

CSN selects the year's best customer service books

The lead story in the February 2010 issue of *Customer Service Newsletter (CSN)* offers the editor's selection of the top customer service books of 2009 — and the first couple of months of 2010. To provide readers with an additional sampling of some of these titles, here are some brief excerpts.

Book Excerpt: *Strategic Customer Service*

by John Goodman

From Chapter 1: Seeing Customer Service Strategically: Understanding the True Role of Customer Service in Your Business

A FEW MONTHS AGO, I bought two eggplants at my local grocery. Upon getting home, I peeled and sliced into them, and I found that both were brown and yucky in the middle. I took one large unsliced half of each back to the store's service desk, casually said, "I got two eggplants and they were bad; can I get two more?" and started for the produce area. The service counter rep stopped me and said, "Sir, I see only one eggplant." I asked if she were questioning my honesty, and she said, "I'm only saying that I see only one eggplant!" I had to return all the pieces of both eggplants in order to get replacements. Compare this to the New York Richard Rodgers Theater, where my family and I mistakenly arrived on a Saturday with Friday night tickets; Tim, the house manager, placed chairs at the end of a row so that we could see the play and be forever indebted to the Richard

Rodgers Theater. Memorably bad service over \$2 worth of eggplant and memorably great service when the customer made a \$750 mistake: How do you avoid the former and achieve the latter? That's what this book is about.

A strategic view of customer service requires thinking of the function not as a cost center to be minimized, but as a competitive differentiator, revenue retention and generation machine, and word-of-mouth management process. This begins when you see the true role that the service experience plays in your business and the broad impact of customer service on your financial performance.

This chapter will help you see your customer service function in strategic terms and grasp its true potential. The chapter begins by examining several ways in which customer service and customer reactions to service can affect an organization for better or worse. It then looks at how financial decisions about customer service and the overall customer experience are currently made, and how they could be

made strategically. After pausing briefly to clearly define several key terms that will arise in most discussions of customer service, the chapter turns to presenting a model for a customer service function that can play a strategic role in your organization. It finally is brought to a close with six first steps you can take to establish strategic customer service in your organization and, as you'll see at the end of each chapter, key takeaway points.

HOW CUSTOMER SERVICE AFFECTS A BUSINESS

The idea that poor customer service harms a business is intuitively correct, but it cannot be incorporated into decision making unless it can be quantified. What follows here are some of the basic quantified findings of TARP's research from over the past three decades. First, I will give you the bad news, and then the good news.

The Bad News

Most customers do not complain, and noncomplaining customers hurt your business. With consumer packaged goods and other small-ticket items, only 5 to 10 percent of dissatisfied customers com-

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plain, and most of them complain only to the retailer. For serious problems with big-ticket items, the complaint rate rises to 20 to 50 percent reporting to a front-line rep, but only 1 out of 10 of these customers (or 2 to 5 percent of all complainers) escalates to the local manager or the corporate office. This means that at the manufacturer or headquarters level, for each complaint you hear, there are approximately 20 to 50 other customers with problems.

Customers' reasons for not complaining are usually that they believe it will do no good—what we term “trained hopelessness;” they do not know where to complain; and they fear retribution from the person they are complaining about. (To put this in its proper context, think of your trepidation about complaining to the manager of a restaurant about your waitress before she brings your entrée to the table.) When dissatisfied customers don't tell the company about their dissatisfaction, their problems can't be resolved. We see the same behaviors and even worse ratios of problems to complaints in nonprofits like museums, health clinics, and government agencies.

Customers who don't complain about problems are 20 to 40 percent less loyal than those who have no problem or those who complain and are satisfied. This means that for each five customers who have a problem but don't complain, you are losing at least one.

Problems result in lost customers and revenue. In some 1,000 studies in every industry in a score of countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, we have found that when a customer encounters a problem, there is, on average, a 20 percent drop in loyalty compared with customers who have had no problem. This means that for every five customers

with problems, one will switch brands the next time he buys a specific good or service. This doesn't even include the effects of bad word of mouth, which, as you will see, can be quite significant.

Bad news travels far. TARP's landmark 1980 study for Coca-Cola revealed that, through word of mouth, an average of 5 people will hear about someone's good experience, but 10 will hear about a bad experience. A later TARP study for an automaker indicated that while 8 people will be told about a good auto-repair experience, 16 will be told about a bad one. Bad word of mouse travels even further: On the Web, four times as many people hear about a negative experience as hear about a positive experience. In addition, a 2008 TARP study found that 12 percent of dissatisfied online customers told their buddy lists, which averaged more than 60 persons. However, recent TARP research finds that positive experiences can also have great impact. In one packaged goods study, 40 percent of consumers who were told of a positive experience by another customer tried the product. Positive word of mouth can indeed be a powerful marketing tool.

The Good News

Now, as promised, here's the good news.

Employees are not the cause of most customer dissatisfaction.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, employee attitudes and errors are responsible for only about 20 percent of overall customer dissatisfaction. TARP research reveals that in most industries, employees come to work desperately wanting to do a good job. It's what they are told to do and say to customers that causes most dissatisfaction. About 60 percent of overall customer dissatisfac-

tion is caused by products, processes, and marketing messages that are delivered as intended, but that contain unpleasant surprises. About 20 to 30 percent of problems are caused by customers' errors, erroneous expectations, or product misuse. (Every year, a leading liquid bleach manufacturer gets several calls from people asking whether it can make the product taste better for when they brush their teeth with it to whiten them.) However, regardless of the cause, customers tend to blame the organization, so it is to the organization's advantage to prevent or fix the problem.

Keeping customers is cheaper than winning them. We originated this widely accepted rule of thumb in 1978 during an analysis of marketing costs versus customer service costs for a U.S. automaker. In this study, TARP compared the expense of dealer advertising (only one part of the cost of acquiring new customers) with the average amount spent to retain a customer via effective complaint handling. The ads cost five times as much. In similar analyses in more than two dozen other industries, depending on the specific industry and organization, the cost of winning a new customer can be two to twenty times that of retaining an unhappy one by resolving her problem and restoring the relationship. In a business-to-business environment, a company can easily spend \$10,000 to \$100,000 to win a new client, but then undermine the relationship and future sales by skimping on installation, training, documentation, parts, or service.

Proper handling of complaints retains customers. In almost all business sectors, a customer who complains and is satisfied by the resolution of his complaint is actually 30 percent more loyal than a non-complainer and 50 percent more

loyal than a complainer who remains dissatisfied. Getting three noncomplaining customers to complain and satisfying them produces the same revenue as winning one new customer. Clearly, then, it's incumbent upon you to find effective ways of resolving problems and of encouraging customers to complain. Several TARP client companies have found it useful to imprint invoices or post signs with the statement: "We can solve only problems we know about!"

The economic imperative for service improvements is clear.

When the right financial data are combined with the right data on customer behavior, CFOs and CEOs can readily recognize the returns on investments in customer service. Ironically, these data (with the exception of the noncomplaint rate and word-of-mouth data) already exist in most organizations or can be developed with existing resources. The missing element is typically a sound methodology for modeling the impact of service on revenue and word of mouth in a way that senior executives understand—a methodology I'll cover in detail in Chapter 4.

However, to be motivated to even consider such a methodology, management must understand the broad effects noted earlier, and then consider the business case for improvements in customer service.

MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN SERVICE

An organization can implement full-scale strategic customer service or simply improve specific aspects of its service. Either way, the organization is making improvements in customer service, and, although there are some low-cost and even no-cost ways of doing that (such as trusting known customers, 98 per-

cent of whom are honest), most improvements will cost money. Thus, you'll need to convince the finance function in your organization that there will be a tangible payoff from investments in an improved customer experience.

Unfortunately, investments in improvements in customer service are rarely presented to finance as true investments; instead, they are presented as costs on a budget line. That's why most companies just fix the problems that produce the most frequent or the loudest complaints. That's also why they add service reps and call stations when sales rise, and lay off reps and reduce resources when sales sag. There is no real understanding of the linkage between service and future revenue.

These approaches not only are shortsighted, but also shortchange customers, employees, and the organization itself. Strategic customer service focuses on the business case, that is, on the revenue benefits of improvements in service, which are usually 10 to 20 times the cost implications. That focus recognizes the links among customer service, customer behavior, and financial results. These links will be a theme throughout this book because I have found—as have scores of leading companies—that investments in customer service provide some of the largest returns on investment that a company can make, usually a multiple of the return on other investments, and some of the fastest. When you implement a change that improves your service, the benefits of increased loyalty, positive word of mouth, and reduced risk begin accruing on that very next phone call.

To bring the business case into sharper focus, let's look more closely at the revenue impact of problem prevention and resolution. In the previous section, I noted that when a

customer encounters a problem, there is, on average, a 20 percent drop in loyalty. Thus, for every five customers with problems, the probabilities say that you will lose one of them (5 customers x 0.2 loyalty decrease = 1 customer lost). To make a strong business case—that is, a financial case—you must quantify the impact on revenue. So, let's say a customer is worth \$1,000. That implies that for every five customers with problems, the company will lose one customer worth \$1,000 in revenue. We have now linked problem occurrence to revenue implications—the most critical linkage we address in this book. You can then reverse the analysis and say that if you can prevent or fix five problems, you will retain one customer who otherwise would have been lost and thus save \$1,000 in lost revenue. Moreover, that \$1,000 in revenue can be attributed directly to the service process, because that process involves identifying, preventing, and resolving the problems. (You'll see how shortly.) That sort of calculation makes the basic case for this type of investment in customer service. If you can get the finance staff to accept the above linkage, you are more than halfway to gaining their support.

Analyzing investments to improve customer service requires you to know what a customer is worth to your organization. If you don't know how much the customer is worth, how can you decide how much to spend to keep him happy? This number can be calculated in various ways, such as the lifetime value of the average customer (the amount a typical customer will spend during his tenure as a customer), the average or median annual revenue per customer, or the averages or medians for specific customer segments or product lines. I find it dis-

concerting that most senior executives—even in sales and marketing—don't know the average value of their customers. Marketing should know, and if it doesn't, finance must know because loyal customers should be considered the company's most important asset. To think strategically about customer service, you must know the average revenue per customer for your organization.

CFOs quite rightly want to see the business case for customer ser-

vice investments, as they would for any investment. Making that business case—the economic imperative, as I call it—goes to the heart of strategic customer service, which actually requires an economic rationale for every improvement in service. In this way, you don't end up fixing squeaky wheels that barely warrant a drop of oil.

The business case for strategic service depends on the relationship between revenue and several con-

cepts, which in my experience usually warrant clarification.

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Book Excerpt: *The Power of Pause*

by Nance Guilmartin

From Chapter Three: The Paradox of Pause You Gain Impact by Taking a (Brief) Time-Out

It's a paradox: to move forward, you gain time and options if you momentarily ease off the accelerator, suspend your initial reactions, and consider your immediate assumptions. Here's how one senior manager in state government uses the paradox of a pause to help a fast-moving team be even more productive:

In adrenaline-pumping moments, pausing is the furthest thing from anyone's mind. But it is exactly what they need to do. People can get hung up on timing, but a pause doesn't have to take forever. If you are good at it (and it is a skill that has to be developed — kind of like triage), you can get it done very rapidly, and people leave the moment feeling that at least you have things under control.

I do this all the time in meetings and usually begin with, "Forgive me for taking a second or two here, but I want to try and rephrase - recap what I think I understand, what we as a group

just said, and what we have decided to do." This usually leads to a five — minute time — out where heads can cool, and people listen and make corrections if needed. Then the group either moves on with a consensus of opinion or realizes that everyone was not on the same page and the issue needs to be readdressed. I tend to do this when I feel like a meeting is out of control or something just happened that doesn't sit right with me intellectually and I need more explanation to wrap my head around the issue.

Another example of the paradoxical power of a pause is this: when you exercise the presence of mind to pause, your ability to make better choices is sharpened, and that can lead to significantly better results for you and for your clients. Exercising the self-control to pause and make different choices also increases your communication intelligence, a concept we'll explore in the next section. Let's first look at the competitive field of law for an example of how a pause restores your power when responding to

someone who's pressuring you to act fast.

Ellen* is a prominent securities attorney whose colleague asked for her expert eye and quick review of a client's proposal for a public offering. Ellen had a "funny feeling" — sensing there might be something incorrect or incomplete — and insisted on having more data. She resisted her colleague's argument that her expertise should be sufficient to provide a fast review. At first he dismissed her need for more information, giving her the impression that he thought she ought to be "an instant genius."

However, she had the presence of mind to pause again — to reassure him that even though his proposal was logical, the reason she couldn't just say yes was that no one had ever asked her to present regulators with a deal structured like this one. She could not predict how they would react to his plan.

She explained to me, "Your Power of Pause process helped me resist the pressure to satisfy my colleague's demands that I provide an instant answer that appeared to solve his situation. Instead, with the additional information, I had a chance to identify a problem no one else had

known existed and, therefore, gave better legal advice to our client.

However, the ‘instant solution’ would have been a false solution.”

Ellen said yes to a better outcome and no to the intimidation that she ignore the need for crucial information. By momentarily putting in the clutch, she changed the dynamic in the relationship. She was able to disengage from her colleague’s anxiety, giving him an unexpected chance to rethink his priorities and collect the additional data.

People have asked me, “How is a pause powerful, especially when your reputation or your job is at risk if you don’t respond fast enough?” Ellen’s story shows how a choice to take a measured moment restored her power to say no when she felt pressured to say yes. As author William Ury explains in *The Power of a Positive No*, when you take the time to communicate what you are saying yes to, it enables you to provide someone with a more effective no. 1 In Ellen’s case it prevented a

mistake that would have taken a toll in time, money, and the reputations of the two attorneys, their company, and also their client.

What’s Your CQ?

A high IQ is not enough to succeed today; we also have to have high *communication intelligence*, or what I call CQ. What I mean by communication intelligence is demonstrating the agility to:

- Correctly interpret incoming information and exercise the self-control to listen
- Confirm that you understood what the other person meant
- Accurately convey meaningful thoughts, ideas, and messages
- Confirm that what you meant was understood the way you intended

It’s this simple. Exercising CQ means that you: speak clearly, listen closely, rephrase with an open mind, and take responsibility — up front — for being understood. Don’t assume anything just because you think you were clear.

CQ begins with cultivating a focused state of mind — one that some refer to as mindfulness — as an antidote to the instant urge to react.

When we react on automatic, we’re not operating with all our ability. When we’re caught off guard or pressured, it’s hard to say what we really mean. And it gets worse. We hardly listen to what other people say to us. No wonder we often don’t feel heard, much less understood. It’s generally accepted that about 70 to 80 percent of verbal communication gets “ignored, misunderstood or quickly forgotten.” 2

Judging from that statistic and your own experience, you might think to yourself, Is what you said what I heard and what I heard what you meant, and did you understand what I meant to say to you?

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Book Excerpt: Who’s Your Gladys?

by Marilyn Suttle & Lori Jo Vest

From Chapter 1: Professional Movers: Who’s Your Gladys?

Professional Movers, a successful moving company in Walled Lake, Michigan, maintains a balanced approach to customer care by focusing on the details. We discovered several specific actions that are built into the company culture, an overall approach that has led to a dramatic 40 percent growth in sales in the last two years. What really stood out during our interviews with Director of Sales and Marketing

Andrew Androff, one of the company’s owners, was his genuine interest in the lives of his customers. He told us about Gladys, a difficult customer whose much-loved marble tabletop was broken by one of Andrew’s movers. You’ll discover the dramatic results that occurred because Andrew’s sales rep Chris had paid attention to the details and taken the time to get to know his customer. Gladys is the embodiment of everyone’s most challenging customer. She’s the one who pushes your buttons and requires a higher degree of skill to manage. As you

meet Gladys and the many other challenging customers throughout this book, we invite you to apply the lessons learned to your most difficult clients.

Eighty-seven-year-old Gladys has a reputation among her fellow retirement community members. She’s known as a cranky complainer who is impossible to please. But to her surprise, when she called Andrew Androff’s company, Professional Movers, to move her into her new apartment, she was treated with warmth and respect. When her sales rep, Chris, visited her home to quote the job, he noticed her prickly personality and made a conscious decision to focus

on her spunk and tenacity. By the end of his visit, Gladys had bonded with Chris and booked the move.

On moving day, there was a mishap. One of the movers accidentally cracked Gladys's marble tabletop. Andrew knew that she would be furious. Determined to set things right, he prepared himself to let her vent before she could even think about possible solutions. As predicted, Gladys had steam shooting out her ears.

Andrew felt compassion for her while she vented and assured her that his company would have the table repaired, and that if she wasn't satisfied with the results, he would replace it. Although he continued to reassure her that things would be set right, she was still spitting mad. Gladys wanted to talk to Chris, who had sold her on the company in the first place, and Andrew promised to have Chris call her as soon as he came into the office.

Chris arrived dead tired after a long day filled with meetings with potential new customers. When Andrew told him about Gladys and asked if he'd be willing to call her, Chris responded, "No way. She's going to need more than a phone call. I'll stop by her house on my way home." Chris arrived at Gladys's house ready to comfort her through her anger and outrage. Then he assured her that he would personally oversee the repair of her table. This calmed her down, and she thanked him for coming over.

Unfortunately, the repair was less than perfect. Andrew knew that

he had to set things right, even though doing so would be expensive. He called Gladys and promised that she could meet Chris at the marble store and personally pick out her new marble tabletop. Since Chris knew that Gladys didn't drive, he called and arranged to pick her up and take her to the store himself.

Gladys is now living at one of metropolitan Detroit's premier retirement communities with her new marble table. While it cost Andrew and his employee Chris extra time and extra money to make things right, the payoff was outstanding. Gladys tells everyone moving into or out of her assisted living complex that they have to hire Professional Movers if they want to work with the best movers in town. High and persistent praise from such a hard-to-please person attracts attention. As a result, Andrew's company is now the number one choice of movers for Gladys's retirement complex. By creating a culture that values compassionate connection with his customers, Andrew has built a referral base that has helped his sales grow by over 40 percent in two years.

This culture of connection has been particularly effective in building a strong business with senior citizens. Seniors often move from their homes to be nearer to their children or to retire to a senior community. Professional Movers has found this population to be a good fit for its particular style of customer service, so it put a great deal of effort into developing the market segment. Everyone at Professional Movers

makes a practice of creating a human connection with her clients. The staff members show respect for their clients' wisdom, experience, and opinions. They also know how moving affects their clients, both physically and emotionally. It isn't easy leaving behind the security of their homes, their friendships with neighbors, and the familiarity of their routines. Andrew's employees are trained to be sensitive to the unique issues of downsizing. They are sensitive to the emotional connection to their precious family heirlooms that senior citizens feel as they leave behind the past. Professional Movers strives to give seniors the sort of service they would receive if their own family were doing the job.

"It's like we're their sons," Andrew said with a laugh. "We get very close with their families. We interview their caregivers and their social workers. It really helps us develop a customized process to address their concerns." This needs-based approach to both customer service and sales has helped the company become the top provider of moving services in metropolitan Detroit's retirement market.

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Book Excerpt: The Napkin, the Melon & the Monkey

by Barbara Burke

From Chapter Five: Have a SODA, My Dear

That morning I had a smile on my face and a bounce in my step as I made my way to the cafeteria. I ran into Isabel at the coffee machine. “Well, hello Olivia,” she chirped. “You look unusually happy for this early in the morning. What’s up?”

“I have some good news,” I whispered. “Whatever you said the other day gave me the kick I needed. I finally unplugged yesterday. It was an amazing feeling.”

“I’m so glad, Olivia. I knew you would get there eventually. It was just a matter of time.”

Isabel paused for a moment. Then with a twinkle in her eye, she asked, “I am curious about something. You and I talked about many things the last time. Was there anything in particular that you found to be the most useful?”

I didn’t miss a beat. “Absolutely! The one thing you said that I kept repeating over and over in my head was the part about my needing to ‘stop to observe, then decide how to act.’”

Aha # 6: When all else fails have a SODA.

“Hey, congratulations! You discovered my favorite acronym: SODA!” she giggled.

I thought back to what I had said.

I repeated it to myself: “Stop, observe, decide, and then act.” After several tries, I finally got the meaning.

“Of course! Now I get it,” I exclaimed.

“SODA stands for Stop, Observe, Decide, and Act. I like it!” SODA was an acronym I would never forget.

“Isabel, I have to tell you what happened to me on the way to work. I surprised even myself!”

I described my encounter with the little old lady on the freeway. I told her I was surprised that I didn’t do what I usually did — jump to the conclusion that she was just another inconsiderate driver. Instead, I stopped myself from responding automatically. Just like when I unplugged. When I stopped long enough to observe what was really going on, I could see that the woman was in a dangerous situation. Instead of getting angry, I responded with kindness.

I didn’t expect my story to get such an emotional reaction. Isabel had tears in her eyes!

“Oh, Olivia,” she said. “You learned such an important lesson from that little old lady. You not only applied SODA when you stopped to observe what was happening — you went beyond that. You resisted judging her. Instead of stereotyping her as just another pokey driver, you withheld judgment.”

“You are right,” I beamed. “When I did, I could see that the best thing to do was to show her some understanding. To treat her with compassion.”

“I used to be very judgmental,” Isabel confessed. “That was until I realized how harmful it was. When I started at Mighty Power twenty-five years ago, one of the senior service reps took me aside. She informed me that it was a ‘known fact’ that anybody who lived in Terrace Pines,

the local trailer court, was ‘trouble.’ As she put it, ‘They are all dead-beats, every last one of them.’ Eager to learn whatever shortcuts I could to make a complex job simpler, I went along with her stereotyping. I soon discovered how unfair it was to judge somebody on the basis of where they live, or, for that matter, anything else so arbitrary.”

Then it dawned on me. I was guilty of the same thing! I jumped to conclusions about my customers all the time. I had to admit that the woman with the five kids never had a chance with me. As soon as I saw her address was in Terrace Pines, I pegged her as just another irresponsible deadbeat. I showed her no mercy.

Aha # 7: Withholding judgment allows me to observe what is.

My judgmental attitude wasn’t reserved just for my customers. I applied it pretty freely to myself. During my failed unplugging session the day before, I had categorized myself as one of those people who had such a busy mind that it was beyond my control. I had decided that I was not only a failure at learning to unplug, I was a failure at every other attempt at self-improvement.

I vowed to be more patient with myself next time.

I thought back to a morning last week when I had lost my temper with Nate and Natalie. Their crime? Dawdling over their breakfast. Their chattering and teasing had slowed down their progress toward finishing their breakfast. I had decided that if that continued they were going to be late for the bus again. I had given them the ultimatum: “Finish those Cheerios, or else!”

I could see that if I had applied the SODA formula to the situation, the outcome would have been so much better. Giving myself time to stop and observe and then decide how to act would have helped me realize that allowing them another two minutes at the breakfast table wouldn't have made the difference between being at the corner on time for the bus or not.

I needed to be more patient. I had to face the fact that my kids weren't little adults. They were kids. Kids tend to play at inconvenient times and pay no attention to the clock.

I vowed to be more patient with Nate and Natalie next time, too.

Then there was Jake, poor guy. According to me, he couldn't do anything right. No wonder he was so defensive. Being criticized for every move you make would make anybody paranoid.

When he and I started going together, I thought his idiosyn-

crasies were endearing. Not any more. Instead of accepting him as he was — the man I fell in love with twelve years ago — I had set out to change him into somebody else.

The problem was that had I actually succeeded in changing him, he would have lost those very characteristics that made him who he was. Maybe if I eased off of the criticism he would spend more time with me and less time working in his workshop in the garage. I vowed to be more patient with Jake next time.

I could see now that somewhere along the way I had appointed myself the General Manager of the Universe. My attempt to control everything and everybody had to change or I was never going to be at peace with myself or with the rest of the planet. I could see now that once I let go of my need to be in control, all my relationships would improve. My customers would be happier and so would I.

I made another decision. I resigned from my self-appointed position as General Manager of the Universe. Effective immediately.

I continued to discover the power of letting go. Once I let go of the notion that everybody needed to meet my impossibly high standards, my life got a whole lot easier. I began noticing it when I talked to my customers. I thought it was odd that all my customers were in such great moods one day. Instead of arguing with me, every customer was friendly and cooperative. I had to laugh when it dawned on me that they were responding to my more positive, patient approach.

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