micah SOLOMON and associates

IGNORE YOUR CUSTOMERS
(AND THEY'LL GO AWAY)

Reading Group Guides

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?

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?

1. Do the selection (hiring) criteria in our organization give enough weight to personality traits that align with what's needed for customer-facing work, as opposed to previous experience and existing skills? If not, should we move in this direction?

2. Could we be casting a wider net than we do now by offering a round-the-clock online preliminary application portal in order to afford us a larger pool of potential prospects? Would this be a benefit to our organization if implemented?

3. Employee onboarding (orientation): Is ours focused on conveying our organizational purpose and a new employee's part in it, or is it primarily mundane and legalistic? If the latter, what can be done to address this?

4. Do employees have significant input into how their duties are designed and carried out? If not, can this be achieved in our organization? Would it be of value to employee development and morale if it were?

5. Millennials as employees: Micah recommends a set of four accommodations . . .
   - They're hungry for feedback, so give it to them.
   - They want to share responsibility—so find ways to let them.
   - Support their desire for work-life balance.

- Let them work for an ethical organization—by being one.

. . . that can make employment more attractive for this large generation of employees. Do you agree with his list? Are there any approaches on this list that we should adopt that we haven't already?

6. Micah also warns against overly generalizing about how the members of any generation think or behave. Do you agree that this is a hazard? Is it a problem in our organization?

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 digital "word of thumb") when making a purchasing decision? (Extra credit: do you remember which of Micah's relatives represents the other 7 percent?)

1. One way to think of the customer experience is as a movie put on for the benefit of customers. Whether or not we use this metaphor in our organization, do we pay sufficient attention to pacing, staging, lighting, and other soft, dramatic details of the customer experience? Would there be value for us in doing so?

2. This chapter suggests that, in most industries, a good customer experience theme to aim for is "enchantment." In our organization, do we strive to enchant our customers, alongside the more traditional goals of efficiency, reducing friction and the like? If not, should we?

3. Mishandling issues, including language, related to money can be an easy way to break the spell of enchantment. Have we looked at issues related to money from this emotional angle? Would it be worthwhile to do so?

4. Micah suggests that we should look at our customer experience with an eye toward *making customers feel good about themselves.* Some of the ways organizations fail to do this that he mentions are confusing signage and poor instructions, use of internal jargon with external customers, and obstructions or unclear directions for customers with disabilities. Do we spend enough time in our organization looking at the

experience we provide from the angle of how it makes customers feel about themselves? Would there be value in giving this concept more consideration?

1. Every organization can benefit from setting up and maintaining service-related standards and systems. Is our organization doing this sufficiently, or is it more "catch as catch can" around here?

2. This chapter devotes some time to the importance of "language standards" for communicating with customers. Do we have language standards in place in our organization—and, if so, are they widely known and taken seriously?

3. This chapter also devotes time to the importance of tracking customer preferences and sentiment. Do we give these enough of a priority? Are our systems up to snuff in these areas?

4. This chapter stresses the importance of "service recovery," of having a plan in place/methodology for when things go wrong. Micah goes on to offer his MAMA system for service recovery. Do we have a similar approach already in place that's working for us? If not, should we adopt the MAMA system?

5. This chapter makes a point of encouraging organizations to look to *systematic* causes of customer service failure rather than jumping to blame a particular employee when things go wrong. Are we good about this? Could we be better?

1. Is our organization's *style* of customer service one that customers perceive as authentic? For example: Does the language we use put customers at ease, or is it stuffy and overly scripted? What about our dress code, uniforms (if any), and restrictions (if any) on tattoos and piercings? Do our current policies in these areas support or fight against us being considered authentic by our customers?
2. According to this chapter, customers today tend to be turned off by finishes, furnishings, and other such cues that seem fake or sterile or ostentatious. Has our organization devoted sufficient attention to whether the publicly visible elements of our business are projecting authenticity?
3. A type of authenticity that's particularly important to today's customers in many industries and contexts is a sense of place, or *terroir*. Is this concept applicable to our organization and industry? If so, are we giving appropriate and sufficient clues to what makes us unusual (or at least specific) in terms of our location?

1. According to this chapter, we've entered an era where customers have grown eager to achieve many of their goals without human intervention. Do our own customers show this growing affinity for technology-powered, nonhuman-mediated types of customer service? Or is it different in our industry from the landscape described?

2. In this chapter, Micah proposes a "Jetsons Test" to determine which functions to offer on a self-service basis and which to assign to human employees:

    If a human can perform a function best ("best" here can mean more flexibly, accurately, creatively, warmly, or pleasantly), be sure to have a human continue to carry out that function. Otherwise, if the task or touchpoint is something that can be handled best by automation, artificial intelligence (AI) and chatbots, algorithms, or self-service, be sure to offer the appropriate technological solution, at least as an option, for your customers.

    Has our organization been thoughtful in deciding which functions should still retain a human feel versus where our customers would prefer to serve themselves via automation and digital tools?

3. This chapter describes millennials as a uniquely large and influential generation of customers. Are millennials an important

group of customers for our organization now, or will they be soon? If so, do we have a good handle on accommodating the needs and desires of this generation?

4. This chapter portrays millennials as a bellwether generation, whose desires provide hints for what customers of all ages will be expecting in the near future, due to the infectious nature of millennial expectations, especially, but not only, in relation to technology. Have we seen this play out in our customer base— or, for that matter in our personal lives: are all of us becoming millennial-like, regardless of age?

1. Is our organization doing enough to make it easy for customers to engage with us and spread the word about us via social media?

2. One factor that motivates customers to share is the opportunity to *elevate their status* in the eyes of their online cohort by being seen as a "discoverer." Does our organization offer opportunities for customers to discover items/experiences ("social currency") that can help them elevate their status socially? If not, are there opportunities to do so that would make sense for us to pursue?

3. At the end of this chapter, Micah lays out a set of five pointers for what he calls "social media survival." Do these suggestions align with how we handle social media at present? If not, should we adopt these five pointers as ours?

1. The cliff of dissatisfaction is the point at which a customer loses patience with—and, quite likely, faith in—an organization because the service is too slow. Do we have sufficient ways here to monitor our speed, and how customers feel about that speed, in all portions of the customer journey? If not, should we undertake the self-audit approach offered in this chapter, beginning on page 191?

2. Is our *entire* industry too slow? An entire industry or niche can unwittingly be lulled into complacency when *everyone* in the industry is slow, leaving all players in the industry vulnerable to a potential disruptor who has a different idea of what "timeliness" means. Is this our situation? If so, should we start benchmarking our speed against speedier players *outside* of our industry?

3. Sometimes, a company *can't* go any faster but can manage to please customers by conforming to their desired timeline in other ways, for example by offering callback options when hold times would be extreme or by offering self-service account management tools ("my account" functionality) that are available to customers 24/7. Have we considered approaches such as these to better align with the timetables desired by our customers?