Chapter One

THE DNA OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE

"I hate furniture shopping, almost as much as I hate car shopping. But my husband and I decided that we needed new furniture for the living room, so we dragged ourselves to a local store. I went in with my fists up, ready to fight off all the pushy salespeople. I'd dealt with pushy sales-people before. Walking around the store, however, I felt different there. The salesperson was helpful but didn't hover. When we had a question, he magically appeared. Everything about the store felt good. I still can't put my finger on it. We bought our furniture there without looking any-where else."

I t's a challenge to define excellent service because it's a feeling that you get. You know it when you get it, and you know it when you don't. This chapter, however, will provide a framework for defining excellent service for your organization. We're going to look into the ''DNA of service excellence.'' The concepts, lan-guage, and examples in this chapter will provide the groundwork for everything to come later in the book.

2 UNLEASHING EXCELLENCE

"Inculturating" Service Excellence

You won't find the word ''inculturate'' in any dictionary, but it accurately describes the whole purpose of this book. The idea is for excellent service to ultimately become part of your company's culture. You want employees to perform in an excellent manner because such performance is part of the organizational DNA.

Let's imagine, for example, you're in a restaurant and you observe an employee interacting with a customer. The employee is providing outstanding service and going to great lengths to ensure that the customer is satisfied. Imagine approaching this employee with: ''I'm impressed with the way you served that customer. What gets you to give great service like that?'' The best answer the employee could give is, ''I'm not sure what you mean. That's just the way we do things here.'' A response like that means that the behavior is simply the normal course of business. Contrast that response with one such as, ''Well, management has video cameras monitoring us, and if we don't act happy we get in trouble.'' This type of answer indicates an initiative based on coercion, not organizational DNA.

The Framework

Many (if not most) organizations overcomplicate any initiative they try to take on, including service improvement initiatives. These organizations analyze everything to death and end up paralyzed—too overwhelmed to do anything. The approach recommended in this book is designed to be simple and straightforward. It takes commitment, but it's not complicated.

''Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.''
—*Leonardo da Vinci*

Figure 1.1 gives you a snapshot of the framework for service excellence. It is based on our observations of outstanding, service-
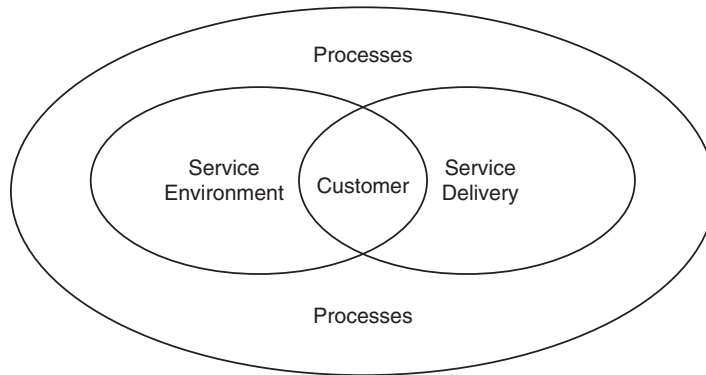
Figure 1.1 Customer Service Model

driven organizations and our analyses of the activities that make these organizations great. We've also studied the not so great to analyze what's missing. Four components make up the framework: the Customer, the Service Environment (physical setting), the Service Delivery (employees), and the Processes.

You'll notice that the customer is in the center of the framework shown in Figure 1.1—the customer experience being the driver of the service strategy. The service environment and service delivery components overlap the customer component since they are designed from the customer's perspective. Finally, the processes component surrounds everything. Effective processes ensure that each element of the model is executed in an excellent and sustainable manner. Let's take a closer look at each element.

The Customer

Most organizations say they put the customer at the center of everything they do. Experiencing the service they provide, however, quickly blows that theory. Their processes and policies demonstrate that the focus is on *their* convenience, not the customer's. We've all been frustrated, for example, by phone trees that say; ''For sales, press 1; for reservations, press 2; for customer service, press 3.'' For real customer service we shouldn't have to press

anything; we should get to talk with someone right away! They've made things more efficient for themselves, but they're irritating customers in the process. The situation has gotten so bad that several consumer web sites now offer secrets for bypassing phone trees. GetHuman.com, for example, provides specific codes callers can enter in order to get to a live person at hundreds of organizations. GetHuman.com has to update the site regularly because companies keep changing the codes in order to keep customers from getting through. It's a sad situation.

The Lens of the Customer

A truly customer-focused organization sees things through the ''lens of the customer.'' This approach asks, ''How does the *customer* see us?'' Looking at the operation from the customer's perspective is one of the performance elements that separates outstanding organizations from ordinary ones. Customers appreciate the difference.

If you've ever tried to navigate the corridors of most hospitals, you know that the signage doesn't usually offer much help. It doesn't help because staff members who already know their way around the hospital designed the signs. Arrows pointing in 40 different directions make sense to people working in the hospital every day. Those of us who only visit the hospital in stressful times find that these directional signs only add to the stress. The designers weren't looking through the customer's lens.

Common employee statements that indicate a lack of looking through the customer's lens include:

- ''The computer won't let me do that.''
- ''First, I need you to fill out this paperwork.''
- ''I'm not sure if we carry that item. If we do, it's on aisle 5.''
- ''My department doesn't handle that. You'll need to call xyz department.''
- ''Have a seat; someone will be with you.''
- ''I'm closing this restroom for cleaning. There's another one on the next floor.''

These statements aren't blatantly rude; they simply indicate a company focus, not a customer focus. Even a seemingly innocent statement such as, ''I'll have someone call you right back,'' indicates a lack of seeing through the customer's lens. What constitutes ''right back'' for one person is probably different for another person. Is it 5 minutes, 15 minutes, or an hour? Nit picking? Not to a customer waiting by the phone for you to call ''right back.'' What about the furniture store that tells you that the delivery truck will be at your house between noon and 5 PM? Whose convenience are they concerned with? Whose lens are they looking through?

Understanding the Customer's Lens

A very simple method exists for discovering the lens of the customer. Once you discover this lens, you're able to perform accordingly. You may be tempted to disregard the method because it's deceptively simple. Don't disregard it. It works. The method is this: *If you understand the customer's **emotions**, you will understand the customer's **needs**.* Customer emotions are the key to personalized service. The following two possible statements by a visitor to a hospital provide clues to the customer's emotions:

- Statement 1: ''I'm here to see my daughter. She just had a baby. Can you tell me what room Sally Jones is in?''
- Statement 2: ''I'm here to see my daughter. She was just in a car accident. Can you tell me where I can find Sally Jones?''

These two statements reflect completely different situations and, therefore, completely different emotions. Unfortunately, both customers will probably be treated in exactly the same clinical manner. While this example may seem extreme, similar situations happen regularly. Is the situation of the young couple taking out their first mortgage the same as that of the person who buys and sells real estate regularly? A completely different emotional dynamic exists. The young couple is nervous,

overwhelmed, and excited. They need understanding, clear in-
formation, and a banker who is visibly happy for them for taking
the big step of buying a house. The experienced real estate buyer
has very different emotions and, therefore, very different needs.
Yet many lenders will treat these situations the same way.

Computer help-lines are notorious for not understanding the
emotions customers are dealing with. When you have a computer
problem you're frustrated and anxious. You have work to do!
Computer help-line phone trees are long and complicated, and
most customers don't understand the nuances of the different
options anyway. When you finally do talk with a technician, they
use ''computer speak.'' You become more confused and frustrated
as the process goes along. Those rare times when you get a techni-
cian who speaks in normal, everyday language, you feel comfort-
able and appreciative. It's just a change in approach—the excellent
companies understand the emotions and needs of their customers.

As you implement the customer service tools and techniques
recommended in this book, it's important to constantly remind
employees to see things through the customer's lens. Using this
lens as the decision-making compass dramatically increases the
likelihood that your improvement efforts will succeed. Focus
the lens on customer emotions and needs. You might hear the
argument, ''What if we're wrong about the customers' emotions?
We can't read their minds!'' Yes you can. By shifting the mindset
to the lens of the customer, employees will read the situation
correctly most of the time. What about those times they're wrong?
When an employee is truly trying to understand the customer's
situation and respond to his or her needs, the employee is likely
providing great service even though he or she may have read the
customer's emotion incorrectly.

A bank client shared the story of a teller at the bank's drive-
through window who noticed the customer she was serving was in
tears as she pulled up to the window and placed her deposit slip in
the container. It was clear that the customer was fighting back
sobs as she waited for the teller to complete the transaction. As
she placed the customer's receipt into the container, the teller

also included a short handwritten note expressing her hope that whatever was wrong would turn out okay. The customer gave a grateful smile as she drove away. Did the teller overstep her bounds? We don't think so. Our position is that it's better to provide an outstanding, caring experience and perhaps periodically misread the situation than to make the decision to be mediocre for everyone in order to avoid any missteps.

In Chapter 4, you'll be introduced to Service Mapping—a tool used to ensure that each step of the customer experience is designed with the customer's lens in mind.

The Service Environment

Imagine yourself in a restaurant. As you sit down, you notice the table is a little dirty. There's something crusty on your fork. How comfortable would you be? Wouldn't you start worrying about what else might be wrong?

Everything Speaks

Every detail of an organization's physical environment is saying something about their brand. Everything the customer sees, hears, touches, smells, and tastes creates an impression—''everything speaks.'' Customers may not consciously pick up on every detail, but, make no mistake about it, an impression is made. Overflowing trashcans, empty display shelves, peeling paint, and burned-out lights all speak to the quality of the overall business. A bank ATM, for example, is an expensive piece of technology. How many times have you walked up to an ATM only to see a crudely handwritten out-of-order sign taped to this expensive piece of equipment? If everything speaks, what does this sign really say? Go away! Certainly that's not the message that was intended, but it is the message received. Everything speaks.

Making sure that the setting is right is a sign of respect for the customer. The everything speaks philosophy also has a subtler meaning. If a company can't handle the small details, why should

the customer believe that the company is capable of handling the big, important details? A customer's experience renting a car illustrates the point:

"I needed to rent a car for a fairly lengthy stay in Chicago, so I reserved a car through one of the bigger name rental companies. When I walked into the office, the first thing I noticed was a roll of toilet paper sitting on the customer counter (this should have been the first indicator of how I was going to be treated). I just couldn't take my eyes off that roll of toilet paper as I tried to figure out why it was there. The service rep finished his conversation with a fellow worker before finally making eye contact with me. As he apathetically went about the necessary details, I looked around the office at the various stacks of paper, used coffee cups, and dirty office fixtures. I felt more and more like this was a fly-by-night operation, yet it was a name we all know. The rep finally directed me to my car. After loading my bags in the trunk and adjusting my driving directions, I turned the key and . . . nothing. Realizing that I had proba-bly turned the key incorrectly, I turned it again . . . nothing. I proceeded to unload my bags and trudge back to the office only to be treated (by the same representative) like I hadn't been there four minutes earlier: 'How can I help you?' I explained that the car wouldn't start and he looked me dead in the eye and asked, 'So, you don't want the car?'"

That roll of toilet paper on the car rental counter was an indicator of bigger problems. Again, if a company can't handle the little details, what makes us think it can handle the important details (like cars that start)?

Getting your employees in the everything speaks mindset is a critical component of the service improvement effort. Every employee needs to take personal ownership. Everyone, beginning with the boss, must enter the business as a customer and be alert to *any* negative messages delivered by the appearance of the organization's environment.

Raise the level of awareness by noticing and talking about elements of the physical environment that detract from the company's image. What do these negative elements say to the customer? What does a dead plant in a doctor's waiting room communicate to the customer? What does a dirty glass in a restaurant communicate? What does a messy desk in a banker's office communicate? Make no mistake, something is communicated—everything speaks. Just raising the level of awareness helps to focus attention on the details.

One leader we know used a creative technique to focus his team on the quality of the physical environment. Tired of constantly seeing trash scattered around the facility, he implored his employees to pay more attention and to make an effort at keeping the place clean; but nothing seemed to work. In a team meeting he asked the employees why they didn't pick up the litter. ''Because we're so busy, we don't even see it,'' was the response. So, before the next team meeting, he scattered a few crumpled dollar bills throughout the facility and watched with quiet amusement as his employees picked up every single bill. In the next team meeting, he explained what he had done and what he had observed. The issue wasn't one of being too busy to see the trash; the issue was one of being motivated to pick it up. They got the message.

Leadership, of course, must set the tone by walking the everything speaks talk. Leaders can't just tell employees to pay attention to the details while ignoring the same details themselves. Employees quickly see through such hypocrisy. When employees see a member of management walk by a piece of trash, not picking it up, a clear message is sent. A very different message is sent when employees see the boss take the time to pick up that piece of trash. Some of the best training comes from leaders modeling the values of the organization. Employees are watching to see what's important to the boss.

Bob Gillikin, former president of Cummins Southern Plains, placed a heavy focus on the everything speaks philosophy in his diesel sales and service operation. He knew he had to set the right

tone for his team. Bob actively participated in keeping the facilities looking great by picking up litter and helping to eliminate clutter. And he was also willing to invest money where needed, whether in painting facilities, re-striping the parking lot, or purchasing new displays for the distributorship. His investment of time and money clearly communicated that it was everyone's responsibility to ensure the environment conveyed a positive message.

Observing employees who have developed the everything speaks mindset is gratifying. Any time one of these employees sees something out of place they handle it automatically. It becomes part of who they are. That type of behavior is indicative of an organization that has inculturated service excellence.

One of the tools described in Chapter 4 is the Everything Speaks Checklist. This tool helps to ensure that the physical environment positively reflects the organization's brand.

The Service Delivery

No matter what business you're in, customer service success ultimately comes down to your people. Even if your business is the epitome of automation, it still takes people to design and maintain that automation and to formulate your business strategy. Service delivery encompasses the people element of your organization. Successful service delivery is driven by employees performing in such a way that your customers not only want to come back, but they *automatically* come back. You don't want your customers to even consider doing business with the competition, do you? You want your service to be so good that customers enthusiastically recommend your company to others. Customer referrals are as good as it gets. In his studies of customer satisfaction survey questions most closely correlated with referrals and repeat purchases, noted researcher and business author Fred Reichheld states in his book, *The Ultimate Question: Driving Good Profits and True Growth* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006,

p. 26), ''It turned out that one question—the Ultimate Question—worked for *most* industries. And that question was, 'How likely is it that you would recommend Company X to a friend or colleague?''' So how do you achieve this level of service? Create ''service wows.''

Create Service Wows

Some of you may have rolled your eyes when you read the words, ''Create service wows.'' You may have thought, ''If one more book tells me I have to wow customers, I'm going to scream.'' The reason for this feeling is that the examples cited are always huge, grandiose gestures of service generosity. Examples:

- The employee who drives his personal car through blinding snow to deliver a pair of shoes to a customer so that the customer has just the right shoes for a holiday party.
- The employee who arranges first-class upgrades for every step of a newlywed couple's first trip (ever) out of their home state.
- The employee who cheerfully gives his own watch to a customer who has lost his watch.

These are all actual examples and represent wonderful service. But how many organizations can consistently do these things and stay in business? When we speak of creating service wows, we're talking about small things, consistently done, that please the customer. The bank teller that puts a dog biscuit in the drive-through container when she notices a dog in the car. The flight attendant who assists a passenger who's struggling to find overhead bin space. The theme park employee who approaches a visitor who clearly needs directions, rather than waiting for the guest to ask. Each of these examples represent small, seemingly insignificant behaviors. Imagine, however, a corporate culture in which *every* employee does these small things in the normal course of business. The impression that results is one of service

excellence that makes customers say, ''Wow.'' It also makes customers want to come back.

The two arguments we often hear about creating service wows are:

1. *''If we do these service wows consistently, won't they eventually become expectations?''* Yes. And that's a wonderful thing. If you routinely do things that your competitors don't, you become a beacon of light in an otherwise dark customer service world. Your consistency of excellence becomes the wow. Don't worry about it until your competitors start catching up. And, if you've built a culture of service excellence, your employees will always be looking for new ways to wow customers, so you'll stay ahead of the game anyway.

2. *''Customer expectations are too high as it is. It's too tough to please them.''* Bull. Customer service is so bad that most of us have learned to expect nothing. Anything that a company does that is special, even if the employees just smile at us, is like a gift. A company that uses the ''expectations are too high'' argument is simply looking for an excuse to stay mediocre.

What can your organization do to create service wows? The best way to figure that out is to sit down with employees and talk about it. Most employees have done something that wowed a customer, and some have techniques they use regularly. Pulling together a group of employees to talk about service best practices starts to leverage these wow techniques. As employees listen to the stories of others they often will think, ''I can do that.'' It simply takes an effort to weave certain behaviors into the everyday life of the organization.

One organization looked at the way they handle incoming phone calls that need to be transferred to another department. In the past, the customer would have to explain the problem again to the next employee in the chain. In order to provide a customer wow, even when a call had to be transferred, the team agreed to stay on the line with the customer to smooth the transfer. The

original employee answering the call would introduce the customer and the situation to the employee who would handle the call. Customers now feel like they're dealing with one organization, not a group of disconnected individuals. And since they're not used to that kind of service, they're probably thinking, ''Wow.''

Chapter 4 will introduce the Service Philosophy and Service Standards, which help guide employees in wowing customers in ways that are consistent with the organization's brand and can be done at little or no cost.

Processes

The final component of the customer service model is the ''processes'' component. Again, note in Figure 1.1 that the processes element surrounds all of the other elements. Processes are the magic key for inculturating service excellence. Many service problems have nothing to do with employee attitudes—they have everything to do with broken processes.

"I had a customer who wanted to exchange a television set that he bought and decided he didn't like. Even though he had his receipt, our store policy is that the manager needs to approve all exchanges on merchandise over $400. I kept paging the manager but got no response. I tried to be friendly, but the customer kept getting madder as time dragged on. I really couldn't blame him. My manager finally showed up and took two seconds to approve the exchange. The customer got what he wanted, but he wasn't real happy about the experience."

Service Heroes

Effective service processes *set employees up to be service heroes.* An example drives this point home. Walt Disney World cast members are expected to know the answers to all guest questions, right?

You logically know that this is impossible. There is no way for a Disney cast member to know everything. So a mechanism has been put in place to assist. This mechanism, called Information 4500, is a central phone number (4500) that any cast member can call with a guest question they can't answer. Information 4500 keeps a database of the questions and answers so that cast members can answer questions ranging from ''What time does Epcot open tomorrow?'' to ''How many bricks are there in Cinderella's Castle?'' (None—it's made of fiberglass.) Guests are impressed with the cast's ability to answer the questions, and cast members feel supported in being service heroes. Everyone wins.

It's one thing to tell employees, ''go out and give great service.'' It's another to be committed enough to put the processes in place that allow for great service to be provided. This kind of commitment separates the world-class organizations from the ''wannabes.'' Chapter 10, The Service Obstacle System, is an entire chapter dedicated to identifying process issues and developing customer-focused solutions.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter we've looked at the framework of a service-driven organization—the DNA of service excellence. Imagine if everyone in your organization consistently applied each element of the framework. Every employee would look at the operation through the lens of the customer. Customers would feel your employees understand them. You would see employees paying attention to the details of the work environment because they know everything speaks. Customers would know they're dealing with a quality organization. Employees would consistently do those little things that create service wows. Customers would feel special and cared for. Finally, you would see an organization that is constantly improving and looking for ways to create service heroes. What a dynamic work environment that would be!

We've already mentioned some of the tools you'll learn about in future chapters. In fact, the rest of the book is about creating an organizational culture that makes each of the principles described in this chapter, ''business as usual.'' These principles are the foundation of a culture of service excellence:

- See everything through the *lens of the customer.*
- Pay attention to the physical environment because *everything speaks.*
- Provide service delivery that will *create service wows.*
- Develop processes that make employees *service heroes.*