

Service Leaders

They lead with simplicity.



by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

GOOD MORNING! WELCOME TO OUR *USAToday* route. Now, if I should miss you, please call me at the number below. I'll personally re-deliver your paper as soon as possible. If you have a complaint that you and I can't solve, you may call my district manager directly. His name and number are also below. Thanks a lot. We really appreciate your business."

This is the letter to the *USAToday* home delivery Chip received with his first paper. It was crafted, copied, and conveyed by the local delivery person, Hazel. Look at its tone and message! The top concern of newspaper customers is "not getting a paper." Hazel's letter deals with that loyalty driver up front. It leaves you the clear impression your business is truly valued. No letter written in legalese with a fancy letterhead and logo—just a simple note from the heart to a new friend.

Customers don't require *fanfare and froufrou* to know they're important. In fact, organizations that overcomplicate service tend to spend more time maintaining processes than focusing on customers. Simplicity means removing all hassle from customers' experiences. Too often added complexity rolls down from top; it rarely emerges from the bottom. Service with simplicity requires leaders more interested in relationships than rules.

Focus on what matters most. Great service leaders ensure everyone knows what attributes or features of service most drive customer loyalty. While *safety* is rated the *most important feature* among airline passengers, it does not drive their loyalty. We assume safety. We select one airline over another based on one-to-one communications; a positive customer experience from ticket purchase to luggage handling; and, employee behavior.

Quick service restaurant chains know *location* is their most critical feature. Yet, *location* only wins if you're

the only game in town. When it comes to insuring customer loyalty, *customer service* beats everything else, including the food and the price. Customers assume the food will be as they expect and the price fair. Those are tickets to play, not tools to differentiate. Hazel knew that concern about non-delivery was a critical driver of loyalty.

Great leaders talk most about what truly matters—not trivial sideline issues like budgets, procedures, policies, and minutia. These sideline issues are important, but, *subject air time* and *passionate communications* telegraph the real story. Show grave concern about the budget while ignoring a conversation about its impact on customers and you will get penny-wise, pound-foolish front-line decisions. Help employees focus on the mission like owners and you get responsible focus—taking care of the customer *and* the organization.

Provide easy escape routes. Customers should never have to *demand* to "speak with your manager!" Service experiences should have *easy escape routes* so customers know from the gitgo they're not boxed into one person, one rule, or one approach. Hazel provided easy access to her manager as a part of the introduction. Should there be an irresolvable problem (only a remote chance with Hazel), the customer would only need to make a simple request for a higher court review. How easy is it for your customers to complain to someone who can effect restitution and improvement?

Look at your service processes. If customers can't get exactly what they need the way they want it, are there alternatives? Examine the phone cues—if your system lacks a "punch 7 to talk with a real-life person," you are set up for customer ire. Customers expect your service to be laced with options.

Simplicity leaders look at service processes through the customers' eyes. When John Longstreet was GM of the Dallas-based Harvey Hotel, he held weekly "What's Stupid Around Here" meetings with employees, often inviting a vendor and hotel guest to attend. The learning shaped improvements in

his guests' experience and told employees their ideas and suggestions were valued. John also held quarterly focus groups with the taxi drivers who often transported guests to the airport after check-out because he knew guests would be more candid with them.

Make it simple. Service with *simplicity* comes from taking an "empathy walk" in order to view the entire service experience through the customer's eyes. The customer-centered inspection helps discover the things that make sense inside out; but appear completely absurd outside in. It includes helping employees focus on the customer's *goal*, not just on their *request*.

Well-meaning service people are often stopped by a request outside their script. When we ask—what would happen if you provided the item, they reply, "I'd get in trouble" or "the computer would reject the order" or "I'd be fired." Leaders who handcuff employees with silly rules frustrate customers and emasculate employees. Enslavement yields a lack of passion, pride, and professionalism.

Show your gratitude.

Thank you are the two most important words in the English language. Yet, how often are you served, pay your hard-earned money, and end up doing the thanking? Like Hazel, let customers know that you never take them for granted.

An effective *Thank You* conveys a feeling. We've all heard *thanks* knowing there was little sincerity. *Thanks* means *communicating gratitude in a fashion that makes customers feel your authenticity*. Most customer relationships don't end in dispute—they wither away from disregard and inattention. Neglect is more dangerous than strife; indifference more costly than error. Customer relationships are fueled by affirmation, attention, and care.

Great simplicity leaders show the gratitude to employees they expect them to show to customers.

Great customer service is *simply* focusing on what's important to customers, managing the details to keep the experience simple, and letting them know they are valued. Put great leaders behind the front line, and your people will provide customers with service daily that is *simply* the best! LE

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ACTION: Lead with simplicity and sincerity.

