

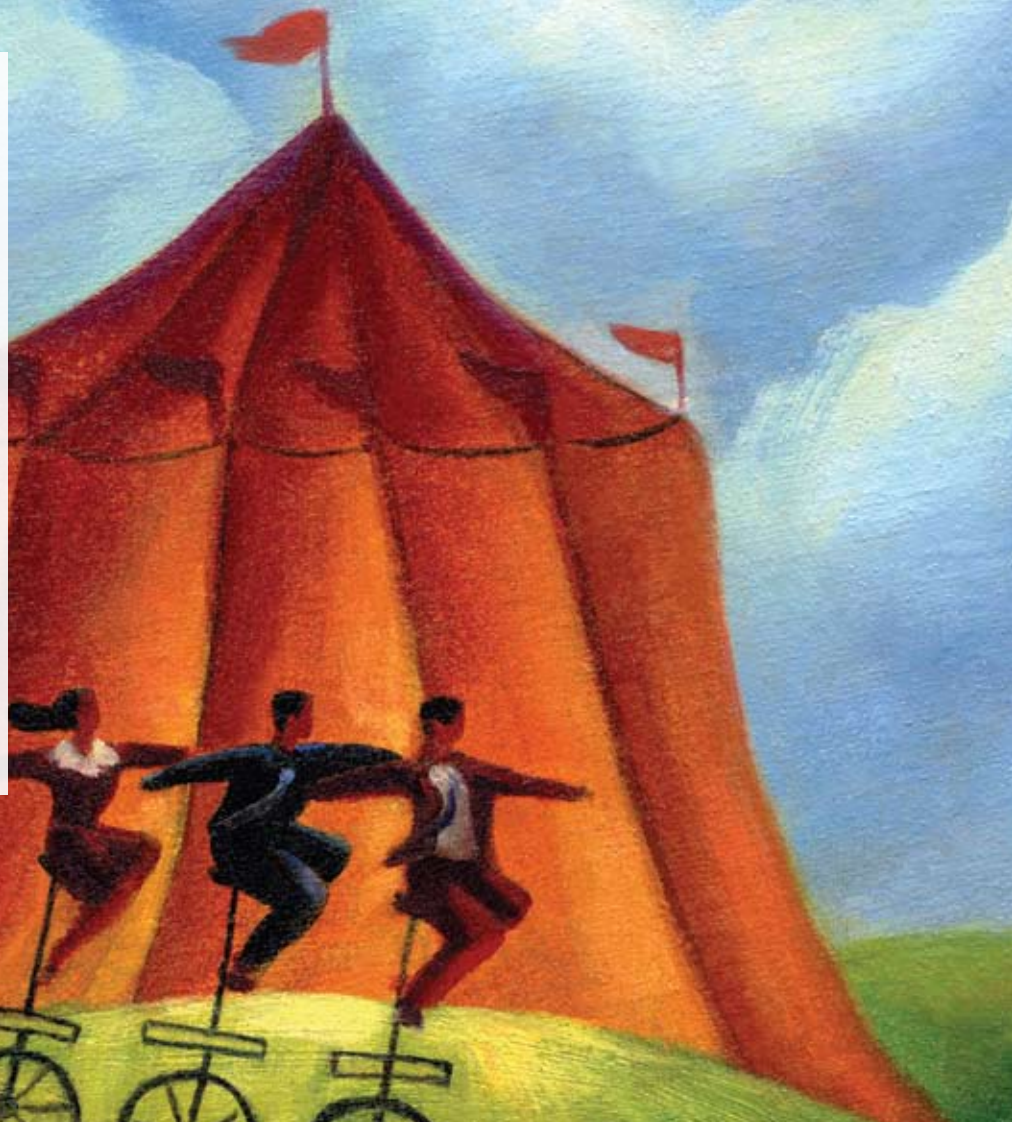
# Surprising Customers

Especially in a challenging economy, imaginative service helps you cut through the competition

By Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

## **FAST FORWARD**

- Successful businesses must provide “value-unique,” or imaginative customer service not just more or better service.
- When your is truly focused on residents and their families, imaginative customer service thrives, but it’s up to managers to inspire employees.
- Imaginative customer service only works in atmospheres of trust, where leaders and colleagues are considerate and supportive.



**IF YOU'VE EVER TAKEN THE SHUTTLE BUS BETWEEN THE ATLANTA AIRPORT TERMINAL AND THE HERTZ CAR RENTAL LOT, YOU MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED ARCHIE BOSTICK—a quirky but highly effective example of how**

today's business leaders must provide imaginative service to remain competitive—especially in tough economic times.

The first thing you notice about Archie is the welcoming grin on his face. Instead of a tip jar (baited with a handful of bucks to encourage reluctant tippers), Archie paper-clips dollar bills across the front of his shirt. Nothing subtle about his ploy—it's an attention-getter that announces the upcoming unique experience. Once on the bus, Archie delivers a stand-up comedy routine, instead of the standard warning about forgetting to turn in the car keys. He uses any excuse to break into song. ("The next time you're in Atlanta, maybe there'll be rain, and you'll be ... singin' in the rain. I'm singin' in the rain.") As Archie pulls up to the terminal, he announces, "I may never see you again. So, I want us all to say together, 'I love Hertz!'" He invariably convinces a crowd of strangers to holler, "I love Hertz!" before they get off the bus. As customers exit applauding, they realize they've just witnessed a service innovator at work.

But Archie's approach does much more than add value to that customer experience. It transforms what would otherwise be an ordinary experience into a unique experience—a strategy all people-focused businesses can use to improve operations.

In the past, standard value-added strategies delivered the sales results businesses needed—take what customers expect and add a little more. But value-added extras have gotten a lot more expensive lately, particularly as service costs continue to climb for providers. Plus, pursuing the extras can send a mixed message. What will employees think when they're told to wow residents in the morning and then informed of expense reductions in the afternoon? Tough economic times call for a new approach—imaginative customer service or "value-unique."

Indeed, value-unique is different than value-added. Ask residents what they would consider to be value-added and they focus on taking the expected to a higher level, meaning "they gave me more than I anticipated." But, value-unique is not about addition, it's about imaginative creation. When caregivers are asked to give more, they may think, "I'm already doing the best I can." But, if asked to pleasantly surprise more residents, they feel less like worker bees and more like brilliant fireflies. When employees get to create, not

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just perform, their work becomes imaginative and rewarding.

But, how do leaders foster customer service that takes a customer's breath away? What is it that leads employees to think value-unique is a legitimate customer service strategy and not just the familiar value-added? Here are five strategies for transforming the ordinary customer experience and creating a rewarding employee environment. Both results will help improve operations and ultimately help bolster the bottom line.

### 1. Be a Genuine Leader

Imaginative service leadership is about realness, not "roleness." The stereotypical leader can caught up with looking, sounding, and acting executive, which gives employees a message of "plastic power"—an approach that may engender compliance but rarely commitment. Great leaders are unimpressed with the trappings of supremacy and more interested in communicating an authentic spirit and an egalitarian style.

Imaginative customer service leaders recognize that they get from employees the attitude they project. As all leaders move in the floodlight of employee observation, their actions can telegraph either optimism or gloom; excitement or despair. When we are led by happy, upbeat people, it is much easier for us to join in the spirit.

### 2. Be Strategically Imaginative

There's a great diner scene in the movie *Five Easy Pieces*, where Jack Nicholson tries to order a plain omelet with a side order of wheat toast. He gets feedback like, "No side orders, only what's on the menu," "no substitutions," and "I don't make the rules." His solution was a creative but pricier one: "I'd like a plain omelet with a chicken salad sandwich on wheat toast—hold the chicken, hold the mayonnaise, hold the butter, bring me a check for the chicken salad sandwich and you haven't broken any rules."

Indeed, tasks are important and rules are essential. But when a senior living business is truly focused on residents and their families, imaginative customer service thrives. In these communities, leaders encourage and empower employees to put residents first; not procedures. Of course, this doesn't mean violating regulations or safety measures. Rather, it means employees are free of tunnel vision. They see the whole picture, and the resident is at its center.

### 3. Proclaim Joy

We are in a time of frugality and reduction. What typically accompanies cost controls and cutbacks are somber, gloomy employees. The receiving end of such dower dispositions is the customer with money

to spend. And, at a time customers most need a shot of enthusiasm, they are served by sleepwalking employees who seem indifferent and bored. The antidote to such melancholy is a leader with unmistakable passion and irresistible joy. Surprise customers with proclamations of joy.

As Scott Cook, founder of the software company Intuit, has aptly said, “You need

people who have a whole bunch of passion, and you can’t just order someone to be passionate about a business direction.” Passion comes from a deep sense of purpose and a commitment to a vision. Not the “ought to” sense of purpose that drives civic duty. It’s the “can’t wait to” enthusiasm of an inspired employee, and inspired senior living leaders drive that passion.

#### 4. Provide Trust

Imaginative service happens when there is an atmosphere of trust, where people are considerate and supportive. If manipulative or unfair behavior among employees is tolerated, the climate turns to one of protection. It requires leaders disciplined enough to model thoughtfulness and hold others accountable for the same.

Trustful environments nurture the appropriate risk taking that leads to novel solutions and refreshing customer experiences. Leaders who trust view error as a learning opportunity and failure as an invitation to try another approach. They empower and encourage. They are open about their own foibles and upfront when they make mistakes.

#### 5. Preserve Integrity

S. Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-Fil-A, the sixth largest fast-food chain in the United States, is a deeply religious person. Like 1924 Olympic gold medal runner Eric Liddel’s refusal to compete on the sabbath, which led to the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Cathy elects to keep his business closed on Sundays. While competitors KFC, McDonald’s, Burger King, and others serve customers seven days a week, Cathy has gained favor in the marketplace for remaining faithful to his values.

Imaginative customer service leaders are grounded and laced in no-exceptions integrity. They show their nobility when they courageously tell the truth, relentlessly do what they say they will do, and gallantly own up to their mistakes. Indeed, senior living executives are prime candidates for leading imaginative customer service. As ALFA President & CEO Rick Grimes often reminds us via e-mails and tweets ([www.twitter.com/RickGrimes](http://www.twitter.com/RickGrimes)): Don’t waste this crisis! Take this sluggish economic opportunity to provide imaginative customer service and then, when the economy recovers, sit back and enjoy the results.

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