to pursue wow hundreds of miles from solid ground, out on the high seas, where resources tend to be more limited and the challenges more pronounced than they are ashore.

Richard D. (Rick) Meadows, the president of Seabourn, tells me:

Our mission at Seabourn pivots on one key word, and that is the word “moments.” “Moments,” at Seabourn, are those connection points where we interact with a guest [passenger]. These are our opportunities to excel, and to provide something that’s beyond what our guests would expect. This approach is at the core for us; it’s something we’re wired to do across the board on all ships. And it’s also something that we’re conscious of doing across our

crews. In other words, exceptional moments happen among crew members as well, when they interact with each other.

What I call “wow moments” (and Meadows simply calls “moments”) can be small and subtle, or they can be large and dramatic. There was the time when a passenger’s shoe came apart and a crew member polled her colleagues until she found a pair that was the right size for the guest to borrow. And there’s the passenger who was on her way to a celebration dinner when her dress had a malfunction all the way up and down the back.” “Very quickly,” says Meadows, the suite stewardess rallied the tailor. They sewed her into her dress as quickly and delicately as they could, so she could go down to dinner and not miss the event.

Meadows then hit me with one final example of a moment in the Seabourn customer experience that was neither small nor subtle.

“We had a guest who was heading out for a shore excursion with her husband, putting on hand lotion as she left her suite. As she walked out to the gangway, she was rubbing the lotion in when her wedding ring flew off—beyond the gangway and into the water.”

Micah: “That sounds pretty final.”

Rick: “It *looked* pretty final. These are deep waters. Our guest was very upset, distraught even. As it happened, the captain was on the gangway for another reason. So he told our guest, ‘Look, go on your shore excursion. When you come back I’ll make sure that we do all the claims reporting with you to make this [insurance replacement] process as easy as possible.’

The minute the guest was out of sight, however, the captain sprang into action with another plan entirely. He took it upon himself to contact some divers in the waters nearby, to ask them to find the ring. Which, against all odds, they were able to do.

Once the ringless guest was back on board, a crewmember telephoned her suite and asked her to come to the ship’s common area, ‘to fill out the insurance paperwork.’ But as she arrived, the captain came up to her and said, ‘I think I have something for you—is this what you’re looking for?’ and held up the ring.”



“GET TO THE POINT,
MICAH!”

READER’S CHEATSHEET FOR CHAPTER 4

A wow experience is when a service provided to a customer goes beyond fulfilling basic expectations and does so in a creative, unexpected way. Wow can be a powerful way to connect emotionally with a customer. The “wow stories” created by the experience are likely to live on in the customer’s memory as well as being shared enthusiastically with the customer’s friends and contacts.

Furthermore, the act of creating wow, and the feeling of being empowered by the organization to do so, can inspire the employees involved and be a powerful tool for improving teamwork, employee retention, and companywide morale.

If you want to wow your customers, here’s how to do it:

1. Empower your employees to make on-the-spot wow decisions *without* having to run to a manager for

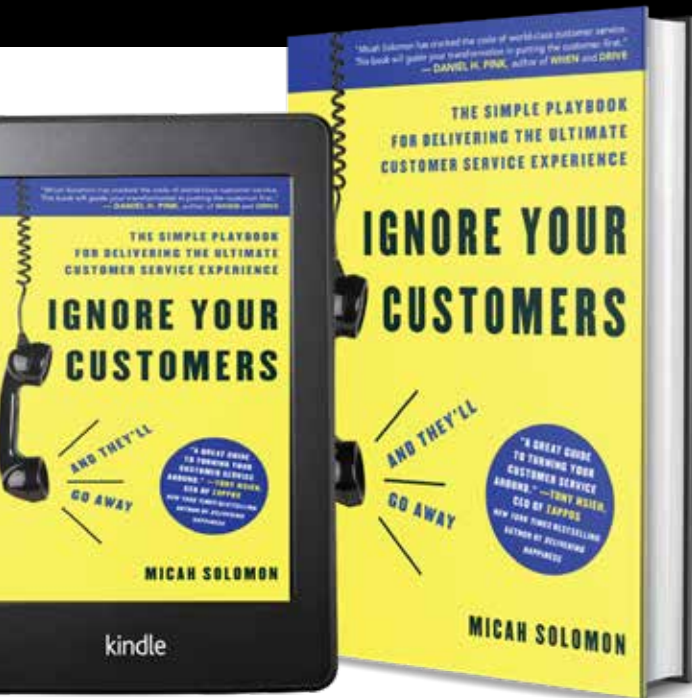
- approval, even if these decisions require financial outlays or investments of time.
2. Actively recruit and hire wow-capable employees, as discussed in more detail in chapter 3.
 3. When your employees make an effort to wow customers, publicly recognize and applaud their contributions.
 4. Encourage your employees to practice *anticipatory customer service*, which means answering a question or fulfilling a need or desire that a customer hasn't even voiced—because they're shy, because they don't want to betray their ignorance, because they don't know the extent of how you can help them, or simply because they don't understand enough to put their request into words. Anticipatory customer service is one of the most effective ways to create wow.
 5. Be sensitive to when it's the right and wrong time to wow your customers; a customer who is in a rush or is busy with a business call or a personal conversation isn't going to appreciate the disruption, no matter how well intended.
 6. Keep in mind that not all wow moments are the result of elaborate actions. They can also be created through the use of the right words in conversation with a customer, words that make an emotional connection that transcends the transactional. For example, Zappos employees strive to make a connection on every single phone call by bonding over something relatively workaday (a love of pets) or dramatic (a more serious shared interest/concern) based on cues the employee picks up on from the customer.

READING GROUP GUIDE FOR CHAPTER 4

1. Do we have a stated or implied goal at our organization of providing wow to customers (even if we don't use the "wow" word), of delivering service that goes beyond the expected and transactional, and is designed to make an emotional connection with our customers?
2. If not, would such a goal be of value to our organization? And does it seem realistic for us to pursue it?
3. Assuming the answers to #1 and #2 are, respectively, "no" (not currently committed to wow) and "yes" (we do want to commit), what are some steps we could take to explicitly commit to wow and to begin our journey to get there? For example: modify our mission statement; change or supplement employee training to promote and train for wow; add reinforcement rituals to celebrate employees who succeed in creating wow.
4. Do you agree with Micah that it's credible to believe that 93 percent of customers listen to word of mouth (or "word of thumb") when making a purchasing decision? (Extra credit: do you remember which relative of Micah represents the other 7 percent?)

Reminder: All of the reading group guides are available as a single document you can download for free at guides.micahsolomon.com.

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MICAH SOLOMON is a bestselling author, consultant, and keynote speaker. A thought leader and expert on customer service, company culture, customer experience, innovation, entrepreneurship, and intrapreneurship, Micah is a regular contributor to Forbes.com and Inc.com and his expertise has been featured in Bloomberg BusinessWeek, Harvard Business Review, ABC, CBS, and NBC.

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