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The Art of Customer Service

Why, you might wonder, would one use the word *art* to describe a business practice like customer service? After all, most of business is pretty cut-and-dried, whereas we often think of those who have artistic talent as touchy-feely types—as being less logical and more right-brained than successful, professional types—right?

Not necessarily. American neurobiologist Roger W. Sperry first introduced the concept of right-brain and left-brain thinking in the late 1960s. Sperry's research showed that the human brain has two very different ways of thinking. The right brain is visually oriented and processes information in an intuitive and synchronized way, while the left brain processes information in an analytical and sequential way. In 1981, Sperry won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his work in split-brain research.

We all have two ways of processing information, and as vendors of products or services, we need to appeal to both. Overly

creative right-brainers tend to get a bad rap these days. They are thought of as dreamers, visionaries, or idealistic enthusiasts; rarely as sharp, savvy businesspeople. This doesn't make a lot of sense when you look at it through the lens of today's forward-thinking CEOs—many of whom, by the way, say that the way they make decisions is based largely on intuition, because all the data they need is not always available and they must be able to react quickly to the market.

Take Kip Tindell, CEO of the Container Store. He was quoted in the *New York Times* (March 13, 2010) as saying, “We just beg and plead and try to get employees to believe that intuition does have a place in the workforce. After all, intuition is only the sum total of your life experience. So why would you want to leave it at home when you come to work in the morning?”

Columbia University Business School offers a course for executives that teaches them to make better use of their intuition. The course is based on William Duggan's publicly acclaimed series of books, *Strategic Intuition: The Key to Innovation*, and introduces breakthrough ideas, methods, and tools for generating creative ideas that are also strategic.

“The only real valuable thing is intuition.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

If you look, you'll find plenty of examples of leaders using their intuition. Leading by intuition does not mean making uninformed or sporadic decisions. To the contrary: You as a leader need to make sure that your instincts are fully supported by information from your customer and employees. This means that by being involved in online outreach you receive constant feeds from your target market and your employees. By tapping into what your customers need and want, and how those demands are or are not

being met by those who regularly interact with them, you will be in a stronger position to use your intuition more effectively.

Therein lies the opportunity for your customer service engagement. With your online presence, you are in the position to regularly interact with customers. You have the opportunity to see what works and what doesn't. Knowledge gleaned from outside your inner sanctum will enable you to address key questions, such as whether your product or service offering is right for the market and up to date with current trends. This helps you motivate employees to deliver the level of service required and to identify what, if any, are opportunities for your company's growth.

Interestingly, that has been the main focus of former Forrester analyst, Dr. Natalie Petouhoff (@DrNatalie on Twitter). At Forrester, she covered not only customer service and customer relationship management (CRM), but by observing the new juncture of social media and those disciplines, she wrote the world's first social media return on investment (ROI) model.

Natalie, now the chief social media and digital communication strategist at Weber Shandwick, is one of the truly brilliant folks in her field; her work is legendary at businesses whose budgets we can only imagine.

Her groundbreaking ideas in this arena can help to center our thoughts on exactly how this is all going to work for our own businesses. When I asked Dr. Natalie about my theory about customer service becoming the new marketing, and about how small business has an innate advantage today, here's what she shared with me:

People asked me why I went from addressing customer service and its professionals to a public relations and marketing firm. What I found was that companies are fracturing their brands. This started to happen even before social media.

PR and marketing departments were crafting amazing brand promises. But because the way those departments have been organized, they don't interact with customers after the brand promise has been delivered. So who does have to deliver on the brand promise? Customer service. And because customer service has been largely trapped into the category of a cost center, it rarely is able, during those customer interactions, to deliver on the brand promise, or even have enough respect within the organization to have others accept the idea [that] they have to change products or services to better meet customers' wants and needs.

This dynamic—the lack of interdepartmental interaction—has been happening since companies left the mom-and-pop model. Along comes social media, and what are consumers using it for? Among the many uses—to keep in touch with friends and family, find a lost love, shop—they are realizing they can broadcast to millions their disdain about how companies are *not* meeting their brand promise.

As a management consultant back in the days of the top management consulting companies, (the “Big 6,” including Accenture, Price Waterhouse, Coopers & Lybrand, EY & Young), as a PricewaterhouseCoopers consultant, we were taught that more than anything, managing customer expectations was the key to success. And that lesson learned can be applied here today in business.

That is the reason I joined a PR and marketing firm. I wanted to help companies manage their customers' expectations. After many years in the corporate world, I realized the chasm in corporations needed to be healed. That chasm? Interdepartmental disconnect and dysfunction. If I were to really help the business world make this huge change, I myself had to be the change. I had to partner with professionals in

departments that I might not have ordinarily interfaced with. So I joined a PR and marketing firm.

I saw that PR and marketing had mastery over delivering a brand's promise. And that their worth was based on the ability to help customers become aware, and to consider purchasing products and services from their company. Once sales "closed the deal," customer service's role was to help, answer questions, and solve problems.

The disconnect was that PR and marketing professionals were not always delivering a brand promise that customer service could consistently provide. And, note, none of this was the fault of PR, marketers, or customer service. It was an artifact of how companies organize themselves into groups of specialties; and rarely do they have leadership that has the intuition that continuing to interact as disparate silos not only is *not* in the best interest of any of those departments, [but that] it will actually be the downfall of companies, which will go out of business if they don't "get it." Of the companies that do sense some of this, many of them may not know how to break down the silos in the politically charged situations they work in. And even in the best situations, they certainly would not be compensated for interdepartmental collaboration.

What social media is doing for companies is essentially this: It is a source of real-time feedback. That feedback is filled with information, if you are listening, that can be used to change your products and service to meet your customers' needs. Imagine how much easier it would be to market and sell a product [that] your customers said they wanted. Imagine if you are listening to your customers and you are using [what they're saying] for product innovation. Imagine if your competitor is not. Imagine the market advantage you'd have. And

imagine if you used customer service as your differentiator. Why would your customers go anywhere else?

While companies are either blindly hobbling along, doing things the way they always have done, or perhaps noticing something probably needs to change, the customer has taken things into [his or her] own hands.

Customers have realized that posting on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and other places got the attention of millions. Customers are avoiding calling the call center, and instead are going to social media to announce their disappointment and disdain. The power of social media has put the power into the hands of the customer.

If companies had gotten ahead of these issues and made the changes they needed to make so that the PR and marketing brand messaging could be delivered by the products and service, as well as by customer service, many companies would not be doing the social media scramble. But they didn't.

Some of these ideas are not really new, but the intuitive leader will respond to issues arising from this information more quickly and effectively, and ensure the structures are in place to achieve it.

PR has now become customer service. Customer service is now PR. The question you have to ask yourself is, "How are you going to be managing the expectations of your customers, and how will all your departments deliver on your brand's promise?" No customers, no business. Period.

Natalie's words on silos (departments or people who do not share information) are the last you will read in this book. As a small businessperson, you have too much on the line. Rather than forming silos in your organization, you can encourage collaboration with your employees and develop engagement with your customers. You can work as a *team*.

My experience tells me that customer service is not only an art, but a “soft science.” By *soft science*, I don’t mean that there are no concrete numbers to run the business. There are specific rules that must be followed and will always work for all situations. But there are also numerous ways to perform quality customer service, depending on the customer and the situation.

Of course, those who manage customer service will say it’s easier to manage people working in customer service when there are clear rules that govern how they treat customers. But it’s following those rules to a tee (even when you and your employees know doing so doesn’t make sense) is what incenses customers and will probably lead to employee attrition at your company.

Instead, consider this: Art is a means to an end; it is the deployment of words and actions to accomplish a task. Art can facilitate constructive interactions. To have mastery at one’s “art” requires practice and a certain amount of reverence. It may seem strange to think that something as basic as customer service has to become an art—or at the very least, a soft science with a range of approaches—but I think what you will find in this book is that if you can learn and apply this idea, not only will you be happier in your work, so will your employees. Your customers will also return and stay loyal. The point is, working from this starting point allows us to better understand the ongoing process of forming connections with our customers.

Developing Your Customer Service Intuition Skills

The art of serving customers begins with creating real relationships with real people in the real world. For years, we didn’t connect the brick-and-mortar aspect of business to the online world. It’s important to make sure that no matter where we are dealing with customers—in a store, on the phone, or on a Web site—there are some basic tenets to keep in mind.

To perform quality customer service, you need to respect, trust, and be committed to the people you are dealing with. This is a core tenet. A culture and a lifestyle of treating others with the same respect you wish to be treated is key to reducing attrition and strengthening customer loyalty.

What's funny is that this is all you need to know. It's customer service, in a nutshell. It's everything your parents (and, hopefully, teachers) tried to instill in you as a child. We were brought up thinking that respect for others was the key to a good life. So exactly when did this change? Just because we're living in the dollars-and-cents business world?

At what point did we begin to think that it was acceptable to ask employees to work more hours than we pay them for? Or to make cuts in staff when it comes to customer service, when it's the task that is the most customer-oriented? When did we begin to think it was "good enough" to *not* treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves—even worse, to *not* treat customers the way *they* want to be treated?

When researching what the "big brains" (you know, the experts with all the answers) thought about customer service, I scoured scores of high-level books written by high-powered specialists. Some of them I bookmarked, and a very few are marked throughout with highlighter. These books are mostly about promoting loyalty in the old-school style. The others are treatises, full of data and charts; and most claimed to have some supernatural key to success. When it comes to customer service, working with people is not cut-and-dried. People are not numbers.

So why is this "magic bullet" so difficult for so many to recognize?

Top business experts spend a lot of time putting things into categories: customers, employees, situations. There are tons of charts, along with a multitude of acronyms, which reduce simple

human needs to statistics and alphabet soup. But we're not statistics or letters; we're people.

The bottom line is, there was little "humanity" in the bulk of the books I read. No art. In them, customers were reduced to statistics—not for the purpose of understanding them, but to teach how to "get them." People have feelings. They have expectations. They have wants, needs, and desires, and we as business owners need to make sure that our products, services, and messages can deliver on all that.

The quote here is something we should all keep in mind, as it applies to each and every one of us in business:

"The only value a company has is the value that comes from customers: the ones they have now and the ones in the future."

—DON PEPPERS AND MARTHA ROGERS, PhD

Do Lessons Learned from Large Companies Apply to Your Business?

There's also a huge disconnect between small and large business. Small businesses have the advantage of being closer to their customers and employees. They've retained more of the mom-and-pop feel to their businesses. The acronyms that the experts like to use are only vaguely part of the small-business dialogue. We know the words, and recognize that a customer is a person, not a "C." Small business interacts with customers every day.

A lot of these graduate-schooled, powerful experts love the graphs and charts, whereas small business has very little time for these. We're in the trenches, and although we may produce a graph every now and then, we certainly don't run our companies based on them.

When the Light Came On

All data has its place with all of us—including top-level planners—and though the statistics portion of business is important, short text in an article or blog often delivers more information. If there is something to be learned, I want to learn it as quickly as possible.

I've heard that, last year, top companies spent over \$450 billion in new customer acquisition, yet spent only \$50 billion on customer service. Whether this figure is fact or apocryphal, it seems upside down to me. If these organizations were actually putting their money where their mouths are, customer service and promoting customer loyalty would be the *top* figure. I guess if you continue to burn out your customers with poor-quality service, you'd better be prepared to pony up some new consumers to support the bottom line.

At the point in my career when I lived and breathed the stats, I met a man named Peter Glen. I was building the fashion section for a soon-to-be prominent newspaper, and Peter was brought in to cement our connections with top retailers. He was a fascinating and provocative man; you either loved or hated him. He showed up for conferences well dressed, with a crazy bow tie and red socks or some other accessory to make a visual point that thinking and acting outside the box was his norm.

Peter had established a reputation as the top retail consultant in the country. He was the original “push-the-envelope” kind of guy. He authored several books, including *It's Not My Department: How America Can Return to Excellence—Giving and Receiving Quality Service* (Berkley Trade, 1992). Although it's been almost 20 years since its publication, Peter's words are still valid today.

Peter was such a force in motivating retailers to produce fine service that when he died in 2001, the National Retail Federation

created the Peter Glen Retailer of the Year award, given to the retailer that best exemplifies Glen's standards of retail excellence: innovation, service and intelligence. He left a legacy of quality.

In an interview in early 2001, Peter applied his visionary thinking to the future of online retail commerce:

E-commerce would have you believe the merchandise doesn't matter—that it's all in the distribution business. That's changing fast. Merchants are moving onto the Internet, [and] a merchant at the helm is still the competitive difference between one Web site and another—[between] good merchants and bad, those who get it and those who don't.

The merchants who “get it” are the ones who display exemplary customer service.

How interesting to read these thoughts from a time when very few people knew where e-commerce was going. Peter would consult with shopping centers and retailers, using the original “secret shopper” program as part of his research; and when he reported in, the results were rarely up to his standards. Relating to, respecting, and dignifying customer service were his top goals. I remember him asking the crowd of well-dressed, big-brained retail executives for whom he consulted, “Who has seen *E.T.* (referring to Steven Spielberg's now-classic film, *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial*)?”

There were mutterings from participants all around about how their kids had seen it, and that it was certainly a kid's movie; but only a couple of people raised their hands. To this, Peter responded with another question, “How can you possibly relate to your customer if you're not understanding pop culture? This is what they are watching, and it affects their thinking and what they want.”

Peter was indeed a futurist. He made me realize that there's a line between those who "get it" and those who don't. And you need to "get" the art of customer service, too.

If a cultural shift is taking place, you should be aware of it. Anytime a change in customers' lives occurs, it is an opportunity to provide better service, but only if you understand exactly what is flipping their switch at the moment.

That's the art: understanding your customers, and knowing what they like. Peter often said, "Retailing is theater." He felt that engaging the customer was best done with bells and whistles and honesty—and art.

Respecting your customer by delivering the finest service is the main cog in the wheel of customer loyalty. In this world of infinitely fast electronic communication, a loyal customer is your best secret weapon.

What Is the Business Value of Customer Service?

In 2007, a report from Walker Information, Inc. (a worldwide leader in customer loyalty management), titled "The Walker Loyalty Report for Online Retail," exposed some telling figures about the companies that obtain the top customer loyalty ratings. The report averaged three years' worth of revenue data and found, interestingly, that the average operating income of those companies they deemed as "Loyalty Leaders" grew 682 percent higher than those that scored low in customer loyalty. Their annual revenue growth was 146 percent. The study also found that among satisfied customers in a range of industries, only about 50 percent were loyal. These numbers send a clear message to anyone who cares about their bottom line.

There are—at a minimum—five things you must absolutely do to keep customers in a "good mood." This good mood may

garner sales and bring them back to your Web site to shop over and over—that is, if you play your cards right.

1. *Welcome the customer.* This is more than just having a lovely homepage. Let the customers know—at first contact—how important they are to you and your business.
2. *Offer help at each step of the way.* Not everyone is as Web savvy as you are (or your employees); make sure your site is easy to navigate and has a help button at every turn. Make your forms simple.
3. *Give customers space.* Don't have bouncing "Can I help you?" bubbles traveling back and forth across the page. Did you know that these make some people nervous? Perhaps that's why they exit many online stores.
4. *Offer customers more than just merchandise for sale.* People crave information about what they buy.
5. *Thank them.* A thank-you is not an offer for a small, free item tied to a subscription to a newsletter. A thank-you is your heartfelt way of letting customers know you're truly happy for their patronage. Offer a coupon for future use, or a discount on their next order—anything to make 'em smile!

Remember that "online" means connecting on the Web. Like a spider web, there are myriad platforms from which to connect, join, and relate to your customers.

A Word from a "Soft Scientist"

While I was writing this book, I spoke to a lot of people who study customer service for a living. I like to think of them as the "big brains." I respect them, and so I looked to them to find alternate definitions of the *art of customer service*.

I called on Michael Kringsman, chief executive officer of Asuret, Inc., a consulting company that studies and prevents failed information technology (IT) projects. He's also a prominent blogger and expert on topics related to social media, customer relationship management, and leadership.

That said, Michael knows his stuff on some very high levels. When we spoke about the future of customer service online, he spoke some pretty solid words to me.

Customers have become an important “power bloc” in their own right. Gone are the days when we can control the customer relationship, filtering our message and expecting customers to sit back and smile. Today, social tools such as Twitter and Facebook mean that customers can form ad hoc, self-aware interest groups with rapid, even viral, speed.

Today's customers are sophisticated and will take to the online streets in a heartbeat. If they love your product and service, they'll tell their friends. If the call center kept them on hold for an hour, only to be followed by a rude interaction with an inexperienced agent, your customers will shout that from the rooftops.

Wise companies today engage and collaborate with customers to achieve mutual and beneficial value. Invite customers to share their feedback with you, and ask their advice on how to improve. You don't have to accept every bit of advice they offer, but give customers an opportunity to talk. Listen closely to see how you can align customer interests with your goals.

Profitable relationships result when both buyer and seller realize mutual value. In today's world, that's a mantra for communication, engagement, and collaboration.

Michael's words ring true, and align with the message of this book. Humanity and engagement *must* be part of your customer service strategy.

What Online Customer Service Means to You

Why bother with online customer service? After all, don't you believe that you do a good enough job at your business or with your phone response? You know that the world is changing and that people are way too busy to sit through lengthy phone calls. Many no longer want to spend their time on the phone or engaged in chats with canned robots.

In the old days, families used to sit together in the evenings and watch TV. This isn't the case anymore. We live in the electronic age. Everyone is online now and life runs at a much faster pace.

Your customers need to be assured they can reach your business anywhere, anytime, and almost immediately. Quality customer service means providing a convenient place where your company can be contacted whenever your customer has a problem. Online—and specifically through social media—is the best way to enable that reach.

Small businesses don't always have the time or staff to spend on the phone. Your office is often stretched with work as it is. Unfortunately, your customers won't understand; as far as they're concerned, your number one priority is to meet their needs.

Online customer service is useful to you and to your customers, because it (hopefully) allows them to get their messages to you and receive responses back in—at most—24 hours. They can complete what they need to accomplish and move on to the more important things—like living their lives.

If they call your company on the phone and are put on hold for long periods of time, they will grow frustrated and angry—and, therefore, be much more difficult to work with. Getting an answer back from you quickly is important both to them and to your reputation.

It's a well-known fact that the better the customer service experience, the more customers will buy from you—and the more loyal they will be. So having a solid online customer

service presence helps you in several ways. It gives your customers some real-world benefits, because it's:

1. *Useful*. By connecting with your company online, customers have an “ear” for describing their dealings with your products, or you and your employees.
2. *Easy*. They can log on to your Web site or blog or connect with you through a social media venue and reach you quickly.
3. *Enjoyable*. By connecting directly, they feel that they've accomplished something; they know their words were heard.

Never lose sight of your customer culture and the value of the relationships the Internet offers your company. And because online customer service has its roots in the real world, consider real-world examples of customer service. Then we can translate what we do face to face into the magic we perform online.