

## Secret #1



# Acknowledge Your Customers Immediately

My name is William Watson. My friends call me Willie. I'd appreciate it if you'd call me Willie, too.

—Willie Watson

Looking back, little did I know that as I begrudgingly made my way to the taxicab waiting outside that South Carolina airport that my personal standard for measuring those who provide service to others would soon change. I was about to meet the man who would initiate that change and establish the new standard. But how could I have known? As far as I was concerned, this was just another cab ride. One of many. I expected the service experience to be more of the same.

Willie Watson, on the other hand, viewed this encounter far differently. Willie knew that if the service—and the attitude with which he offered it—were

impressive enough, this encounter could be special. And if the encounter was special enough, the possibility existed that a positive economic benefit could result. Make no mistake about it. Willie Watson was a nice guy. But he was also an entrepreneur, a businessman. In Willie's business, better tips and additional business opportunities spelled the difference between profit and loss on a day-by-day, fare-by-fare basis.

Willie, therefore, had the upper hand in this service encounter. Even before the encounter took place, he knew what he needed to do to build a positive experience for the customer. He saw customers like me come and go every day. Over time, he had learned the importance of establishing a personal connection with his customers early on, in order to set the stage for the positive service experience to follow.

But Willie also knew that his window of opportunity was limited. If his passenger was able to make it to the back seat of his cab without that initial positive connection being made, there was a real possibility that the passenger might soon be engaged in a telephone conversation, have his faced buried in a newspaper, or even fall asleep, any of which would mean the opportunity for personal connection was lost, possibly forever.

Willie was unwilling to take that risk. He recognized that the first few seconds of any business encounter often set the stage, positively or negatively, for all that could follow. Rather than wishing and hoping, Willie was engaged in planning and acting. He put his plans into action by

acknowledging me before I had even made it to his cab. (“Hey, buddy. Need a ride? I’ve been sittin’ here waitin’ for ya.”) He then personalized the relationship even further once we were both inside the cab (“My name is William Watson. My friends call me Willie. I’d appreciate it if you’d call me Willie, too.”)

With two master strokes, he accomplished what many who labor in service-related jobs never learn. First, he effortlessly broke down the invisible barrier between two strangers, the one in which one party waits uncomfortably for the other to speak or act. Second, he offered me the opportunity—the invitation—to be included in that elite group of individuals he calls his “friends.” And he accomplished both with two well-planned and well-executed statements.

You may be wondering if the focused actions that Willie embraced are available only to entrepreneurial cab drivers, or if these techniques could benefit other professional service providers as well. The good news is that the techniques are available to anyone willing to learn and practice them. The sad news is that too few people ever do.

Consider some additional examples—good and bad—of other service providers and how their approach to servicing their customers might compare to Willie’s.

## **What Is a Customer?**

Several years ago my wife Susan and I were on vacation driving up the United States’ eastern seaboard. Our trip

took us all the way to the state of Maine in search of picturesque coastlines, fresh lobster, and a break from the stifling, late summer heat and humidity of our native South. As is our vacation custom, there were very few firmly established items on our travel agenda. But on one stop we had both agreed. We were determined to visit the anchor store for L.L.Bean, located in Freeport, Maine.

New Englanders have known about L.L.Bean for decades. But for many other North Americans, our knowledge has been limited to L.L.Bean's mail-order catalogs. Personally, I had enjoyed their merchandise for years. Their sterling reputation for quality products and service—albeit almost always long distance service—was nothing short of legendary. But the hook for me was the claim the store made that they never closed. I had to see for myself.

Susan and I arrived at the L.L.Bean retail store shortly after 1:00 A.M. As one might imagine, there were few customers and only a smattering of staff to be found in the wee hours of the morning. Nevertheless, Susan was soon lost to me in her dogged pursuit of all things Gore-Tex, flannel, and fleece. Her absence allowed me the opportunity to wander the premises, exploring on my own.

As I sauntered up one aisle and down another, I eventually found myself in a back corner of the building. There I noticed something stenciled on the wall for all to see. As I drew closer and began to read, I soon found myself wondering if it had been placed there for the benefit of customers—or as a constant, very visible reminder to all L.L.Bean employees. It read:

*At L.L.Bean a Customer Is . . .*

- The most important person to us, whether in person, by phone, or mail.
- Not dependent on us, but us on them.
- Not an interruption of our work, but our purpose for doing it.
- Human like us, with feelings, emotions, and biases.
- Not someone to argue or match wits with.

The simple, straightforward message grabbed me. I thought it a good working example to share in my future customer training programs. So right there I took out my pen and began scribbling the words from the wall on a piece of scrap paper. Soon I was totally immersed in this solitary activity when someone suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. The physical touch startled me and caused me to jump. I had assumed I was all alone. I whirled and found myself face-to-face with a young store clerk who, seconds earlier, I didn't know existed.

"Excuse me, sir. I didn't mean to frighten you," he said sincerely. "I was just curious if there is a problem I can help you with?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied nervously, still working to regain my composure. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, sir, I couldn't help but notice that you were focused on our customer commitment statement," he said, pointing in the direction of the wall. "I just wanted to offer my assistance if you were experiencing any sort of problem."

I resisted the temptation to say what I was thinking. *You mean a problem other than almost causing me a heart attack?*

As I began to realize the sincerity of his motive, I moved from being startled to being thrilled.

*Here is someone who gets it! He really gets it! Serving the needs of customers has become real to him.*

Don't be fooled. One cannot determine a company's or an individual's true commitment to servicing its customers simply by some fancy, well-scripted proclamation printed on glossy paper, etched in granite, or even stenciled on a wall for all to see.

Willie Watson didn't have his service commitment monogrammed on his shirt. Willie didn't hire a public relations company to craft and promote his "service creed." No, Willie earned his service stripes the old-fashioned way by seeking out and servicing individual customers—whenever, wherever, and in whatever manner he could.

A true commitment to service is always mirrored in the actions of isolated professionals. Someone once said, "Character is what's on display when no one is watching." No one was watching Willie during our ride from the airport to the hotel. No one was watching this third shift L.L.Bean sales clerk. No one, that is, but me—the customer. And both of them responded marvelously. They met and exceeded my expectations.

Keep in mind the customer is always watching. It's either the customer you are interacting with presently or the one who is trying to determine if he or she wants to

interact with you in the future. Do a good job and the customer will likely return again and again. Be indifferent to the customer who is watching, and the outcome most likely will mean opportunities lost.

## **Opportunities Lost**

Too often, unfortunately, instead of the customer being acknowledged and appreciated immediately by the service provider, the customer is ignored and taken for granted. The business consequences of such shortsighted actions can be devastating.

Susan and I work together. She laughingly tells people that after 20 years of marriage, our personal and professional relationships still work because I travel and am gone much of the time.

A few years ago, I was home for a stretch of several days. During that time, I was doing my best to try to lighten her load a bit, while at the same time earning some much-needed bonus points.

“Susan, how can I help you this morning? Do you need me to run any errands for you?” I asked.

“Well, I need to run by the bank and make a deposit, but it’s really easier to do it myself,” she responded.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I countered. “I will be happy to go to the bank for you. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Hesitant at first, as if unsure of my overall ability to complete this simple task, Susan finally entrusted to me

the business deposit. In addition, she included very specific instructions as to which of the branches of our nationally known bank I was to patronize. I listened carefully, in spite of being a bit insulted. Admittedly, Susan did most of our banking transactions. *But, really. How hard can this little project be?*

Per Susan's instructions, I drove to the bank's branch office nearest our home. I pulled into the lot and drove past the bank's stylish sign, manicured lawn, and modern building, straight to the convenient "customer-friendly" drive-through canopy. There were five lanes in operation. I noticed that lane number three was unoccupied, so I pulled my vehicle into the lane and rolled to a stop beside the "automatic teller." I rolled down my window and paused briefly. I heard nothing. I noticed an empty cylinder lying in its cradle beside me. I retrieved the cylinder, inserted my deposit and returned the cylinder to the cradle. Still no sounds. Upon closer inspection, I noticed a green "SEND" button. I pushed the button. With a great sucking sound, the cylinder and my deposit were whisked away into nothingness. I sat briefly in total silence. Not more than two minutes later, a loud whooshing sound announced the reemergence of the cylinder, this time containing a receipt where my deposit had previously been. I collected the receipt from the cylinder and returned the cylinder to its holder. I sat for a moment longer, listening to more silence. Finally, I rolled up the window and pulled away, headed for home.

The entire experience had lasted less than three minutes. My transaction was apparently handled correctly and with unquestioned efficiency. Yet, the brief experience left me feeling cold and ambivalent.

“Did you go to the bank?” Susan asked upon my return.

“Of course, I did. Here’s the receipt.”

“Any problems?”

“Not really,” I said haltingly. “But one thing kind of bothered me.”

“What’s that?” Susan asked.

“Well, I used the drive-through like you suggested. But, throughout the entire transaction, no one inside the building spoke to me. Not a single word. I thought that was strange.”

“Phil, I drive through there all the time. They never speak,” Susan said simply, never looking up.

At first I was amazed, then irritated. How could the act of customer service have gotten so routine, so mechanized, so impersonal that organizations no longer see the need to acknowledge the customer?

*Surely, we’re both missing something, I thought. I need to see for myself.*

For the next two days I insisted on making the “bank run.” Sadly, I discovered Susan was right. I did business in the same lane at the same bank branch for three days in a row and not once did I ever hear a human voice. Not “Good morning,” “Thank you,” “Kiss my foot,” nothing! I

admit the transactions were processed correctly each time and there was very little waiting. But with each unacknowledged visit, I became more and more annoyed until finally I announced my intention to close our accounts and place our meager funds in some other more customer-friendly financial institution. Susan had her doubts, but I insisted.

The next day we closed our accounts and withdrew our money with absolutely no fanfare. I didn't expect our decision to make front page news in the *Wall Street Journal*. I didn't expect them to bar the doors and throw themselves in our path to keep us from leaving. I didn't expect there to be crying and gnashing of teeth at the news of our decision. I did, however, expect someone at the bank to be trained to ask us one little question: "Why?" But, once again, my most basic of expectations simply went unmet. Instead, the bank representative simply processed our final request (very efficiently, I might add) and watched us walk out their door forever.

*Do you not realize that with us goes your last chance to lend us money for cars, motorcycles, vacations, home and office remodeling, business expansion projects, and three—count 'em—three upcoming college educations? Do you not realize you will never again earn fees from checks we write, our visits to the ATM machine, and various other personal services that you offer? Don't you understand that our three children will one day need a financial institution of their own, and based on our recommendation, you're not going to be it? Can you really afford*

*to disassociate yourself so easily and thoughtlessly from established customers like us?*

The thought of any business being so callous toward their customer base that they show no interest or obvious concern in knowing why their customers are leaving is simply flabbergasting to me.

I wish I could tell you that exhaustive research and extensive interviews with various bank officers, managers, and staff led us to choose our next financial services supplier. I wish I could tell you that we knew exactly what our new bank offered in terms of personalized financial services. I wish I could tell you I knew how our new bank ranked on key financial measurements compared to other available local, state, regional, and national banks. I wish I could tell you I knew those things before selecting our new bank. But it wouldn't be the truth. In fact, I believe very few people take the time to research banks, credit unions, accounting practices, law firms, brokerage houses, automobile dealerships, realty companies, restaurants, department stores, barbers, and hairdressers *before* they begin doing business with them. I am convinced most initial business relationships begin with a "gut feel." A gut feel assures us somehow that we will enjoy doing business with the *people* who represent the business.

I must admit that I chose our next bank very *unscientifically*. It wasn't the bank that was nearest our home and office. In fact, it was more inconvenient than our previous bank. It wasn't the bank that had the most financial

options available. Frankly, I never asked what was available. I chose the bank because of one person I knew at the bank—plain and simple. One of the bank's branch managers, Mark, and I had served on a local committee together. I didn't know Mark well, but he had always been friendly and outgoing. I liked the way he treated me and others with whom I saw him interacting. That was enough for me.

"Phil, it's good to see you. What can I do for you this morning?" Mark asked.

"I am here to open both a business account and a personal account," I stated flatly.

"Fantastic! We love new customers," he responded enthusiastically, as he began gathering the necessary forms and paperwork.

"Not so fast, Mark. I intend to open those accounts. But *first* I want to tell you exactly *why* I left my last bank."

"Of course, Phil," Mark responded, obviously confused. "I would love to know why you were unhappy with your last bank."

"Because they wouldn't speak to me, Mark. I drove through their drive-through teller line three days in a row and no one ever spoke a word to me. That bothered me. That bothered me a lot. Mark, do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Perfectly, Phil," Mark assured me.

From that day forth, until we finally moved out of the area years later, I could not walk into the lobby of that

branch without a half dozen employees greeting me personally and enthusiastically. “Good morning, Mr. Van Hooser.” “How are you today, Mr. Van Hooser?” “Beautiful day, isn’t it, Mr. Van Hooser?”

I know what you’re wondering.

*Does Phil recognize Mark had probably coached his employees to respond to him in that specific way?* Of course, I recognize it. Any bright manager would instruct his employees to do what they could to meet and exceed the known expectations of their customers. To do less would be foolish, or worse, arrogant. When professional arrogance serves to discount the customer’s role in the company’s success, that’s the first step toward committing professional, or economic, suicide.

*Did the fact these employees were coached lessen the spontaneity, genuineness, or impact of the experience for Phil?* Absolutely not. Let’s face it. We all have to *learn* to do our jobs. If we learn to offer service incorrectly, or if we have never been trained properly to offer quality, personal service in the first place, then at some point we have to relearn the activity. Spontaneity, genuineness, and impact happen once we learn the basics of a service activity and then start to insert our own personality from there. I loved the recognition, acknowledgment, and relationship building regular visits to the bank afforded me.

Or maybe you’re thinking something along these lines.

*For some reason, Phil must think he deserves special treatment.* Exactly! I do think I deserve special treatment

by every person with whom I do business. Why? Is it because I think I'm better than someone else? Absolutely not. I appreciate special treatment when I experience it because I know it means someone has taken the time to think about me, their customer. They care about how I feel. When that happens, it makes me want to do more business with such caring and attentive people.

*But Phil, does it bother you to know that Mark is coaching his employees to treat all the bank's customers the same way they are treating you?* Heavens, no! It would have confirmed what I already believed—that Mark understood the game of business.

Mark had, in his own way, captured the essence of what it means to offer service “Willie's Way.” Willie Watson understood the necessity of making customers feel special. He understood how the game of service is played.

## **The Game of Service Is the Game of Business**

“Is business a game?” you ask. “It can't be. Business is serious . . . well . . . business!”

Okay, I agree. Business is serious. There's a lot riding on the outcome. But think just a moment of the game of business in the same terms as you would any other competitive game in which you enjoy participating, such as tennis, chess, or Monopoly. Each of these games shares a number of common characteristics. For example, each is governed by a specific set of rules. The rules are usually fairly easy to understand, but not always easy to follow.

Each game requires players to be pitted against at least one other opponent. Finally, for a positive outcome to be realized, either or both participants must possess the skill and strategy to accomplish their individual goals.

The “individual goals” of both parties are where things begin to get sticky. In tennis, chess, or Monopoly the goal is to beat the opponent as soundly as possible. However, in the game of business, to be really successful—to be a truly expert player—both parties must win the first time and every time thereafter. For example, those who provide products and services must make their customers happy by providing quality products and services at a reasonable price, while still making a necessary profit. But they can’t just do it once and be forever satisfied. One profitable business exchange does not a successful business make. Sustainable businesses have been and always will be built on the foundation of repeat business.

Successful automobile dealers prosper when their customers return every three or four years in search of their next vehicle. Restaurateurs prosper when their patrons establish a habit of eating with them regularly. Barbers and hairdressers prosper when their customers return to their chairs every few weeks, without once thinking about where else they might be able to get their hair cut or styled.

In business, like in other games, there are certain to be winners and losers. Each is fairly easy to spot. The winners are the ones sporting the logos on the side of their trucks that proclaim “Doing business since 1957,” or “Voted #1

for the eleventh year in a row.” The winners are the ones who continue to expand their product lines and service offerings. The winners are the ones who report sustained growth and profitability quarter after quarter, year after year. The winners are the ones who have the best and brightest talent clamoring to join their ranks.

But the losers in the game of business are easy to spot, too. The losers are the ones who place “GOING OUT OF BUSINESS” signs in the storefront windows. The losers are the ones acting as if business in the twenty-first century will be the same as it was in the twentieth century. The losers are the ones filing for bankruptcy, or worse, doctoring their own books to mislead others. The losers are the ones who vigorously contest every customer complaint. The losers are the ones who undercut the authority and ability of their own employees to handle customer complaints directly.

I’m not suggesting every successful business is successful solely because of its service expertise, or that every unsuccessful business is struggling solely because of a lack of service focus. The game of business is much more complicated than that. But I do believe those who prosper in the game of business are those who take the time to learn the game in the first place. And in learning the game, it is impossible to discount the importance of having satisfied customers who continue to do business with us and who are willing to share a goodwill message with others about us and the products and services we offer. Whether the business is distributing hundreds of bottles of barbecue sauce locally or overseeing millions of dollars

of Medicare reimbursements nationwide, whether the business is intent on rebuilding your automobile's engine or giving your spine an adjustment, one thing is for sure—it's all about the customer.

## He'll Know My Name

I hadn't been in Willie's cab for more than 30 seconds before he had already introduced himself to me and learned my name. During the next 30 minutes or so, Willie used my name in casual conversation at least two dozen times. And it was all so natural. After our first few minutes together, I consciously forgot that our relationship was that of customer and service provider. It came to feel more like a discussion between friends. Therein rests the magic and the power of using a customer's name. People are drawn together.

Of course, customers are not just those individuals walking into our showroom or calling us on the telephone. Those customers tend to get our immediate attention. Their faces are not as familiar to us. They come from outside the company. We refer to them as our *external* customers.

But we should never discount the importance of our *internal* customers as well. Most of us have them. Internal customers are our co-workers, with whom we interact daily, as we strive to serve the needs of the external customers.

Unfortunately, because our internal customers have become so familiar to us over time, like our own family

members, too often we end up taking them for granted. The critical need to acknowledge our *internal* customers and their contributions cannot be overstated. When working with my corporate clients, I often remind them that if they improve their internal customer service activities, their external customers will benefit from it. If not, it is hard to predict exactly what problems will ensue.

Years ago, I was working as a Human Resources Manager in a nonunion manufacturing facility. During my time there, a union organizing drive was initiated by a relatively small but determined group of employees. Day after day, for several weeks, this group actively solicited their fellow employees in hopes of gaining support for their labor union of choice.

One of the more vocal internal supporters of this movement was a middle-aged machine operator whom I will call "Lonnie." I remember Lonnie specifically for two reasons. First, I remember his involvement with this organizing group as being totally out of character for him. In the four years I had worked with Lonnie, I had found him to be intelligent, capable, and a hard worker, but very quiet, reserved, and inclined to remain in the background regarding public issues. He had stressed to me a number of times over the years that he preferred not to speak out in public and that he didn't enjoy taking on leadership roles. Yet, there he was, not only speaking out, but leading the charge.

The second reason I remember him so well is because of something Lonnie once said to me. I had always

seen my role of Human Resources Manager as a type of local liaison, or go-to person, for both labor and management. As such, I spent a good portion of every workday interacting with production employees on the shop floor, as well as with management people in the front office.

One day, while walking through the plant, Lonnie whistled to get my attention and then motioned for me to join him at his work station. I made my way to him to see what was on his mind. He was quick to let me know.

“Phil, I haven’t had the chance to tell you this before, but I wanted you to know that my involvement in this union drive has nothing to do with you personally. I appreciate what you do to help address some of the issues that are a concern to us,” Lonnie said quietly, with sincerity in his voice. It was something he didn’t have to tell me, especially during a time of heightened tensions in the company.

“Thanks for saying so, Lonnie. I appreciate hearing that from you.”

It could be argued that I would have been better off stopping right there. But, Lonnie had initiated this conversation, not me. Now there was something I really wanted to know. And the best way to find out was to ask.

“This is really none of my business and it won’t hurt my feelings if you choose not to answer. But, I’m curious. Lonnie, why are you so involved in this union movement? This is really not like you.”

Lonnie’s eyes were quick to lock on mine. I watched as his quiet demeanor changed right before me. In

mere seconds, he stopped being quiet and unassuming. In a moment of transformation, he became determined and outspoken.

“Phil, I have worked at this plant for nine years. I have done almost every job in this department. I have worked all three shifts and Lord only knows how many hours of overtime,” he said. Then he paused briefly and pointed across the plant in the direction of the plant manager who stood talking with another employee.

“Phil, do you see that man right there?” he asked, his voice brimming with resentment. “After all these years, he doesn’t even know my name. I dare you to call him over right now and ask him to tell you my name. I guarantee you he wouldn’t be able to do it. Can you believe that? After nine years of working together, he still doesn’t know my name!” Then Lonnie paused for another moment as his eyes returned and fixed themselves on mine. Then he added, “But, when this is all over, he’ll know my name.”

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Willie Watson taught me that the principle of acknowledgment is universal. Whether it’s an L.L.Bean sales-clerk, some anonymous bank teller, or a plant manager in some manufacturing facility, the need to acknowledge our customers immediately and regularly—whether they are with us for five minutes a month or eight hours every day—is the critical first step to “wooing,” “wowing,” and “winning” customers and the loyalty they have to share.

Here are three suggestions to help you acknowledge your customers more professionally:

1. Move to the customer or at least make eye contact as soon as possible.

It is important to physically move to the customer. Never wait for the customer to come to you. The sooner you approach the customer, the less time you allow the customer to formulate mental obstacles, objections, or negative impressions that could adversely affect his or her interest in interacting or doing business with you. If you are temporarily unable to move to the customer (i.e., you are on the phone or helping someone else), make every effort to use some form of facial expression or body language to acknowledge the customer and let him or her know he or she is important to you.

2. Introduce yourself to unfamiliar customers (internal or external) immediately.

“Hi, my name is Phil. I don’t believe we’ve met. What’s your name?”

Never expect the customer to speak first. To hesitate, even briefly, may make you appear aloof, pretentious, or unapproachable in the eyes of the customer—all of which are avoidable barriers if you introduce yourself first. Remember, the most important name in any introduction is not yours.

3. Once you know the customer’s name, repeat it as often as possible during your conversation.

“Mr. Smith, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Is there something special I can help you with today, Mr. Smith?”

“Mr. Smith do you live or work in the area?”

“How did you learn about the services we offer, Mr. Smith?”

“I appreciate you stopping by today, Mr. Smith. Here’s my card, please call me directly if I can be of further service to you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Notice that each of these sentences could have easily been spoken without using Mr. Smith’s name. However, using the customer’s name repeatedly helps solidify the name in your mind as you build on this and future service opportunities. Hearing his name also makes the service experience more personal for the customer.

---