

"Micah Solomon consistently delivers fresh and practical insights about customer service that will propel you and your brand to ever greater heights."

—DANIEL H. PINK, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *To Sell Is Human*, *Drive*, and *The Power of Regret*

CAN YOUR CUSTOMER SERVICE DO THIS?



Create an Anticipatory Customer Experience
That Builds Loyalty Forever

MICAH SOLOMON

The World's #1 Customer Service Turnaround Expert

Foreword by Peter Economy, *Inc.* magazine's The Leadership Guy

PRAISE FOR
**Can Your Customer
Service Do This?**
AND
Micah Solomon

Whether he's undercover or on the stage, Micah Solomon consistently delivers fresh and practical insights about customer service. In an era of transactional, impersonal exchanges, his approach offers a human-centered, future-focused strategy that will propel you and your brand to ever greater heights.

—**Daniel H. Pink**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *To Sell Is Human*, *Drive*, and *The Power of Regret*

In my work at Wharton Executive Education, when I've needed someone to deliver actionable customer service skills to one of my global clients, Micah is who I've turned to. What sets his approach apart is his ability to help companies turn lofty customer service visions into tangible change throughout an organization. In *Can Your Customer Service Do This?* Micah provides a comprehensive guide that covers all aspects of customer service excellence. This book will not only spark your imagination; it will transform your organization.

—**Deb Giffen**, Director, Wharton Executive Education

Great customer service is like great leadership—everyone talks about it, but few get beyond repeating slogans. This book shows you how to actually *do* it—how to become first good, then great at it. If you are serious about providing great customer service, you should read this book.

—**Phil Steitz**, former global CTO, American Express

Micah Solomon is my go-to expert on exceptional customer service and building a customer-focused culture.

—**Herve Humler**, cofounder and emeritus chairman,
the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company

Micah Solomon conveys an up-to-the-minute and deeply practical take on customer service, business success, and the twin importance of people and technology.

—**Steve Wozniak**, Apple cofounder

When customers can switch allegiance faster than you can take a breath, there's no more important priority than customer service. Having built several customer service solutions myself, I particularly love Micah's wisdom on what can happen when informed humans and advanced technology such as AI are combined. This is a must read for any company that wants to differentiate itself.

—**Girish Mathrubootham**, CEO and founder, Freshworks

The service revamp we've undertaken with Micah Solomon and his team has created an elevated level of Member Service that's an essential part of CHROME FCU and our recent and ongoing growth and achievements. In *Can Your Customer Service Do This?* Micah generously shares the secrets that can help readers get started down the same, rewarding path.

—**Robert J. Flanyak**, CPFC, President and CEO, CHROME Federal Credit Union

Micah Solomon's new book *Can Your Customer Service Do This?* is a comprehensive guide that will revolutionize the way you approach customer service. It offers fresh perspectives from a master in this field—and will inspire readers to elevate the level of the service they provide to new heights.

—**Matthias Debecki**, Head of Mergers & Acquisitions,
Zech Group SE

Can Your Customer Service Do This? provides a mountain of tips and strategies gleaned from the author's extensive experience. These will help you deliver the customer service and experience that your competitors will only be able to dream of—unless you make the fatal strategic error of sharing your copy of this book with those competitors!”

—**Adrian Swinscoe**, *Forbes* contributor, bestselling author,
podcast host and producer

Other books by Micah Solomon

*Ignore Your Customers (And They'll Go Away):
The Simple Playbook for Delivering the Ultimate
Customer Service Experience*

*The Heart of Hospitality:
Great Hotel and Restaurant Leaders Share Their Secrets*

*High-Tech, High-Touch Customer Service:
Inspire Timeless Loyalty in the Demanding New World
of Social Commerce*

*Exceptional Service, Exceptional Profit:
The Secrets of Building a Five-Star Customer Service
Organization* (coauthored with Leonardo Inghilleri,
Introduction by Horst Schulze)

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FOREWORD

Micah Solomon is a customer service transformation expert, a true artist in this very niche field.

I don't say this lightly—it's not hype or hyperbole. Micah first landed on my radar screen almost 10 years ago, when I was doing research on how companies deliver, or fail to deliver, great customer service. I realized quickly that, while a lot of people talk a big story about delivering great customer service, very few back up that talk with action. While there are lots of reasons for this disconnect, in many cases the problem is they don't know *how* to turn their lofty customer service visions into tangible change throughout their organization.

Micah is one of the very small handful of people who do.

In fact, when I profiled Micah in the pages of *Inc. Magazine*, I proclaimed him “The World's #1 Customer Service Turn-around Expert.” And over and over, I've seen just how powerful Micah's approach can be, with all sorts of businesses, in all types of industries.

Transformational, in fact.

There's a reason why Micah is in demand: he's a category of one in the field of customer service transformation—an essential discipline today. Micah offers a lifeline that companies reach for whenever interactions with customers start to go south. And, more positively, when they're ready to turn customer service into a competitive advantage and driver of growth.

When Micah speaks, people listen. And they should.

I confess that I'm a bit jealous of Micah because he seems to have more fun with his job than anyone I've met in a long time. When I see him onsite delivering live training, or on the soundstage filming a customized eLearning training module, or doing anything else that is involved in customer service transformation, it's clear that both he and his audience are having a ball.

One particularly fun part of his work (at least, that's how it looks to me!) is the hands-on mystery shopping that Micah and his talented team undertake at the start of a customer service transformation engagement. This is when Micah and his team literally go undercover, onsite, as part of a current-state analysis of where his client company's customer service experience stands right now.

This means that, on any given day, you could find Micah (or probably *not* find him, as he's pretty good at disguises) “shopping” a bank, car dealership, grocery store, tech startup, or multinational organization.

Or, as in the example you're about to read, one of the world's grandest five-star hotels.

What I've seen over my years covering the business landscape and collaborating with CEOs and other executives at multiple organizations is this: The world is getting more and more commoditized. It's becoming very much a sea of

sameness, with customers ever more inclined to switch from one provider to another on little more than a whim.

Yikes! That's not a pretty—or profitable—situation for a company to find itself in. Happily, a direct and lasting way you can distinguish your own business from similar competitors is by delivering great customer service.

Apply the customer service lessons you are about to learn in this book—in every interaction, at every touchpoint—and I promise you that your organization will thrive.

And so will you.

I'll let Micah pick up the story here. I know you're going to enjoy the ride!

Peter Economy

The Leadership Guy at *Inc.* Magazine

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INTRODUCTION

The Dream of Perfection

C*hances are, my morning started a bit differently from yours.* I was undercover, in disguise, performing the mystery review component of a customer service initiative for one of my clients, a famous-name, five-star resort hotel. Mystery shopping is one of the many interesting and enjoyable aspects of my work—if you can even call it *work*—and today I was having a particularly good time.

After a glorious room service breakfast, I headed into the resort's five-star, *Forbes*-rated spa, where I was massaged, manicured, pedicured (that last service was overdue, if you must know), and “facialed” by the spa's exquisitely trained and attentive staff. All the while, I was observing and committing to memory impressions of the customer service behaviors happening all around me: how the spa's employees interacted with the rest of the spa clientele and, of course, how they were treating *me*.

Then, after I recovered from the (nominal!) hardships of my morning activities, I slipped into the hotel's restaurant for lunch, where I similarly sleuthed my way through each phase of the meal. Before I was even seated, I was assessing each customer service touchpoint as it was revealed to me,

from the ease of making a reservation to the quality of the hostess's greeting to the dessert presentation to the graciousness with which my final bill was delivered.

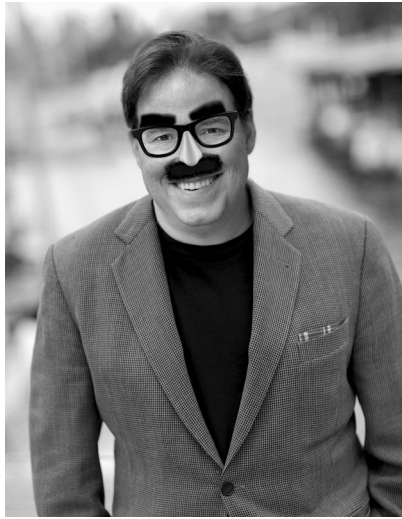
And my job wasn't done, yet.

Making today even sweeter was knowing that when night rolled around I'd be snuggling between my guestroom's Egyptian cotton sheets (with a stratospheric thread count, naturally). And that just before I called it a night, I'd be conducting one final, delicious test: a call to room service to see if they could bring me a late-night cup of cocoa in a timely manner and, per my instructions, "not too hot," hoping that request would not devolve into lukewarm or even flat-out cold cocoa, or be overlooked entirely.

Tomorrow, I'll format my confidential report and forward it to the resort's leadership. Since nearly everyone has done their job well during my visit, they're going to like what they read.

And that, I'd say, is a perfect day—because of the spot-on performance of the resort's staff, and because, let's face it, my job can be a *romp*.

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**Is that Micah in one of his less-subtle disguises?
Looks that way, but, as his publisher, we're sworn to secrecy.**

That's Micah In Disguise. Here's Why.

It's a prickly sensation to spot my own face on a WANTED-style poster pasted up on a hotel's valet stand, or on the swinging door of a restaurant kitchen, or at a bank branch on a memo marked "urgent!" that a bank manager has received and left on their desk. It means that word of my work as a customer service transformation expert-slash-Sherlock Holmes has somehow leaked out and spread through the ranks of a company even before I've visited their place of business.

But it's rather missing the point to try to uncover me—to "make" me, as they say on the spy shows—since I only visit a business to help that business improve, rather than to look for "gotcha" moments.

Still, I suppose it's understandable.

So, over time, disguising myself has become more important and my disguises have grown more elaborate. (If you spot someone with Groucho eyebrows and a grease-paint mustache, that's *probably* not me, but it *might* be.)

My work in customer service transformation aims to take a company ever closer to the ideal of customer service perfection. This requires choreographing multiple employee behaviors via training, eLearning, best practices delineation, and a deliberate framework for reinforcement, plus reviewing and refining all related processes, to create exceptional—spectacular, even—customer service.

In the upcoming pages I'll personally mentor you on how to make such service the norm at your business, customer after customer, interaction after interaction.

Don't worry if you've yet to succeed in providing such an extraordinary level of customer service at your business, or if you haven't figured out how to do so on a consistent basis. We'll get there—together.

Good Enough . . . Isn't

If you've felt instinctively that there's more excellence that can be brought to your organization's customer service experience, that there is an elevated state out there that is achievable (even if most companies in the marketplace don't even try to achieve it), then this book is for you.

This won't be a book about taking shortcuts, or about providing a "good enough" customer experience. (And, candidly, if that's what you're looking for, you should put this book aside until your mood and mindset are ready for a change.)

Instead, it's about going deeper and higher, adding more polish, even some *swagger*, to the the experience you create for your customers.

It's going to be an exhilarating, if strenuous, ride—a ride with phenomenal and company-changing results. You'll be creating as close to a "promised land for customers" as can be achieved, where your employees are mission-driven, empowered, and creative in the solutions they deliver to your customers; where heated moments with customers are rare and easily resolved (and the resulting customer reviews after such resolutions are almost uniformly phenomenal); where your company growth is stimulated day after day by this secret weapon you've now added to your arsenal: a uniquely close connection with an activated and engaged customer base.

What Is Customer Service?

Customer service is the assistance an organization provides to those who use its products or services.*

* And, occasionally, even the assistance given to those who ultimately *don't* become customers, i.e., when you graciously assist someone on their way to a provider who is more suitable for their needs.

The term can also encompass *internal customer service*, which is a rather beautiful way to describe the assistance and support given by one colleague to another at work.

A related term is *customer experience*, often abbreviated as CX. There are entire essays written on how these two terms—customer service and customer experience—are or aren't synonymous. This debate doesn't interest me much; *of course* you can only provide great customer service if you're providing a great customer experience, and vice versa. So I'm happy to use the two terms interchangeably, depending on context and audience.

Exceptional Customer Service Lets Your Company Escape the Deadly Commodity Zone

In cold, hard business terms, why is delivering exceptional customer service so valuable? Why is it worth the investment, when you have other business challenges and opportunities also calling out for attention?

Well, not to go all *Eeyore* on you, but it's highly unlikely that your company or brand offering is entirely unique. Most companies hover a lot closer to the deadly commodity zone than anyone at those companies realize. So, the odds are reasonable that this may include your company as well.

What is the *commodity zone*? It's one of the scariest places for a company to find itself. It's when your business is viewed as more or less interchangeable with the competition, where

your current customers are happy to jump ship to one of your competitors, for a myriad of minor reasons:

- ▶ A slightly lower price
- ▶ A faster website
- ▶ A shinier app
- ▶ A slightly more convenient location

Or, sometimes, for no discernible reason at all.

Happily, there *is* a way you can keep your brand from becoming a commodity—replaceable, interchangeable—in the eyes of the marketplace. Build such a reputation for customer service excellence, and such a strong connection with every customer you touch, that your service becomes a point of distinction, a survival lifeline, and, ultimately, a powerful engine for growth. You may never have to worry about being viewed as a commodity again.

The Long-Term Payoffs from Exceptional Customer Service

An exceptional customer experience will create multiple positive results for your business, most centrally the creation of passionately loyal customers.

Passionately loyal customers are:

- ▶ Less price sensitive.
- ▶ More likely to be interested in any new products, services, or brand extensions you may roll out in the future.
- ▶ More understanding when things go sideways. (This is true. I promise! Once you've done so much, so well,

for your customers, you achieve a state where the little mistakes—and even the occasional massive blunder!—are looked upon in a better, more forgiving, light.)

A loyal customer is also your best form of marketing, bar none. There is nothing more powerful in growing a business than the ambassadorship of customers who are so engaged, so *activated*, that they take on the mission of spreading the good word about your company as crusaders for your brand, who share their passion for your company with their online connections and real-life contacts as well.

. . . And the Personal Benefit You'll Experience Right Away

There's one more benefit that you'll experience immediately as you dig into the work we're going to do together. Even before you achieve the state of customer activation, loyalty, and ambassadorship that I've just promised, the benefits of your new approach will make themselves known to you personally. You'll find yourself shoring up relationships *within* your company, and you'll discover that your own work becomes more pleasant and rewarding.

Who Are You, Micah, to Be Making These Promises?

An exceedingly legit question to be asking, before you commit to spending your time and brain cells with me.

So, here goes:

I've built my reputation client by client and engagement by engagement, working with everyone from small organizations with miniature budgets to some of the world's largest and most respected brands. And I've always done my work with the same aim: to achieve an exceptional level of customer service excellence.

I've written five books on the subject (the one you're reading is my fifth), and I've shared my expertise via *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, *Investor's Business Daily*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and on CBS, NBC, and other networks.

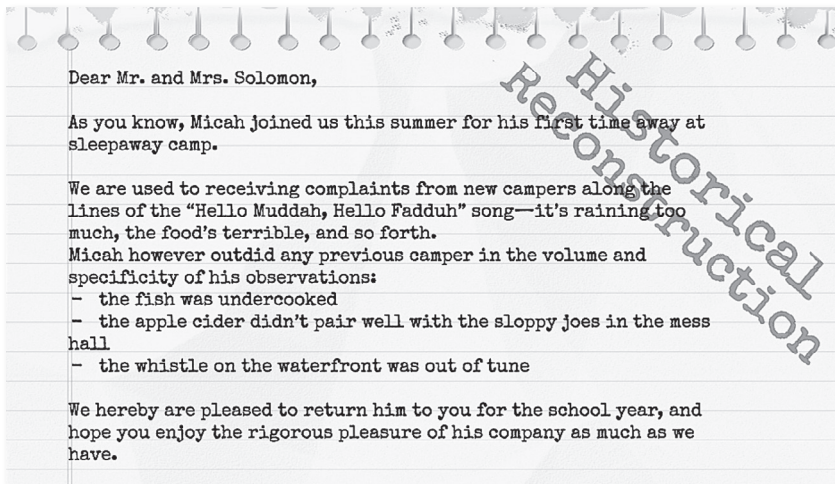
I've also involved myself in customer experience technology innovation, including as an early investor in some of the technology included in what we all know and love (or hate) as Apple's Siri, as well as using my own methods to grow my own company, a manufacturing operation that I built up from my spare bedroom to a place of prominence in our field of play, a story known to readers of Seth Godin's landmark book, *Purple Cow*.

Apparently, I Was Born This Way (Maybe You Were, Too)

But it's not only my professional experiences that have brought me to this point. There's a case to be made that I was *born this way*, as a *particularly* particular person when it comes to all things that we now call the customer experience.

And Here's Some (Reconstructed) Evidence from the Solomon Family Archive

Long ago (I was 11 going on 12), my parents received a letter from my sleepaway camp counselors upon my return from my first summer away. My folks squirreled away that original letter to protect my feelings, but I did manage to see it briefly, and it read something like this:



**Reconstruction of the note Micah's parents
received from his summer camp counselors.**

Oh boy. I must have been an exhausting kid to have at summer camp. Still, I like to think that the very qualities that made me such a trial and tribulation to my camp counselors also make me particularly well suited for the work that now consumes my professional life.

What About You? Are You as Obsessed with Customer Service Excellence as I Am?

Sometimes I meet other people who are likewise obsessed with customer service excellence. Often, they confess this when they come up to meet me after a training or speech or at a book signing. That's where they'll tell me (usually in a quiet voice) some version of the following:

I've always been passionate about customer service, but sometimes it feels like I'm the only one. Nobody else seems to care about this stuff the way I do, but I live and breathe it; it's in my bones.

These customer service enthusiasts span every discipline and industry. They're nurses and administrators in health-care, tellers and managers at banks, enlisted soldiers and officers in the military, and people serving in our federal, state, and local governments. Including, most recently:

- ▶ **The banking vice president** who told me, "If it weren't frowned on when I personally take customer support calls, I'd do it every day in a heartbeat. Sometimes I hear such insensitive language used by us on these calls that it sets my teeth on edge."

(If you share this banker's passion for improving the language we use in conversations with customers, see Chapter 6 for guidance on the proper word choices to make in customer service.)

- ▶ **The owner-operator of a chain of car washes** who told me, "I'm driven to excellence every day by my awareness that customers *could* just wash their cars at

home, when it comes down to it. It's the *experience*, the *something extra* we strive to provide at our car washes that either makes paying for our services worth it or not."

(If you, like this car wash owner, are devoted to providing that *little extra something* for every customer, you can discover how to systemize this via "gold-touch" customer service in Chapter 2.)

- ▶ **The manager at a much-beloved retailer** who told me that her own company's famously high service standards are such that it's hard for her to enjoy being a customer anywhere else, because she always finds herself "biting my lip" to avoid sharing unsolicited suggestions when she's supposed to be enjoying herself as a customer.

(For a discussion of customer service standards, with pointers on developing your own, visit the final chapter of this book, Chapter 12. I've also gone ahead and included a hefty helping of such standards throughout this book that you can borrow from me verbatim.)

- ▶ **The healthcare administrator** who shared her belief with me that "the consideration and compassion with which we deliver healthcare here makes a tangible difference to the experience of our patients," and, she believes, to the success of their medical outcomes as well.

(If you share this healthcare administrator's interest in consideration and compassion, visit, in particular, Chapter 4.)

Note: If you share this interest in improving the patient experience in healthcare, please send an email with the subject line "Bonus Patient Experience Resource" to health@micahsolomon.com and I will send you my RESPECT Patient Experience Model, along with other patient experience-specific resources. Please also include a sentence or two about who you are, what you do, and what you're facing daily at your work in healthcare!

* * *

All in all, if you are consumed by a desire to create a level of customer service excellence higher than most everyone else in business even considers to be possible, this book is for you. So, let's dig in and get started.

The Book Club (or Video Club) Method of Finding Your Secret Customer Service Army

If you're feeling alone in your passion for service, it may be helpful and heartening to identify who else in your organization shares this interest, because they may be all around you, hiding in plain sight. A low-risk trick for identifying fellow service enthusiasts in your organization is to start a book club dedicated to the subject. (And how about this for a good deal: If you want to start your club off with the book you're reading right now, and buy book copies from me, I'll host a session or two for you for free! Email me at club@micahsolomon.com and let's make it happen!)

Or, if your colleagues aren't particularly book people, make it a video club, featuring and reviewing customer service

videos. (You can visit this page on my site, micah.pub/MAMA, for a free training video to get you started.)



For a look at a training video like the one pictured, visit micah.pub/MAMA.

If all this sounds like too much work, you can always shoot me an email at micah@micahsolomon.com and I'll sympathize with your customer service obsession personally.

Liberties I've Taken in This Book

Anecdotes that feature clients of mine, past or present, have been altered to make those involved unidentifiable. Locations, brand and personnel names, and the nature of an industry were all fair game to be tinkered with in the process of writing this book. I've also used simplification and condensation for the sake of making examples clearer and more useful. Finally, some material in this book is adapted from my previously published articles.

CLIMBING THE LOYALTY LADDER

*Propel Your Organization up the
Three Rungs of Customer Service*

The way I see it, your decision to read this book already puts you way ahead of the game. (Here's my logic: there are literally billions of human beings out there who, unlike you, will never read this, or any other book, on the subject of customer service improvement!) And because of your demonstrated interest in the subject, I'm going to assume that you're already providing "pretty good, much of the time" customer service. You're *already* getting quite a few things right—at least on most days and in most customer interactions. So, take a moment to pat yourself on the back.*

If I'm right about this, it means that you've already learned the value of customer service from the moments when you

* But don't strain your neck.

have gotten it right, and you're now inspired to take these successes even further. You're ready to elevate and polish your relationships with customers to a level sufficient to build the customer connections (and business results) that you've always hoped to achieve.

In other words, you're ready to get out of the middle of the pack—what I call Rung 2 of the Service Level Ladder—and ascend to the top. This middle rung, Rung 2, is where you're judged to be more or less satisfactory by your customers, but you're not yet loved (or even probably remembered) for the quality of customer service you provide.

This second rung is, of course, loads better than Rung 1 (unacceptable service), but it's never going to inspire the kind of engagement, passion, and loyalty you need from customers to grow your business.

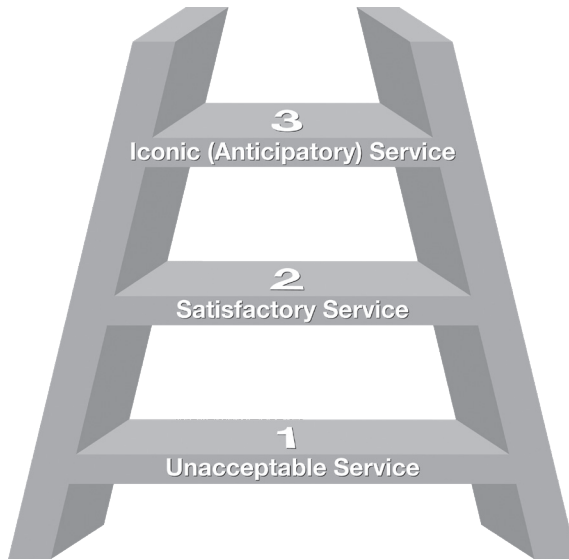
The problem is that a *merely satisfied* (Rung 2) customer will still have a wandering eye. And how can you blame them? If your more-or-less-decent customer service is no better and no worse than what your competitors are also able to supply, where's the value to a customer limiting themselves to only one supplier—you?

In other words, here's what you need to remember:

A merely satisfied customer belongs to the marketplace.

A loyal customer belongs to you.

This is why it's so important to elevate your organization's performance to Rung 3, the level of truly iconic customer service, where customers now consider you their *only* possible supplier—a category of one—and go out of their way to sing your praises and share the word about the extraordinary level



The Service Level Ladder

(© 2023 Four Aces Inc., Micah Solomon, President)

of customer service you provide. Once you're viewed this way in the marketplace, you'll be able to use your new, elevated status to grow your company reputation and to reliably and repeatably grow your bottom line.

Becoming Iconic: Moving Your Organization up the Customer Service Ladder

In the upcoming pages, you'll learn the secrets of climbing up the ladder to Rung 3: how to provide personalized, memorable, loyalty-building customer service via elements that include the more or less magic principle of gold-touch customer service (Chapter 2), how to harnessing the power

of recognition (Chapter 4), how to put in place an effective service recovery framework for when things aren't going smoothly (Chapter 5), the right and wrong language to use (Chapter 6), how to deploy customer-focused technology without losing the human touch (Chapter 7), the principles and practicalities of inspiring customer-centric innovation (Chapter 11), and more.

The Art of Anticipatory Customer Service

These elements by and large share one organizing principle: the principle of anticipatory customer service.

Anticipatory customer service means getting to where the hockey puck is headed *before* the puck gets there. It's giving the customer what they want:

before they ask for it,

before they even *know* they want it,

even if they *never* get around to asking for it.

The *baseline* customer service equation is when a customer asks for something and you provide it to them. This has value, of course, but it's not enough to give rise to special feelings in a customer and to linger in their memory.

But iconic, loyalty-building customer service occurs when you seek out and take care of desires, needs, and questions that a customer has left unexpressed. Customers don't ask for what they need because, among other reasons, they aren't knowledgeable enough to realize that they could benefit from some aspect of your product or service or they don't even

know that you can offer it. Or, maybe, they aren't an assertive person in public—they don't want to be “too much of a bother.” (Yes, such gentle, unassuming customers do exist.)

Anticipatory customer service involves hearing *more* than what a customer says out loud. Uncovering and taking care of unspoken needs and wishes and answering unasked questions is a master principle of service that will bring your company into a new reality: a destination populated with delighted customers who provide you with the kind of loyalty and enthusiastic referrals that will help your company grow and prosper for the long term.

There is nothing more powerful in the world of business.

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CLIMBING THE LOYALTY LADDER

*Propel Your Organization up the
Three Rungs of Customer Service*

The way customer service is delivered in our world ranges from truly amazing to depressingly bad—and a lot that falls in between. To make the delivery of customer service as simple to visualize as possible, I have developed the Service Level Ladder.

The Service Level Ladder has three rungs—the higher your people and your organization climb up the ladder, the better the service they're delivering:

Rung 1. This is the lowest step on the ladder, *unacceptable service*. If your organization is stuck on this rung, you've got your work cut out for you. I'm going to guess, however, that this isn't where you are. Why? You've invested in reading this book, so you already know how much value there is in service.

Rung 2. *Satisfactory service*. Satisfactory service is a big step above unacceptable service. Satisfactory service fulfills the baseline commercial equation: a customer asks for something and you respond by providing it. The problem is that satisfactory customer service can still leave you, in the mind of customers, interchangeable with your competition. It's not enough to create strong customer emotions or make them loyal to you; it's not enough to keep them from leaving you

for the competition for all sorts of trivial reasons—or for no discernible reason at all.

Rung 3. *Iconic (anticipatory) service.* Rung 3 customer service builds on satisfactory customer service by adding another element: anticipation—hearing (and acting on) *more than what a customer says out loud*. This is where you give customers what they want:

before they ask for it,

before they even know they want it,

even if they never get around to asking for it.

When you master this level of service, it becomes a loyalty-building, competitive advantage that will grow your business customer by customer, year after year.

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GOLD-TOUCH CUSTOMER SERVICE

*A Loyalty-Building Practice
Anyone Can Master*

Feeling the ever-more insistent tug of nature, but not wanting to leave my laptop unattended for even a minute,* I asked my server at the five-star Madera restaurant in the heart of Silicon Valley,

“How comfortable should I feel leaving my laptop on the table while I step out for a minute?”

*“**Very** comfortable,” she answered, “because I will be here with it,” moving into an arms-crossed, standing-guard position like a sentry at the Tower of London that she*

* One of the things that made my laptop so precious that day was that it contained an early manuscript of the book you’re now reading!

was still maintaining (with perhaps a bit of humorous exaggeration) when I returned.

What my well-trained server, Audrey Boisvert, was practicing was *gold-touch customer service*.

Gold-touch customer service comes in two varieties. The first is the *do-extra*: giving a customer more effort than they've asked for or could reasonably expect. The second is the *tell-extra*: providing a customer with unexpected, additional value by answering a question with particular thoroughness or by making a connection with a customer on a human, shared passion level.

If you want to transform your company's relationship with customers, I encourage you to practice gold-touch customer service whenever you find or can create a do-extra or tell-extra opportunity. It's a simple practice that can enrich customer interactions and elevate how customers think of your business.

Gold-Touch Examples in Various Industries and Contexts

In the examples of gold-touch customer service that follow, you'll notice they generally aren't massive, splashy, scene-stealing gestures. Yet each one is more than enough to distinguish a company from its competition, brighten a customer's day, and put that customer one step closer to true brand loyalty.

Do-extras:

- ▶ An auto dealership employee could pair a customer's cellphone to their new car's system *before* they drive off the lot, rather than allowing them to drive away only to get frustrated (and perhaps even into a fender bender) while trying to handle it themselves on the road.
- ▶ A hair salon employee could run out and feed the parking meter for an arriving client so they don't have to fumble around trying to find change.
- ▶ A clothing salesperson at a department store could send Girl Scout cookies in the mail to a customer who has mentioned a weakness for, say, Thin Mints (that's me!) or Caramel deLites (that's me when Thin Mints aren't available). My salesperson at Nordstrom, in fact, does this. (She's the fabulous Joanne Hassis at Nordstrom's King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, location.)

Tell-extras:

- ▶ A paralegal could respond to a first-time legal services client who asks about hours of operation with, "The building opens at seven." (Here, they've answered the question the client *actually* asked.) "And you'll want to head to the last bank of elevators to access the higher floors, including ours." (Here, they've added a valuable tell-extra.)
- ▶ Someone scheduling or confirming an appointment for a job applicant—yes, in many senses, job applicants are customers, too!—could volunteer, "Your interview is at 9 a.m." (This answers the applicant's expressed

question.) “And be sure to bring your driver’s license to get into the building—they can be sticklers for that downstairs.” (This provides a useful tell-extra that may head off later frustration.)

- ▶ A cashier at the checkout line could admire—sincerely—one of the articles a customer is purchasing. (This one requires nuance. Trader Joe’s is both by and large great at this and occasionally mocked for sometimes appearing to do this by rote.)
- ▶ A company that sells a potentially confusing product could include helpful, very specific links, or even—and this is one of my favorites—a brief and highly personalized introductory tutorial video. (The flip side of this is that you need to curate what you send. Too much information, à la the final archives scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is nearly as unhelpful as too little.)

One of the Most Powerful Kinds of Gold-Touch . . .

... At least of the tell-extra variety, is when you’re able to make use of a distinctive nugget of information that you’ve picked up about a particular customer. This kind of detail is often right there and ripe for the taking, but you need to have your ears perked up, your eyes open, and your antennas, so to speak, extended. These nuggets can be a customer’s hobbies, recreation choices, love of dogs or cats (or their revulsion thereof), food or beverage preferences, and the neighborhood where they live, as well as, more seriously, details like food

allergies, challenges with low vision, physical mobility (disability) issues,* and the like.

Always be on the lookout for these one of a kind gems.

Like Any Good Deed, Gold-Touch Has the Potential to Backfire

Watch out for these common gold-touch pitfalls:

- ▶ Resist the impulse to offer personalization based on information that the customer will feel uncomfortable knowing that you have. The front desk manager of a hotel shouldn't call a guest in their room and try to gold-touch them by offering an exclusive bourbon tasting based on "how much you've enjoyed the miniature bottles of liquor in your minibar." Yes, things like this *do* happen. No, this isn't a way to endear yourself to your guests.
- ▶ Avoid basing a gold-touch on information that was confidentially shared with you or shared as a requirement of service. While a customer will understand your need to ask their date of birth for legitimate compliance reasons, if you then use it as a public marketing vehicle via LinkedIn postings or unsolicited postcards, it may not be appreciated.
- ▶ Avoid basing a gold-touch on anything that comes too close to an obvious danger area, like religion or politics.

* Although attention to disability-related issues should be considered part of the *standard* service we all provide, I'm putting them in the gold-touch category because, in practice, they are rarely given proper consideration by most service providers. Please be the exception.

Be Gentle with Your Employees If Their Early Gold-Touch Efforts Go a Little Sideways

Be careful to avoid quashing the tender efforts of employees who are just learning the art of providing gold-touches. Searching for opportunities and then delivering gold-touches is a mindset, a behavior, and eventually, if all goes well, a habit. But as with anything creative and personal, it can be tricky to get exactly right. Most commonly, when an employee is starting out, they'll be too overbearing or too personal; alternatively and not as commonly, they may be a little one-size-fits-all in their approach.

If employees start feeling defeated and begin tying themselves into knots with the fear that their gold-touch attempts won't meet your high standards, then the habit is unlikely to take root and flourish. Everyone in leadership positions should take pains to *applaud* rather than *criticize* employees who go about their do-extras or tell-extras in a different way from how they imagine they would have handled it themselves. And remember: whenever an employee is diverted from their regularly scheduled activities to provide gold-touch customer service that couldn't be planned for in advance, it isn't fair to give them grief about the regularly scheduled work they weren't able to accomplish during that time.

With a Gold-Touch, It's the Thought That Counts (At Least to Some Extent)

Here's another reason you shouldn't fret if a gold-touch isn't perfectly designed and executed: there's a significant element

of, “it’s the thought that counts, and that sure was thoughtful!” credit that customers will give a business for making a gold-touch effort regardless—well, *almost* regardless—of the grace or awkwardness with which it was executed.

In addition, providing a gold-touch will telegraph to the customer that you’re up for handling other forms of assistance they may need in the future. In other words, the more you provide gold-touch service, the more you become *their* provider, and the more closely the customer feels engaged and aligned with you.

Gold-Touch Doesn’t Always Have to Be Hand-Crafted and Spontaneous

Although the most meaningful gold-touch gestures are specific and applicable only to the customer to whom they’re offered (because they’re based on an employee’s knowledge of, and cues picked up from, that specific customer), a gold-touch doesn’t always have to be as personal and spontaneous as all that. Choreographed, scripted, universally applicable gold-touches can have value, too:

- ▶ The pet grooming outfit that sends every customer home with a blue or pink bandana around its neck* after making it through its grooming ordeal.
- ▶ The car dealership that puts a bottle of chilled water in the cupholder of every car after service, to be discovered by the driver upon exit. (The environmentalist in me offers this example with some hesitation.)

* Its furry customer, that is, not its human customer—except, I suppose, upon request!

- ▶ The theme park where every employee, whether a groundskeeper or an executive, knows to drop their assigned tasks and jump to:
 - Offer directions any time they see a guest beginning to unfold their theme park map.
 - Offer to take a photo when they see a family group forming for a selfie that will be improbably large and neck-and-shoulder straining unless taken by someone *not* in the group.

Just keep in mind that, on the one hand, these choreographed, preplanned gold-touches have the potential to reach the largest number of customers, on the other hand, they tend to lose their impact over time as they become an *expectation* rather than an extra.

On the *other* other hand, you may be fortunate enough to have a choreographed gold-touch become a brand trademark and attraction, as the chocolate chip cookies at DoubleTree hotels have become. Now how cool would *that* be?

Seriously Now, Micah, How Am I Expected to Find Time for This?

I can picture your eyes rolling as you read this, thinking, “sure, sure, whatever you say, Micah, but fumbling around for opportunities to gold-touch our customers is the *last* thing anyone at my company has time to squeeze into their already busy days!”

Well, good point. Forget everything you’ve just read.
Just kidding.

While more elaborate gold-touches do take time, if you don't have time for those yet,* there are still, in my experience, opportunities that will arise for gold-touches that are ripe for easy plucking, so long as you have a gold-touch mind-set and are paying even a smidgeon of attention:

- ▶ Any time something doesn't go as well as expected, you have a chance to go the extra mile in a gold-touch sort of way. Let's say you're a security company that had to delay installation due to an unexpected room layout within a customer's house. In this case, you could do something as simple as working closely with the customer to conveniently reschedule the updated installation.
- ▶ Any time something goes right (e.g., when a customer of the security company volunteers how happy they are to *finally* have the right system installed after the miseries of working with prior vendors) you also have a chance to add a gold-touch, whether it's simply expressing to the customer your happiness at hearing their thanks, or sending them a card congratulating them on their new success.
- ▶ Any time a customer neglects to ask for something that you, in your professional judgment, know they would benefit from. This could be, for example, recommending that a customer add water leak sensors to their security system, a solution that could, as you explain to the customer, "save you from thousands of dollars in financial losses and weeks of inconvenience while the water damage is repaired." And while this *could* be considered an upsell, if it's a thoughtful and appropriate recommendation, most customers won't see it that way.

* I predict you will start to *make time* once you see how effective gold-touching is.

Even a Funeral Can Benefit from a Choreographed Gold-Touch

I have found that the funeral industry (“deathcare,” as it is sometimes a little cringily called) often attracts particularly customer-focused personnel to its ranks. The majority of funeral directors and their staff are attuned to what can impact their grieving customers and will respond by doing whatever it takes to make their customers comfortable, as in the following instance.

While grief may be the overarching emotion for adults after a loss, hunger can strike almost as acutely when you’re a child.

“My kids and I had run out of the house early the morning of my father’s [the children’s grandfather’s] funeral without eating much,” a young mom tells me. “As a result, on the way to the gravesite for burial, after having already made it through the morning viewing, my kids were getting hungry and well on the way to *hangry*.”

“Then, a godsend happened on the way to the limousines: the funeral professionals handed each of us a brown bag of buttered bagels and bottles of water. I’ll never forget their kindness and forward thinking.”

How to Create an Environment Where Gold-Touch Behavior Will Flourish

As I’ve been emphasizing, your goal should be to create an environment and culture where gold-touch behavior becomes the norm. Here are my suggested ways to accomplish this:

► **Build gold-touch into your customer service training.**

Gold-touch is a principle that should be routinely taught and retaught in your customer service trainings. (See the “Two Free Gold-Touch Tools for My Readers” callout for how to access my eLearning training video on gold-touch for free.)

Two Free Gold-Touch Tools for My Readers

1. I encourage you to email me for a private link (on your honor to keep it private) to my eLearning training video on gold-touch at goldtouch@micahsolomon.com.
2. For a standalone, printable version of my Gold-Touch Prompts to Get You Started, email me at prompts@micahsolomon.com and I'll hook you up right away. Please take a moment in your email to tell me about your situation, company, and yourself!

- **Make gold-touch part of employee onboarding (orientation).** It's never too early for an employee to learn about gold-touch. Start on day one.
- **Lead by example.** Provide gold-touches to customers yourself. Do so especially when you know employees are watching. (Your cherry-picking secret is safe with me!)
- **Celebrate gold-touches and those who provide them.** When you catch employees engaging in gold-touch behavior, recognize (and maybe even reward) them right then and there. Also, take the time to

systemically build ways to celebrate these efforts on your physical or virtual bulletin board, your internal newsletter, company events, and elsewhere.

- ▶ **Empower employees to step out of their planned routines to offer gold-touches as needed.** If employees are always on edge, worrying that management will later reprimand them for having stepped away from scheduled tasks to provide a gold-touch to a customer, they will never feel safe offering gold-touches.
- ▶ **Build breathing space into employee schedules.** Being *theoretically empowered* to creatively provide gold-touch moments—but *in reality* lacking the time to actually carry them out— isn't a winning combination.

Gold-Touch Prompts to Get You Started

Do-extra:

- Are there preferences your customer has exhibited in the past that you can fulfill now? (Bring them a Diet Coke while they're waiting if they asked for one last time, avoid the standard plastic wrap if they asked you to leave it off on a past visit, etc.)
- Is there something you can add to what you're selling that the customer would appreciate, without it breaking the bank for you (e.g., throwing in an extra blueberry muffin when they order a dozen)?
- Is there additional effort you can provide that the customer would appreciate (for example, walking them to their car while holding an umbrella for

them on a rainy day, or walking around from behind the retail cash wrap counter to hand them their purchases from a side-by-side vantage point)?

- Is there a chance for you to do something that's not within the scope of your business (e.g., a real estate manager could do a drive-by for an out-of-town customer who saw a house they fancied online)?

Tell-extra:

- Interests: hobbies, pets, kids, sports teams, etc.
- Something the customer might benefit from knowing (for example, "You'll want to have a screwdriver bigger than X on hand before you start assembling your new purchase") beyond the generic instructions the manufacturer includes with your product.
- Any time a customer neglects to ask for some information that you, in your professional judgment, think they would benefit from.

* * *

I can't pretend—and neither should you—that gold-touches take zero time. But I would argue that gold-touches ultimately take *less* time than the hours of prospecting you'd otherwise need to replace customers who have drifted away from your company because they weren't touched by you in this loyalty-building way. And the marketing value of gold-touched customers spreading the word to others about their delightful experience with your company is truly beyond measure.

GOLD-TOUCH CUSTOMER SERVICE

A Loyalty-Building Practice Anyone Can Master

Gold-touch customer service is a simple practice that can quickly elevate how customers think of your business. Gold-touch comes in two varieties:

Do-extra: When you give a customer more of your effort than they've asked for or would reasonably expect.

Tell-extra: When you provide customers with additional value by answering questions in a particularly thorough way or by connecting with customers on a human, shared passion level.

Often, the best kind of tell-extra is when you make use of a particular tidbit of information that you've picked up about a particular customer. The secret to finding these nuggets is to have your ears perked up, your eyes open, and your antennas, so to speak, extended throughout your day as you interact with customers.

Remember

Gold-touch customer service takes time to learn and often takes employees away from their regular duties. Leaders should applaud gold-touch efforts that their employees make, rather than coming down on employees for having temporarily stepped away from their regular work.

Successfully Delivering Gold-Touch Customer Service Takes Practice

Likewise, leaders should go easy on employees who don't get gold-touch customer service exactly right the first time. You don't want them to be afraid to attempt gold-touch service in the future because you chastised them when their early efforts were delivered awkwardly as they learned the ropes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



(Photo Credit: Danielle Barnum)

Micah Solomon, President and CEO of Four Aces, Inc., is a leading authority, consultant, author, speaker, trainer, and content creator on customer service, the customer experience, hospitality, and customer service culture. His bestselling books have been translated into more than a half-dozen languages and are the recipients of multiple awards. His expertise has been featured in *Forbes*, the *New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, the *Washington Post*, *Entrepreneur*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and many television networks and affiliates.

A business leader and entrepreneur himself, Micah built his own company into a market leader—a story that readers

of Seth Godin's *Purple Cow* will be familiar with. He was an early investor in the technology behind Apple's Siri, and his broad expertise touches on technology, the hospitality industry, manufacturing, the automotive industry, banking, financial services, high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs), retail, the patient experience in healthcare, and the nonprofit and governmental sectors (federal, state, and local).

Through his consulting firm, Four Aces, Inc., Micah and his team are available to readers of this book in the following areas of professional practice:

- ▶ **Customer service transformation initiatives and customer service consulting**
- ▶ **Training and training design** (live and via custom-created eLearning)
- ▶ **Keynote speaking**
- ▶ **Book authorship/coauthorship/ghostwriting**
- ▶ **Content creation and influencer work**
- ▶ **Expert witness work** (practice limited to customer service and the customer experience)

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Praise for *Can Your Customer Service Do This?* and Micah Solomon

“At Wharton Executive Education, when I’ve needed someone to deliver actionable customer service skills to one of my global clients, Micah is who I’ve turned to. In his latest book, *Can Your Customer Service Do This?*, Micah provides a comprehensive guide that covers all aspects of customer service excellence. This book will not only spark your imagination; it will transform your organization.”

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—**ROBERT J. FLANYAK, CPFC®**, President and CEO of CHROME Federal Credit Union

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