

Bridging the Customer Trust Gap BY CHIP R. BELL AND JOHN R. PATTERSON

“I’ll be back to get you when school is out,” a parent promises as her youngster exits the car with book bag in tow. So begins an all-important matter of trust between child and parent. The level of trust that results depends on whether past experiences are more “Mom [or father] always comes” or “Sorry, I’m late again; traffic was terrible.”

Customers are exactly like the youth in the all-familiar story. Service begins with a promise made or implied. The manner in which an organization manages the promise determines the degree of trust in every other component of the service encounter. As a frequent flyer said, “No matter how friendly the flight attendant, how delicious the meal, or how comfortable the seat, if the plane lands in the wrong city, I am not a happy camper.” Granted, great service recovery can convert an aggrieved customer into a satisfied customer, but the residue of betrayal will leave a disappointed customer perpetually on guard for a time when letdown reoccurs.

The trust gap is the emotional space between hope and evidence; between expectation and fulfillment. Insecurity and doubt should not be features of the trust gap. But requiring customers to walk on the high wire of faith is clearly an inescapable component of every service encounter.

Dr. Leonard Berry, famed author and marketing professor at Texas A&M University, has done compelling research on service quality. His work repeatedly affirms this finding: reliability is the most important quality customers use to gauge the quality of their service experiences. David Aaker, renowned brand researcher and professor of marketing strategy at the University of California at Berkeley, confirms a similar research finding: brands retain their influence power only so long as customers associate iron-clad trust with the brand.

Smart organizations know that trust is an animated, always-in-motion dimension of all relationships. As far as the customer trust gap, every service experience we have alters our expectations for future service. 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, and pledge must be in perpetual motion.



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Great service providers know that treating trust as a moving target requires an active, ever-changing relationship with customers. If customer expectations are part of what trust is made of, and those expectations are in perpetual motion, service providers must find ways to stay current. They perpetually work to look at service through customers’ eyes. This does not mean an organization must be completely accurate 100 percent of the time—customers know service providers are not able to read their minds. However, it does mean that the relationship with customers must have built-in ways for updating.

TAKING THE ANGST OUT OF CUSTOMER HOPES

Why are we, as customers, so frequently let down by some aspect of our service experience? Part of the reason lies at the core of human relationships—to err is human. But the lion’s share of fault comes from organizations taking for granted their responsibility to practice persistent trust-building.

Customers do not expect service providers to be

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perfect. However, they do expect them to care enough to manage the trust net so customers retain unwavering trust. Without trust, it is somewhat like asking customers to take a walk on the high wire without a net or, worse, asking a customer to take the walk blindfolded, uncertain if there really is a net.

Examine the companies that make the “best in...” lists and there will be unmistakable understanding of trust poured into their practices. Trust comes from a number of caring actions present in all their customer relationships or service encounters.

CARING ACTIONS Customers trust people and organizations that repeatedly and sincerely demonstrate they care. When Nordstrom joyfully allows customers to return merchandise that disappoints, it is proof that Nordstrom cares more about the worth of the relationship than the economics of the transaction. If you buy a defective computer from Dell Computer, it sends you a replacement computer and box to use to return the defective one, not the other way around.

Trust in all relationships begins with risk...the gamble that experience will not fall short of expectation. Trust is gained through encounters that meet or exceed hopes. These two facts insinuate that the sooner customers get irrefutable evidence they made a good bet, the faster trust occurs. This is why successful automobile salespeople follow up immediately after the customer takes delivery on a new car. Follow-up is more than an antidote to buyer’s remorse; it is an assertive reminder that a strong and caring trust net is under all future encounters. Placing “guarantees” in the brand promise plus customer-friendly return practices can accomplish a similar role.

What makes up a caring experience?

Competence. Customers need to know (or perceive) that service providers not only have the commitment to deliver great service, they possess the capacity to do so as well. For instance, Home Depot’s early claim to fame came through putting in their aisles employees from the trades. Instead of dealing

with a clerk in the plumbing section, customers enjoyed the advice of a real plumber. Best Buy’s Geek Squad and well-trained sales associates dramatically raise customers’ evaluation of Best Buy because it signals they are dealing with experts, not order takers.

Core Protection. Trust also comes when customers sense the organization is “taking care of the basics.” In the case of that school child, showing up late at the end of the school day driving a flashy new car isn’t likely to erase the pain of the child’s unanticipated wait. As far as customers, core protection means the service provider is ever-vigilant to ensure that the customer gets what he or she came to the organization for.

Core protection means a noticeable effort is expended on taking great care of the core components of what customers expect.

Customer trust organizations make sure the basics are always done perfectly. For instance, Southwest Airlines receives great marks for customer service, not because they do glitzy extras but because they do the airline basics very well—landing on time in the right city safely with luggage in tow. They are the only major U.S. airline without an incident involving fatalities.

Constraint-Free. Promise-keeping requires an organization working without silos to ensure seamless operation, flawless handoffs, and constraint-free execution. Customers want to believe the organization they go to is designed and managed around their needs, especially since they are the ones providing the funds needed for the company to survive.

USAA Insurance is one of the service superstars because of seamless execution. Let’s look at how USAA delivers this.

Let’s say you wrote USAA a letter about a claim. A few days later, you called to follow up. Mary answers your call. You say, “Mary, I wrote you a few days ago about a claim.” And Mary stuns you by saying, “Yes, I am looking at your letter right now. You were inquiring about...” USAA scans every piece of correspondence—thousands every day—so they are available in an instant to every customer service agent. Interview

USAA customers and the most frequent word you'll hear is "trust." The accolades are borne from USAA's making it "super easy" to get service and completely irrelevant which server you get. Compare that claim to your next trip to the grocery store checkout line!

Consistency. Consistency reminds customers that effectiveness was neither accidental nor unique to a particular person or touch point. Consistency is posited by wise organizations as a vital component of great customer service. However, we too often forget the rationale for consistency and the major role it plays in trust-building. Consistency is all about promise-keeping evidence. When the hotel always has a friendly greeter at the front door no matter the property, when the fast food restaurant always has a clean bathroom at all locations, and when the flight attendant always underscores the importance of safety, we are comforted. Consistency promotes the continuous renewal of trust.

One key tool to insuring consistency is a service vision—a description of the enterprise's unique or signature experience it seeks to create for customers at every touch point. An effective service vision serves as the lens through which every part of the service experience is examined and aligned. Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company's service vision is: "We pledge to provide the finest personal service and facilities for our guests who will always enjoy a warm, relaxed yet refined ambience. The Ritz-Carlton experience enlivens the senses, instills well-being, and fulfills even the unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests."

PUTTING THE "US" BACK IN TRUST In the end, trust comes through relationships. What makes service different from product is the presence of feeling, not just form. While we expect every Model 423B trash compactor from the same manufacturer to be identical, we know the next cashier will not be a carbon copy of the last. As customers, we admire the absence of variance in products; we find that same trait in service to be robotic and mechanical. We like our products uniform but we want our service unique—crafted just for us.

This reality underscores the power of trust handmade by people.

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Handmade trust is fashioned through the small acts of communication and caring that make customers feel every service person is on their team, not on the opposition's squad. When the mechanic takes the time to explain all of your car repair options—from the cheaper quick fix to the more expensive long-term solution, without trying to "cross-sell" you on a list of other needed repairs they just happened to discover while under the hood—it recalls the "us" in trust. When the pilot takes the time to explain why your plane has sat on the tarmac 15 minutes past its scheduled departure and provides a new estimated take-off time—rather than leave us sitting in the dark, wondering if there's been a terrorist incident—the pilot begins to build a relationship of trust.

Insuring that trust is transmitted to customers through the variance of relationships underscores the importance of leadership. Employees learn how to serve customers in part through the manner they are served by their leaders. Leaders who care about employees beget employees who care about customers. *MW*

Chip Bell is a senior partner of The Chip Bell Group headquartered near Dallas. John Patterson is president of Atlanta-based Progressive Insights, Inc. Their new book is Customer Loyalty Guaranteed! Create, Lead, and Sustain Remarkable Service. For more information: www.loyaltycreator.com

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