

FOREWORD BY RICH TEERLINK, RETIRED CHAIRMAN AND CEO OF HARLEY-DAVIDSON, INC.

Chip R. Bell & Bilijack R. Bell

magnetic service



secrets for creating passionately devoted customers

An Excerpt From

***Magnetic Service:
Secrets for Creating Passionately Devoted Customers***

by Chip R. Bell & Bilijack R. Bell
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Preview

You Don't Know Jack . . . Or Do You?

Larry is a devoted fan of Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey, but he wasn't always. Sure, he enjoyed it from time to time, along with other brands. Not anymore. If Larry is in a social situation where they don't have Jack, he settles for a glass of club soda. When he hears a friend call for some other brand, he makes a passionate plea for ordering Jack Daniel's instead. How did our friend Larry go from satisfied consumer to passionately devoted customer? And what can his transformation teach us about magnetic service?

"A few years ago," Larry told us one day, "a friend nominated me for membership in the Tennessee Squire Association, kind of a Jack Daniel's fan club. A few weeks later, I received an impressive certificate plus a deed to part of the Jack Daniel Distillery property in Lynchburg, Tennessee. I assumed it was maybe one square inch of land!

"I dismissed it all as a clever marketing ploy," he continued, "until I received a K-1 to include with my income tax return indicating I had a loss of 29 cents due to flood damage on my 'property' in Lynchburg." Amused, we prodded Larry for more information.

"Well," he continued, "I began to get letters from folks in Lynchburg, like I really was a neighbor. There was one from a

fellow who ran the local hardware store wanting to take horseweed worms from my property to use as fish bait. The county executive of Moore County, Tennessee, wrote requesting an easement across my property so locals could take a shortcut past the distillery to reach Spencer Hole, a popular recreation area. My favorite came from a guy trying to raise a herd of Black Angus cows. He kept getting white-faced calves. When he spotted a white-faced bull on my property, he wrote me for ideas on how to fix the situation.”

We were now observing the passion of a wide-eyed groupie at a rock concert. Larry’s story continued.

“I’m pretty sure I was a part of the taste test for Gentleman Jack®, a new brand for Jack Daniel they brought out a few years ago. Before it was on the shelves everywhere, the liquor store owner gave me a taste and wrote down my comments. Jack Daniel Distillery once contacted me and asked me to write my congressman to influence a particular piece of legislation they were trying to get passed. The folks in the local liquor store started asking for my feedback, like they were reps for Jack Daniel. I’ve gotten calendars, coasters, and catalogs for ordering JD paraphernalia. You want me to keep going?”

We’d heard enough.

What Makes Service Magnetic?

What is it that Jack Daniel Distillery is doing to stir such ardor among customers like Larry? We see several ingredients in our friend’s story that are relevant to attracting a customer’s passionate devotion.

They Listen . . . Really Listen

The Jack Daniel Distillery seems to use the package store owner to solicit feedback . . . up close and personal, and without defensiveness.

At least that was Larry's perception. The company sponsors Jack Daniel's Tailgate parties—the JD version of Harley-Davidson's HOG (Harley Owner's Group) gatherings—as a chance for fans of Jack Daniel's to gather for fun and camaraderie. The company communicates the details on their Web site and uses the gathering as a chance to build customer loyalty and gather feedback.

They Value Trust

Log on to www.jackdaniels.com. The first thing you do is type in your birthday to access the site. The first words you read once you enter the Web site say: "Your friends at Jack Daniel's remind you to drink responsibly." The Jack Daniel's online store carries the warning, "This special collection of Jack Daniel's goods is intended for adults of legal drinking age."

The Jack Daniel Distillery knows that trust in the eyes of customers is a moving target—a verb, not a noun—and must be regained and reaffirmed with each new experience. They nourish marketplace trust as carefully as they do the sugar maples used to charcoal filter their whiskey.

They Stir Spirits

Every letter our friend received from the folks in Lynchburg was a creative masterpiece. "I tear it open faster than a check from the IRS," Larry told us, and then added, "I know these letters could be partly fantasy, but they keep me enchanted. Whatever the case, it sure is fun."

No matter what you call it, service with an element of surprise builds customer devotion. That said, magnetic service providers know that you cannot rely on "wowing" the customer as your mainstay . . . at some point you run out of room trying to "one up" the last experience. Still, most of us still enjoy an occasional unexpected gesture or the thrill of knowing that a service moment is unique. Just recall how some surprise you delivered affected an important friend or loved one. Magnetic service providers are masters at striking the right balance.

You Don't Know Jack . . . Or Do You?

They Engage Curiosity

Jack Daniel Distillery uses its Web site and mailings to teach customers about everything from “How to sip Jack” to “Recipes with Jack” to “How we actually make Old Number 7.” One of their biggest selling items is their collection of Jack Daniel’s-inspired cookbooks. “There’s a new marinade in their cookbook for barbequed venison,” Larry told us. And, before we could stop him, he added, “I even learned recipes for cooking beaver and possum!”

Today’s customers seek learning in practically every facet of life. The organization that is able to implant enlightenment into the customer’s experience will win customer devotion.

They Foster Inclusion

When Jack Daniel Distillery invited Larry to write to his congressman, they were using inclusion as a strategy for sparking customer devotion. Customers’ devotion toward an organization can ratchet up dramatically when they get an opportunity to put some “skin in the game.”

Inclusion not only captures the creativity and competence of customers as they serve *with* you, but it inspires their commitment and allegiance, as well. Granted, there are customers who are not interested in participation. And there are times when customer inclusion would not be appropriate. As Jack Daniel Distillery has learned, the secret is knowing when and how to include.

They Value Customer Comfort

How can a product like Jack Daniel’s be said to offer comfortable service? Jack Daniel’s shows that they know that customers’ needs vary. The product comes in every conceivable size—from a “single drink” pony bottle to a half-gallon container. And there are dozens of variations on the theme. Jack Daniel’s sells barbeque sauce, lemonade, charcoal, and a host of other products, all flavored with the beloved beverage. Plus their Web site and store displays are accessible, conveying a touch of old-fashioned hospitality.

They Demonstrate Character

Jack Daniel Distillery obviously cares about the quality of their product. They proudly display on the bottle the many awards the Tennessee sipping whiskey has won. They also care about being a quality organization—demonstrating sensitivity to the fact that they are promoting alcohol consumption. They know a quality experience with their products comes with responsibility, and they boldly trumpet that fact. Organizations that are willing to take courageous, principled stands reassure customers that they are dealing with a solid organization likely to stand the test of time.

. . .

Jack Daniel's whiskey might seem like an odd opening exemplar of magnetic service. We are obviously not advocating the irresponsible consumption of spirits. Nor are we on the Jack Daniel's payroll as sales reps, cheerleaders, or stockholders. We just think that Jack Daniel's clearly shows how a product-based company can build brand loyalty and consumer devotion through an eclectic collection of magnetic experiences. If a company in the business of making an object can astound their customers, think of the unlimited potential that organizations in the business of making memories have!

What the Jack Daniel's story demonstrates is that magnetic service is first and foremost bold, imaginative, and stimulating. At Jack Daniel's—and at all the service organizations we explore—magnetic service has a kind of joyful “wake-up call” dimension that makes the customer sit up and take notice. Magnetic service might be daring, or it might not be. It might be “out-loud” assertive, or it might be quietly provocative. It is always unexpected and ends up being a “shining moment” in the memory of the customer. Its power lies in its capacity to stir the emotion of the recipient.

Magnetic service involves a quest for being remarkable in the marketplace. “Remarkable takes originality, passion, guts, and daring,” wrote Seth Godin, author of *Purple Cow*. “Not just because going through life with passion and guts beats the alternative (which it does), but because it's the only way to be successful. Today, the one

sure way to fail is to be boring. Your one chance for success is to be remarkable.”

The path to customer devotion is not complex. But it is by no means easy. Magnetic service begins with treating customers in new ways. If you ground your relationship with them in trust, show that you understand them, touch their spirits, teach them, let them witness your character, and occasionally charm them, they will passionately reward you with their devotion, their advocacy, and their funds.

Part One

The Secret Side of Magnetic Service

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There are people who gleefully pay five bucks for a cup of Starbucks coffee, gratefully pay hundreds of dollars to stay at a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and loyally spend twenty-five grand for a Harley-Davidson motorcycle they wait a long time to get! Where's the logic? Customer devotion jettisons rational economics straight into the stratosphere.

Devotion to Starbucks, Ritz-Carlton, or Harley-Davidson is not about a beverage, hotel, or form of transportation. It's about an experience—an experience as profound and unmistakable as that of a school-boy smitten for the first time! Granted, the product or outcome must be very good, but not necessarily perfect. Harley devotees grudgingly acknowledge that there really are technologically better bikes. But neither Suzuki nor BMW can match the gratification of a Harley owner on a Sunday afternoon ride with other loyalists. Devotion springs from something else.

Customers who are devoted to your unit or organization act very differently from customers who are simply loyal. Passionately devoted customers not only forgive you when you err, they help you correct what caused the mistake. They don't just recommend you; they assertively insist that their friends do business with you. They vehemently defend you when others are critical. Even if there is a good reason for the criticism, they quickly dismiss what provoked it as being an aberration or an exception.

And some take devotion even further. Some Starbucks fans refuse to drink any other coffee. Some devoted customers of Harley-Davidson tattoo the company logo on their bodies. Devoted guests of Ritz-Carlton Hotels proudly wear Ritz-Carlton-logoed clothes . . . and have the hotel chain's signature cobalt blue accessories in their homes. In these instances, magnetic service has forged a connection that becomes a part of the customer's identity and life expression.

Figuring out how to attract passionate devotion is not a simple process. There is clearly a dual "psycho-logic" factor that you must tap into. One part involves incorporating the right color, shape, sound, and touch elements into your product or service. In the customer's brain, these form an intricate pattern that links up with learned preferences, and spells attraction. The other involves providing just the right social component. Watching the Green Bay Packers alone in your living room is never the same as elbowing your way through the frozen bleachers with two hotdogs and a cold beer.

Sparking customer devotion also has to do with timing. The dimensions of the service experience that appeal to the customer today may not have the same allure tomorrow. This is more than a statement about customer fickleness. It means that customers' expectations and hopes are perpetually in motion, being reconfigured with every life experience. Likewise, customers' sense of self is always being altered, changing what excites them. It means that the rock group you would die for at twenty just doesn't hold the same appeal when you are fifty.

Another dimension that makes devotion so unpredictable has much to do with issues of context. The service experience that is seen as charming to the businessperson traveling to a hotel on holiday—a time when indulgence is rather expected—may be deemed trite or even

annoying to that same businessperson staying at that same hotel for a business meeting.

Understanding the nature of magnetism from the customers' side is helpful. It tells us there is more to pulling customer devotion toward you than we service providers may be able to control. You can't turn on a tape of a cheering crowd or flood the store with the smell of motorcycle exhaust every time a customer comes into the place. Even so, there is a great deal that you can do to influence the experience the customer has with your organization. And, as with preparing for and carrying out an important first date, there are certain protocols to consider and practices to establish that are likely to yield passionately devoted customers.

The Seven Secrets of Magnetic Service

The discovery of our seven secrets of magnetic service came through intense study of a number of brands that have elicited cult-like enthusiasm. We studied companies as diverse as USAA Insurance, Universal Studios, Ritz-Carlton Hotels, the Mansion on Turtle Creek, Sewell Village Cadillac, and Harley-Davidson—all organizations that have a very large share of groupies.

We also interviewed managers, front-line employees, and some of the most devoted customers of such well-known brands as Marriott, Merrill Lynch, Sears, American Honda, Pfizer, General Electric, Holiday Inn, MBNA, Victoria's Secret, Aurora Health Care, and Washington Mutual Bank. Our intent was to look for patterns or practices that seemed to yield customer devotion. Whether the company was posh or penny pinching, the difference between remarkable and run-of-the-mill lay not with the price the customer was required to pay but rather the value the customer felt privileged to experience. We also found that though these companies used their own vocabulary to describe their approach, their values and practices were quite similar and transferable in principle to many other kinds of organizations. These shared stories led us to seven secrets for creating passionately devoted customers. We'll briefly outline them here and then develop them more fully in the rest of the book.

Secret # 1: Make Trust a Verb

The rock-bottom principle on which magnetic service is based is trust, but the basis of customer trust is always changing. Every experience the customer has with any service provider alters the standard for every other service provider. Magnetic service is malleable and agile enough to stay up on the customer's evolving requirements for trust. Trust is also multifaceted. It comes, in part, from a belief that a great service experience was not serendipitous. While customers may be infatuated by an enchanting fluke, their ongoing allegiance is anchored to the pursuit of experiences they feel can be replicated time and time again.

Trust starts with authenticity—we trust another when we perceive his or her motives are genuine or credible. Trust emanates from communication that contains crystal clear content as well as empathic “I care about you” consideration. Trust comes from a track record of promises made, paralleled with promises kept. Trust emerges as a result of demonstrated competence that leaves customers assured they are dealing with someone with the capacity to perform. Magnetic service providers work to honor and demonstrate all these features of trust in their relationships with customers.

Secret # 2: Focus on Customer Hopes, Not Just Needs

“The purpose of an organization,” writes management guru Peter Drucker, “is to create and keep a customer.” All the financials are just tools for keeping score of how well that purpose is being achieved. “Serving a customer” means the organization must meet customers' needs while at a minimum fulfilling their expectations of what the process will be like for getting those needs met. Perform that task adequately and you will probably survive. Perform that task well and you will probably succeed.

Magnetic service goes well beyond the “probably succeed” level. Magnetic service providers know that under the surface of the presented or obvious customer need lies the customer's hopes and wishes for what might happen. With those hopes are also aspirations, dreams, and even unconscious needs. Magnetic service providers know that tapping into this reservoir not only enables them to earn the customer's loyalty,

it ensures that they solidify that loyalty by anticipating future needs. The goal here is revelation, an enriched dialogue to surface those unspoken customer aims and ambitions so that they can become the target of serving.

Secret #3: Add “Charisma” to the Service Mix

Establishing customer devotion requires taking a position that is exciting, bold, and somewhat daring. One person we interviewed told us that he felt his service was magnetic when it had an unexpected spin to it. In other words, it offered not just *more* than what the customer expected, but something *different* from what the customer expected.

There is nothing subtle about the impact of magnetic service. It hits its target in a fashion that leaves behind a positive emotional afterglow. The nature of the engagement is personal and moving. People are favorably attracted to service providers when an emotional link is created with that person. And, when that link is profound without being violating, purposeful without being manipulative, and done without presumption on your part, it makes doing business with you a treasured activity.

Secret #4: Engage the Customer’s Curiosity

Customers have a huge reservoir of curiosity. Some anthropologists believe that the compulsion to learn is encoded in human DNA, which explains why humans have evolved so much further than other species. (Perhaps when God endowed humankind with a soul, the substance of that gift was curiosity!) Consequently, when service providers are alert to natural “teachable moments” in the delivery of service, they stimulate something very deep in the customer.

One way to appeal to the customer’s curiosity is to create a path for participation. The allure of customer participation opportunities arises not from the fact that they *require* that customers actually join, but rather from the fact that they offer the *option* for doing so. It is the *potential* for inclusion more than the enrollment experience itself that sparks the customer’s innate curiosity.

Customer participation opportunities take many forms. The most powerful actually engage the customer's energy in delivering the experience. Fresh Market grocery stores get high marks for letting customers bag, weigh, and price their own fruits and vegetables. Customers also squeeze and bottle their own orange juice and grind and package their own peanut butter. But sometimes simply enabling customers to feel and value a connection is enough to inspire their devotion.

Secret #5: Give Customers an Occasional Miracle

We have all experienced or heard about those magnetic service moments in which someone pulled out all the stops. Whether we are recipient or witness, such unexpected, out-of-the-box experiences remind us that service miracles can still happen. Such special incidents leave us as enthralled as does a table set with candles and champagne on a special date. Miracles cannot be regular fare; otherwise they become plain vanilla instead of Neapolitan. But the once-in-a-while special gesture communicates not only a desire to serve, but also a yearning to enchant.

Service miracles leave customers more emotionally moved than simply delighted; more blessed than blown away. They are at the zenith of nobility of service—special gifts that are unexpectedly bestowed and distinctively right for particular individuals. Such service miracles reflect the server's imagination; they are also manifestations of a purity of purpose. They leave customers uplifted and eager to discuss what happened with others. They are the key components of the most endearing service stories we hear and share. And with each retelling, the storyteller becomes more devoted, the audience more keen to join the fold.

Secret #6: Empower Customers Through Comfort

Customers feel empowered when they experience psychological comfort, and magnetic service provides psychological comfort by offering reliability and predictability. We can more easily deal with flights that are always late than those that are sometimes on time and sometimes

not. Human nature abhors dissonance and the kind of ambiguity that makes us feel out of control. Our aversion to unpredictability means that for a service moment to be magnetic, it must be in sync with the customer's notion of what ought to happen, "congruent" as the psychologists would say—it must fit.

Customers are also empowered when service renders physical comfort—the kind that reflects a smooth operation. This means that the experience is not just hassle-free; it is noticeably comfortable, strikingly reliable, and surprisingly seamless. It requires establishing processes and systems that work with the service person in order to ensure a customer's need is met without anxiety or negative surprises. Think of it as providing service without any drag or resistance.

Secret #7: Reveal Your Character by Unveiling Your Courage

Magnetic service should reflect a deeper purpose or destiny, befitting of the organization's vision and marketplace strategy. Service with character also has a sense of innocence, naturalness, purity, and a groundedness about it. It need not be completely obvious to the customer, but it must not feel manipulative or have a quality of deviousness about it. Too often service providers, in their quest to impress customers, rely on "bait and switch" tactics, false promises, and clever tricks customers view as unfair, unnecessary, and unacceptable. The courageous service provider counts on courageous character and solid dealings to win the confidence of customers.

Magnetic service works when it emerges from the service provider's natural joy. Such service is not only clean and ethical, it is also considerate, kind, and thoughtful. It can be subtle, but if it is devoid of a childlike purity and honesty, the customer will feel they have been the subject of a ruse rather than the target of a reward.

Are You Delivering Magnetic Service?

We have outlined above some of the key concepts that characterize magnetic service. Before exploring further, it might be helpful to know

where you are. Below is a list of questions to assist you in identifying your present level of service. Take a few minutes to complete the following assessment. Your honest appraisal is the first step to filling gaps in your magnetic field.

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Do your customers believe your organization or unit listens to them more deeply than almost any organization they can think of? | Yes | No |
| 2. Do you anticipate customers' future needs so well that customers feel you can practically read their minds? | Yes | No |
| 3. Are customers given an opportunity to participate in a different way than they would have expected? | Yes | No |
| 4. Does your service have sufficient consistency such that customers can trust it as being repeatable and not serendipitous? | Yes | No |
| 5. Do customers see your organization or unit as rather daring or gallant in its approach? | Yes | No |
| 6. Do customers think you and other employees in your organization or unit have more fun than other people? | Yes | No |
| 7. Are customers given a chance to learn a lot simply through their encounter with your organization or unit? | Yes | No |
| 8. Do customers witness you and others in your organization or unit perpetually improving service? | Yes | No |
| 9. Is the interpersonal engagement with you so unforgettable that customers think positively about it again and again? | Yes | No |
| 10. Do customers view their service experience as special, distinctive, and not the usual "beaten path" approach? | Yes | No |
| 11. Do customers comment on how the organization or unit is almost always super comfortable to do business with? | Yes | No |
| 12. Do customers feel completely free of dissonance and anxiety when dealing with your organization or unit? | Yes | No |

13. Does your service experience reflect a deeper destiny, vision or commitment to serve? Yes No
14. Is your service to customers delivered in a way that clearly reflects a wholesome and generous attitude? Yes No

How many honest “no’s” did you circle? If you circled more than three or four, you have gaps to fill, holes to repair, and practices to start. If you honestly circled all “yes’s,” then please give this book to someone who could use it!

Secret #1

Make Trust a Verb

magnetism \ 'mag-nə-,ti-zəm \ *n* : A magnet will reliably perform as it always has—its draw is one of the absolute laws of nature.

magnetic service \ mag-'nə-tik 'sɜ:v-vəs \ *vb, n* : Magnetic service is trustworthy. It continually updates and reaffirms the customer's perception of reliability in the service provider.

Service is an implied agreement between the service provider and the service receiver to exchange value for value. It is also a promise by the service provider that certain core requirements will be assured and particular customer expectations will be honored. Finally, it is a pledge that should any part of the covenant not be fulfilled, the response by the service provider will represent a fair fix.

Look at the implied agreement between an airline and passenger as an example. “Mayday” Airline provides transportation to a passenger in exchange for a certain sum of money (value for value). Mayday promises that the delivery of the customer from point A to point B will be done reasonably on time, safely, and with the customer's luggage in

tow. Mayday also commits that flight attendants will be helpful, snacks will be edible, seats will be tolerable, and the in-flight magazine will be complimentary. If one of these requirements or expectations is not met along the way, the airline pledges to take action to right the wrong in an appropriate fashion.

At this point you may be wondering why we chose such a seemingly obvious and elementary opening to the exploration of a concept as complex as trust. Our experience has been that many organizations falter on this vital element of magnetic service because they fail to honor the basics.

Trust Is a Moving Target

Now, for the most important part of this basic 101 intro to trust: Trust is a living thing! It is an animated, always moving dimension of all relationships, just like love. Here's why. As humans, our concept of value perpetually changes. Lots of things make value today different from value tomorrow. Apples are less valuable after you have two dozen in the cupboard than when you had none. Loud music is less valuable when you are past fifty than when you were fifteen. Making a difference becomes more valuable with maturity; making the team becomes less valuable.

If trust is a covenant of value exchange, and value is nomadic, this suggests that the pursuit of trust building needs to include some mechanism for updating the proposition. Think about expectations. Every service experience we have alters our expectations for future service. The standard for service today was altered by the service encounters we had yesterday. Customers today want every service to be FedEx fast, Amazon.com easy, Disney friendly, and Southwest Airlines thrifty. Consequently, the object of any implied covenant, agreement, promise, and pledge must be in perpetual motion. That's why we say make trust a verb—think of it as a constantly moving thing, and not a static “noun-like” concept.

Magnetic service providers know that treating trust as a moving target requires an active, ever-changing relationship with the customer. If customer expectations are part of what trust is made of, and if those

expectations are in perpetual motion, then service providers must find ways to stay current. This doesn't mean that you have to be completely accurate about what customers want 100 percent of the time. It does, however, mean that your relationship with your customers must have built-in mechanisms for updating and renewal.

Trust Is Fostered by Authenticity

M.L. Leddy's is an upscale western wear store in the historic Stockyards section of Fort Worth. The store has been in the same spot since 1922 and calls itself a "handmade Texas legend." The worn wooden floor covered with antique rugs gives the appearance that many, many people have visited. The decor looks like a cross between an old West saloon and the lobby of a cowboy hotel, circa 1875. The photos that adorn the wall give you the feeling that Leddy's might have provided clothes for customers with names like Masterson, Holliday, and Earp.

Trust building starts when you cross the threshold. If you are a first-time customer, you are warmly greeted by salesman John Ripps, who confidently introduces himself, expressing sincere gratitude for your visit. If you are a repeat customer, John knows by the expression of "I'm home" on your face. His sharply focused questions enable him to very quickly zero in on your precise interests in menswear. He is warmly frank about what looks good (and not good!) on your torso and refreshingly candid in describing his experience with certain fabrics or his opinion of certain colors on you. Like a patient in an operating room, you rapidly surrender all defenses as you realize you are obviously in the hands of a pro.

John takes your measurements with the know-how of a master tailor on Fifth Avenue, New York—painstaking patience, respect, and professionalism mark his accomplished manner. Two days after any purchase, you get a handwritten personal note from John, always mentioning something you did or said. When you have something tailored or buy something that has to be specially ordered, you are likely to get an excited call: "Partner, your pants have just arrived, and they are truly gorgeous!" Repeat phone calls always yield instant recognition, warm greetings, and lots of "Yes sir, I have your measurements right in front

of me," or "We'll have that shirt to you tomorrow." If he makes an error, John is boldly honest. His genuineness and sincerity make him one of the most trusted names in the business.

Trust is born out of authenticity. We trust another when we perceive his or her motives are unadulterated and credible. Think of your goal as demonstrating realness in motion. Start with an inviting, pleasant expression. Greet the customer as if you are sincerely glad to see him or her. Communicate your enthusiasm for the privilege of being of service. Look for a way to provide an early, honest, non-patronizing compliment.

Also, reveal something personal about yourself, especially something that your customer is unlikely to know. Universal Studios Hollywood puts the front-line person's favorite Universal movie on his or her nametag. It can be a great conversation starter. Many organizations include the server's hometown for the same purpose. It creates the beginning of a genuine connection and sparks an animated exchange that customers see as believable.

Trust Is Born of Demonstrated Competence

His truck looked like he'd been mud racing and lost. He slid off the seat and turned his back to the customer as he pulled up his sagging jeans and removed a shiny box of tools from behind the truck seat.

"You called for a plumber," he said with obvious pride, "And I'm your man!" With urgency he walked toward the customer with outstretched hand. The customer was already getting the happy sense that his pesky plumbing gremlins were in very deep trouble. Five minutes later, the plumber was outlining the problem, the prognosis, and the price. He spoke mostly in English, but managed to intersperse a bit of advanced plumbing lingo in his prescription. He obviously knew his stuff.

"I can fix it now . . . it'll take me an hour and a half . . . or I can come back when it's more convenient for you. You will need to take everything out of this bathroom cabinet, and I'll need to get a drop cloth and ladder from my truck."

Exactly eighty minutes later, the customer was writing a check and requesting business cards to give to friends should they ever have plumbing challenges. This customer had played “yellow pages roulette” in search of a plumber and hit the jackpot!

In order to earn the customer’s trust, magnetic service providers communicate that they are worthy of trust. A person is worthy of our trust when we believe he or she has the wherewithal to actually perform what is promised or needed. Wherewithal includes competence, credential, and the correct conduct—and they all add up to credibility. We examine the plaques on the physician’s wall, the badge on the police officer’s uniform, or the tenor in the pilot’s voice during in-flight turbulence to gain clues into matters of credibility. The plumber in the example above may have had a dirty truck but the tools of his trade were spotless.

Magnetic service providers know that credibility should be constantly kept in “demonstrator mode.” Showing your competence to do the job is not about boasting; it is reminding the customer he or she made a smart decision in coming to you. It means you know how to show off without being a show off. Create your exposition of your talents from the perspective based on what your customers need; don’t give them a complete catalog of what you have. Tell a personal story that uses your expertise as the backdrop, not the subject. Add to an affirmation or compliment to your customer a tidbit from your resume. For example, you might compliment your customer with, “Your jacket is gorgeous,” and add, “and believe me, as a long-term collector of velvet jackets, I can spot quality.”

Trust Is Enhanced Through Customer Inclusion

In a small shoe shop in a shopping mall near the New Orleans French Quarter, a cobbler sat hammering nails into the heel of a boot. He seemed completely immersed in his chore, since there were no customers to divert his concentration. The grayish sign hanging on his wall at eye level from the cash register loudly proclaimed exactly how he felt about customers. It blared out a part jesting, part serious warning:

Price List

Full soles: \$20

Half Soles: \$12

Heels: \$10

Taps: \$2

Add: \$3 If you wait

\$5 If you watch

\$10 If you try to help

Right next door to the shoe shop was a chocolate fudge shop, the kind with the big marble table in the middle and guys singing and making fudge. They were encouraging the large audience standing around to sing along as they played catch with a chocolate soft ball with one of the kids. Customers were mesmerized and enchanted as they shelled out twenty-dollar bills to purchase more fudge than they could possibly eat in a year.

Anthropologist Desmond Morris in his classic book, *The Naked Ape*, concluded that humans were genetically hardwired to be joiners, not loners. Sure there are a few hermit types who would rather live isolated than enlisted. But they are the rare exceptions. Humans have bonded in groups as long as they have walked upright. It is telling that we use solitary confinement as a punishment even within normal incarceration.

The need to connect with others is a vital part of building trust. Customers' devotion soars when they discover that they can be active participants in the service experience. At one point, we thought it was participation that accounted for zeal ("People will care if they share").

Further research has led to a profound discovery: It is the open door, not the actual participation, that fuels their trust. If the door is always open and customers know they have an opportunity to be included, the impact is almost as powerful as if they actually put “skin in the game.”

Building a sense of inclusion can take many forms. Harley-Davidson created the Harley Owners Group (HOG) as a forum to bring Harley devotees together for education and recreation. Membership comes with purchase of a Harley. Frequently, members of executive management join in the fun and fellowship as HOG members reunite around a barbeque or motorcade on a Sunday afternoon. Dealers for BMW's new Mini Cooper brand automobile mail to buyers a “birth certificate” once the customer has paid a deposit. The customer is then provided with a way to follow his car's production online. Here again, customers care when they share.

Sometimes inclusion can be fun; sometimes it can have a more serious “help me” dimension. Bilijack was pursuing a company's real estate business without success. Unable to make contact with the key decision maker, he turned to his existing customers who had done business with the elusive prospect. Before long, he received a voice mail from the prospect indicating that he had been contacted by several people (Bilijack's customers) singing his praises. The next week he had a very productive first meeting with the prospect. By asking for their help, Bilijack had helped some of his existing customers feel involved in his business. Follow-up calls from them, all anxious to learn how the meeting had progressed, now telegraphed their heightened loyalty.

Inclusion reinforces a “we're in this together” partnership, and magnetic service providers are always on the lookout for novel ways to accomplish it. When Rusty Epperson at commercial real estate firm Wilson, Hull & Neal in Atlanta tours a warehouse facility with a prospect or client, for example, he often hands them the telescopic instrument used to measure the exact height of the ceiling clearance. On the business side, this measurement directly determines the client's ability to adequately rack and store additional merchandise. On the personal side, this inclusive gesture helps clients put more skin in the game, elevating their devotion and allegiance.

All these customer inclusion secrets are powerful tools for creating trust, but there are a few cautions. Provide customers a brief background when making a request for assistance so they clearly know the reason you are asking them to participate. Be clear and specific about why and how the customer can assist. “We are a bit swamped today and I could really use your assistance. If you could complete your own paperwork on this order while I get the part, I can get you processed and on your way a whole lot quicker. What do you think?”

Make certain the customer sees the opportunity to participate as a part of a larger, collective effort. The customer must see that you are sharing in the effort, otherwise he or she will feel unfairly used. Remember that the pronoun in power is “we.” Give the customer plenty of breathing room. This means being selective in how and when you invite customers to participate. Too little, and the customer never gets to feel the glow of inclusion. But too much can be worse—the customer will feel intruded upon and leave thinking “they know me too well” or “they took me for granted.”

Also, only ask for what is reasonable—make sure your request is something appropriate to ask of a devoted customer. Avoid any customer request that puts the organization or customer in any way at risk or in a position of liability if things go wrong. While the goal is to help the customer feel like a member of the family, it’s important to remember that the customer is always the guest of the organization.

Finally, never forget to express your gratitude. Asking a customer to assist should be as unique as it is special. The customer will remember it that way if you remember to always communicate appreciation for their efforts. Customer requests should be seen as an option by the customer. Reward their caring enough to accept that option by letting them hear and feel your thanks.

Remember, too, that there are times when inclusion is inappropriate. There are times when customers do not have the skills or know-how to participate. If you go in for open heart surgery, for example, participation is not likely to be at the top of your list of hoped-for outcomes. Also, some customers do not want to be included—they want to be pampered or simply “just served.” When they do, though, magnetic service providers make the path to customer contribution comfortable and obvious.

Trust Depends on Taking Risks

While it is true that trust develops with experience, it is also true that all experience begins with “no experience.” Ultimately, someone without any experience with a particular relationship must take a leap of faith. So, the origin of trust is risk. When a service provider shows trust in a customer, the customer reciprocates with trust. Customer trust building requires a culture that encourages risk taking.

Arthur’s is a popular deli-style restaurant in a large mall in Charlotte, North Carolina. Long known for great food and a wide range of wines, they are also known for building trust by showing trust. Customers enter the restaurant, order their food, eat, and pay as they leave. Whatever price customers tell the cashier is what is rung up on the cash register. There is no ticket, just trust.

A trust-building action can be as small as placing a cup of pennies next to the cash register with a sign that reads, “Got a penny, give a penny; need a penny, take a penny.” It can be as simple as putting a sign up like the one on a dry cleaner’s wall in San Diego that says, “We DO take personal checks.” Examine the signs around your organization which use “Don’t,” “No,” or other negative language. A library in Minneapolis changed “overdue fines” to “extended use fees.”

What messages in your organization can be communicated in a positive, more trusting way? The magnetic power of trust is that it creates more—show trust to customers, they’ll trust you back.

Trust Is Solidified Through Betrayal Management

We all know it when we experience it. Things do go wrong—the never-wear-out jeans wear out, the laundry cracks a shirt button, the steak comes to us too rare, the knock in the engine returns—and we feel let down, taken advantage of, or just plain furious. Somehow, we were counting on everything working, but the experience came up short. We have all experienced service failure—and judged the culprit by how well they responded.

Magnetic service providers know that great service recovery is not a matter of luck, or even just a matter of excellent interpersonal skills.

They treat service failure as a betrayal of trust and make sure that service recovery is planned and managed in that spirit. You may be thinking, Why not just put all your energy into doing it right the first time? And, besides, maybe talking about mistakes will cause mistakes to happen more often. Shouldn't the goal be zero defects?

Obviously, doing preventive ("do it right the first time") maintenance on those troublesome fail points in a service delivery process is an important first step. But even the very best service operation occasionally will fail. And there are fail points in service that are just too expensive to fix. Airlines, for instance, could prevent passengers with tickets from ever getting bumped by only taking as many reservations as there are seats on the plane. But we all know that practice would make no economic sense because of the number of "no shows." So, the airlines intentionally overbook, and the consequence is that some ticketed passengers occasionally will be disappointed. Smart airlines anticipate such problems and plan effective steps to get the passengers on the next flight out. The best ones work hard to restore the customer's trust.

Customer service research has found that a customer who has had a problem elegantly corrected ends up being more loyal than a customer who has never had a problem. Before the service breakdown, the customer operated on hope. After a glitch is treated with effective betrayal management, there is proof. Proof restores trust.

Customers need to hear words and see actions that let them know you care and understand how they feel—that you appreciate why they are upset or frustrated. However, a sincere apology and empathy are not enough. Customers need to sense some urgency—words of momentum—which let them know you are working to correct their problem as quickly as possible.

It might be a good idea to think through exactly how you plan to handle breakdowns that happen with some regularity. Maybe there is merit in providing some token or gesture that tangibly telegraphs your sincere regret that the disappointment occurred. Symbolic atonement does not mean "buying" the problem. It can be as simple as offering to do a small courtesy, a personal extra, or a value-added favor. However, the most important part of trust renewal is follow-up after the problem has been resolved. This conveys to customers that you sincerely care about them and the fact that they had a problem.

Look for ways to get customer feedback about service break-downs. Keep track of the most common customer complaints. Devote time in your next meeting to talking about service recovery in terms of betrayal management. Plan ways to deal with recurring service failures as opportunities for trust renewal until they can permanently be fixed. Remember, the difference between a good service operation and a magnetic service operation is not how they perform in normal times; it's how they perform when the customer is disappointed.

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Trust is a vital building block of any relationship—be it with a friend, spouse, or customer. Trust building for the customer relationship is different, however. We generally don't "hang out" with our customers the way we do with our more intimate relations. Our friends and spouse usually know who we really are. Customers see us through the filter of commerce, contract, and compliance. The innate artificiality of the initial encounter makes trust building particularly important.

Magnetic service organizations know that suspicion can be transformed into steadfastness through the manner in which we offer to customers our authenticity, our confidence-building competence, our invitation to participate, our willingness to take a leap of faith, and our commitment to mend both association and anomaly when things go wrong.

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"Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservations."—Elton Trueblood

this material has been excerpted from

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Secrets for Creating Passionately Devoted Customers***

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