



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

BUSINESSSS GROWTH: EARNING ARDENT ADMIRERS AND MAKING MOM PROUD

Jeanne Bliss

Necessity may be the mother of invention. But mothers are an inspiration to virtuous business growth.

Their no strings attached treatment reminds us of what pulls us toward people who have our best interests at heart. The best companies focus on helping customers achieve their goals—and grow as a result. Like our moms they are selfless, brave, and think of us first. They start with our life and earn the right to grow by proving with their actions, not their words, that they are in our corner.

Our opportunity is to become this kind of company is to **design for “no strings attached” life improvements**. It is this expansion of moving past what is *required* to what is *desired* that changes and elevates companies.

Make-mom-proud companies prove with their actions that **they have their customers’ best interest in mind**. This is at the heart of companies that grow most organically—earning ardent admirers who grow their business for them. They earn a bigger piece of the pie, because they improve customers’ lives.



This is a simple idea to accept, but oh-so-hard to execute. Operating at this level remains elusive until a paradoxical realization kicks in: **To achieve your goals, you need to help others achieve theirs.** Taking this approach to customer advocacy and growth goes well beyond “whack-a-moling” problems away to imagining the people and the emotions and the lives that you serve.

To take this approach to **growth means opening everyone up to a new order** of design and decision-making. At global shoe manufacturer Cole Haan’s innovation center, for example, they imagine your life in shoes. Designers and innovators obsess about what you do throughout your day, your week, and your year, in every kind of shoe. They layer in both the physical and emotional baggage you carry while you head from point A to point B. Where and when, for example, do women start feeling the pinch of those high heels? Scott Patt, Cole Haan’s vice president of design and innovation, summed it up like this for *Fast Company*: “The work we do here is driven by the belief that the work we are doing can improve people’s lives.”

This imagining of people’s lives was how we grew the business at Lands’ End, where I found a home early in my career. When we started making swimsuits for women, we began with the emotion (oh, the emotion!) of swimsuit shopping and looking at ourselves in the mirror, tugging and pulling. We asked our best customers if they would partner with us to build a better suit, and ended up flying in hundreds of women to Dodgeville to join us at the big Olympic pool in the Lands’ End activity center. There, we watched them get in and out of the pool and swim laps. Where they yanked, we changed, and where they pulled, we fixed.

We looked back on our lives as kids playing with the shipping boxes as much as the toys, and got inspired to print the head and tail of a cow, a sheep or a horse on the flaps so kids could ride their Lands’ End box all over the house! More than thirty years later, people still tell me about those boxes. **We started with imagining our customer’s life.** We yearned to deserve customer love. We started there and worked for it.

Designing experiences and products from the customers' point-of-view is a virtuous way to grow. And it takes leadership and commitment and unity to challenge the status quo and rebuild from the outside in.

This means you must **flip the leadership and operational mindset** from designing for what you want to *get* from customers, to designing for what you want to *give* them—so they can achieve their goals, so they can *see and feel* value.

Designing operations, processes, products, and services to improve customers' lives requires a shift in the origin of design: moving from internal, company-driven priorities and focus, to external customer emotions, priorities, and needs. As a result, experiences designed to deliver on customer priorities emerge. And success can be measured not only in business results, but customer sentiment and story-telling about how the company helped to achieve their goals. And yes, improve their lives.

There are many reinventions, transformations, and disruptions that have the ability to grow companies and draw employees and customers closer. Some are big, some small. **What matters in all of these stories is their starting place.** They all begin with the lives, emotions, and needs of customers as the inspiration for design or the impetus of change.

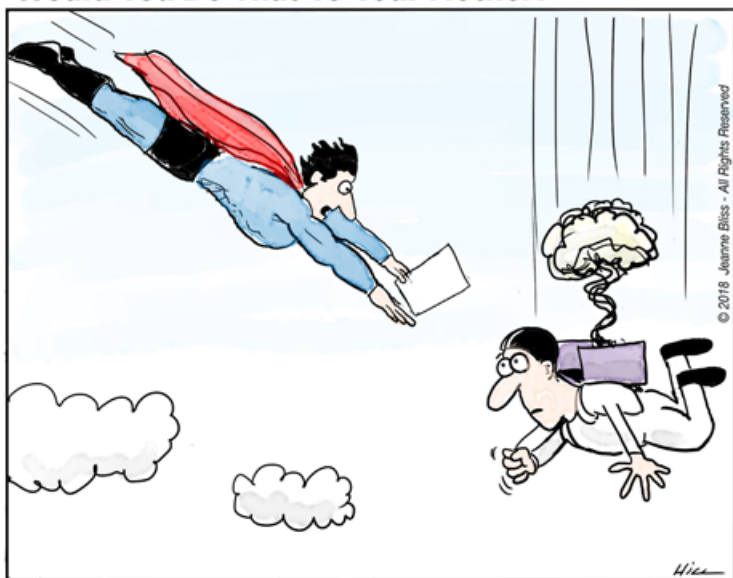
The best companies focus on helping customers achieve their goals—and grow as a result.

1. Design Humanity into Your Welcome

How we're greeted as customers tells us about a lot about the treatment we're about to receive. Whether it's placing a call to a company, checking into a hotel, walking into a retailer, or visiting the doctor... that first moment of contact cements it. And, as you're standing there or on the line waiting, you get that little catch in your throat waiting to be acknowledged. **What we all yearn for is to be recognized and welcomed.** And to have our priorities understood and acted on. Yet it's often the processing of paperwork or checking in customers or patients that takes precedence over the welcome. It's all too easy to slip into an ultra-efficient routine that inadvertently focuses on internal processes rather than human right in front of you. Make your welcome about your customer's life first, not about your paperwork or process.

Would you invite your mom to an event at your home, then give her a number and ask her to take a seat? Of course not. You'd welcome her in, ask how she was doing and make her comfortable. You'd make sure she knew you acknowledged her importance.

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"PLEASE FILL OUT THESE FORMS FIRST."

Hyatt hotels focused their human centered redesign on that moment of recognition. CEO Mark Hoplamazian said that this work began when he personally observed Hyatt's check-in experience from the perspective of the customer, rather than the hotel chain's. As a result, Hyatt spent two years developing a system that redirects the front desk clerk's initial focus with a customer from keying in the reservation to a greeting and welcome. The redesign has led to an increased focus on hiring engaged people at that front counter. Now, empathy and a human connection, rather than the sound of those clicking keys, are hallmarks of a Hyatt hotel welcome.

The great opportunity here is to redesign your welcome—to rethink your “hello” with a welcome, eye contact, and calling customers by name. This all sounds intuitive, but the truth is this is the exception rather than the rule. ContactPoint Client Research has found that, on average, employees ask or welcome customers by name only twenty-one percent of the time.

Be the company that always honors the person first. Before you do anything else, acknowledge the customer reaching out to you. Care genuinely. Know his or her name. This small acknowledgement paves the way for real relationships that go beyond transactions. They set the Make-mom-proud companies apart, and they don't cost a thing. Humanity trumps paperwork.

2. Design Grace into Customer Rules & Requirements

Allow for human error, and design in empathy and care. **To earn your place, offer grace.** Know the times that your customers are vulnerable and lend a helping hand—because it's the right thing to do.

For example, in Uganda, women entrepreneurs often experience a vicious no-win cycle. They take out loans with such high rates, short cycles for repayment, and late fee penalties that no matter how hard they work, they really never get ahead. Now, that's beginning to change: The Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) decided to give women entrepreneurs a chance by giving qualifying women an extended grace period for repayment, and improved loan terms based on how long the business has generated an income. Women who repay their loan within the first twelve months pay no interest.

Mercedes Benz wires in grace when it learns that a lessee of one of their vehicles has died. Families receive assistance that says, “We know this is a tough time. We want to help.” Bereaved family members receive a condolence letter and a leather journal and pen to help record all of the tasks ahead. And then they offer grace: Mercedes offers families a ten-day time period to return the vehicle, in which all fees are suspended. Alternatively, the family can continue the lease, transferring it to a qualifying family member. They waive all transfer fees.

Finally, Wholesome Wave extends grace and support to a special category of vulnerable customers in the healthcare industry. They’ve created a national network to enable doctors to write fruit and vegetable prescriptions to people on strict budgets. They have partnered with over 1,400 farmers, markets, and grocery stores who redeem these “produce prescriptions,” helping participants greatly reduce their risk for diet-related diseases such as obesity, hypertension, or type-2 diabetes.

This is our opportunity to choose to build empathetic actions into our operating model, to wire in acts of kindness and humanity, and to have knowledge of customer frailties (leading to new and innovative products and services). Can you identify the opportunities across your customer journey where you can **stand out by stepping up**? When can you offer an extension of what your company stands for by operating differently?

The more grace and empathy you give, the more you’ll receive. And the more your employees will love working for a company that extends grace, because it’s the right thing to do. Make-Mom-Proud companies proactively design responses that deliver empathy and care. It’s how they weave humanity into their operating model.

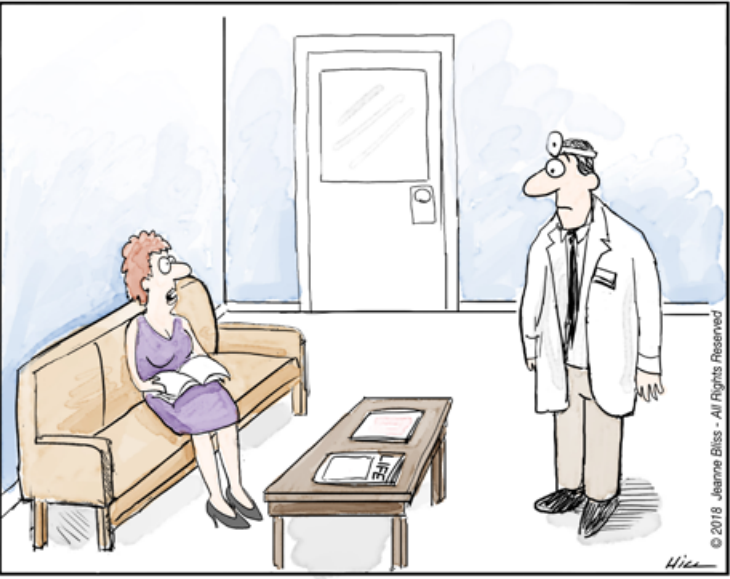
3. Design with Emotions in Mind

Find selfless ways of helping to assuage nerves, worry, or concern in customers' lives.

Often what sets apart the companies that we love is that they **obsess over how customers feel** in certain situations. They work at understanding the emotions that are native to customer experiences, and use that understanding to redesign experiences to deliver an outcome that flips the negative emotion to a positive. Emotional understanding of customer experiences is often leads companies to their most innovative business practices.

Make-mom-proud companies strive for emotion-driven innovation. It what sets them apart as people. Their own natural desire for connection drives them to **develop products and services that support the human condition**. They think about their customers' emotions first.

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"IF I CHIP IN SOME MONEY, WILL YOU GET NEW MAGAZINES?"

For example, Cleveland Clinic used their understanding of the stress, worry and anxiety of parents with infants in their neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) to innovate the practice of installing cameras in the NICU units of their hospitals. Placed over each baby's bed, their "NicView" calms those stressful emotions, and brings joy to new parents. Similarly, The Mayo Clinic knows medical equipment is sometimes scary looking for kids, so they hide CPR equipment behind pictures in children's exam and hospital rooms.

Restaurateur Danny Meyer knows that tipping stirs up emotions among both restaurant patrons and restaurant team members, so he eliminated tips so people can focus on the food and the service. Similarly, Zappos Adaptive was designed around the emotions of their customers with physical disabilities. Through this initiative, Zappos fulfills its mission of creating footwear that causes feelings of self-sufficiency and pride for their customers.

Not surprisingly, these practices are yielding results. Both The Disney Institute and Gallup research tell us that companies who practice emotion-driven innovation earn customer advocates that are three times more likely to recommend. They are also immune from the competition. And with all of this comes greater sales growth—up to eighty five percent higher than competitors who have not engaged emotionally with customers.

This is our opportunity to understand the emotions that come along with customers' journeys with us. Once we understand how our customers feel, we can devote our energy to designing out fear, frustration, worry, and concern.

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4. Design in “We’ve Got You” Moments, and Invest in Being There

There’s nothing like that panic that builds inside of us when we know our options are diminishing. **We hate feeling alone** at those times, hate being left to our own devices to figure it out.

This is our opportunity to give our customers the sense that we “have them” in moments when they need us. The Make-mom-proud companies have their customers’ backs because they obsess about knowing when customers feel like they’ve slipped between the cracks. They create customer rescue plans ready to be acted upon when needed. **They plan for customers needing them.**

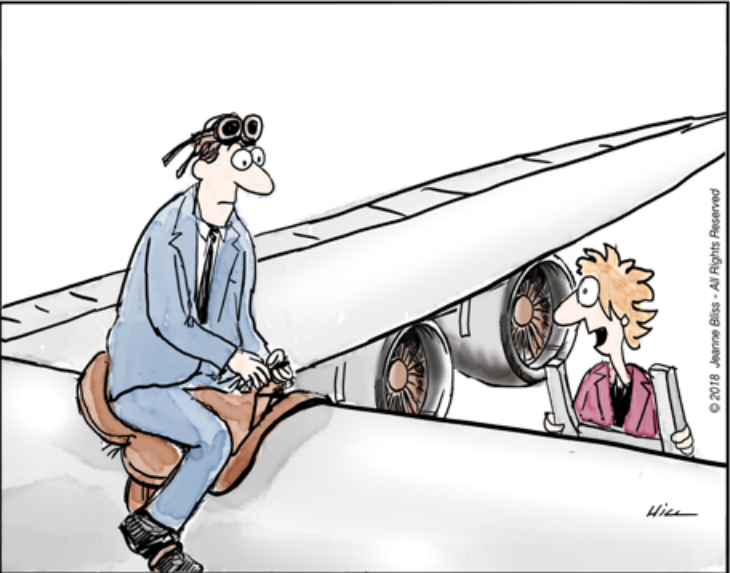
Clothing manufacturer and retailer Patagonia becomes part of their customers’ lives by going the extra mile with “no strings attached” support. They drive around the country in a van that looks like a big cedar barrel—the sole purpose of which is to help college kids keep their clothing going for them. Patagonia’s “Worn Wear College Tour” travels to colleges around the U.S. to repair clothing for free and teach students how to fix their own clothes. And they’ll do this for any brand in these kids’ closets—not just their own. Patagonia wants to be there for students when they need them, in that time in their life when they need to get every mile they can out of that pair of pants or shirt. Is this something these students knew that they needed? They wouldn’t have said so if you asked them on a survey.

But this is the point of the Make-mom-proud companies. They create a bond with customers because they are there even when people didn’t know they needed them, just like mom. **Are you there for customers? Do you “have” them?**

A big part of “being there” is developing the culture so that everybody holds themselves accountable to this promise to customers. E-V-E-R-Y-O-N-E. That also means giving permission, tools, training, and trust—so people can act when their customer is slipping into quicksand. Or when they see a moment for celebration. Or someone’s just having a bad day.

For example, *everyone* at Alaska Airlines is held accountable, given permission, and trusted to help a customer in need with their “Empowerment Toolkits.” Where other companies might hold employees accountable to that same mission, but give them little leeway to act, Alaska moves in the other direction. Ben Minicucci, Alaska’s President and COO gives everyone permission to act at work like they’d act at home: **“Do what you think is right,”** he tells employees. **“We trust you. You’ll never get in trouble for making a decision. And we don’t want you to call the supervisor.”**

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“WE MISSED YOUR CONNECTION. BUT SEE, I TOLD YOU I WOULD GET YOU ON THIS FLIGHT.”

Everyone, including your baggage handlers, the people at departures, your gate agent, flight crew, service reps at the airport, and those on the phone are prepared for the vulnerable moments when humanity means the most. The airline travel experience is fraught with potential opportunities for customer frustration and disappointment, and this is when personally connecting and showing up as human is most critical.

“Connect first, then decide how to act” is the approach employees are guided to take. Each is encouraged to “find the story of the customer, and create a personal connection.” That informs how they decide to act and how to personalize how they solve a challenging customer experience, such as a delayed or cancelled flight.

Based on loose guidelines, people are trusted to customize miles, money, restaurant vouchers, and fee waivers—just some of the gestures proactively given to them to use without asking anyone. Customer Service Agents receive special training in how to humanly help and have more options in addition to their toolkit gestures they are free to act upon. Mobile devices provide them updates on customer situations and tools to help them. For example, when customers agree to be bumped to another flight, instead of setting compensation limits, employees are encouraged to make their best judgment based on the situation and the best human response.

Think of all of the ways that you can let your customers know you've got their backs. Plan how you'll rescue them in moments of hardship when they need you. But also plan for the times when, just like Patagonia, they didn't know they needed you, so that you can **create moments your customers can't live without.**

This is our opportunity to give our customers the sense that we “have them” in moments when they need us.

5. Dare To Design Out What's Always Been Done

Make-mom-proud companies **take a human-centered approach** to engaging with customers. They develop products and services based on their careful understanding of what customers desire and seek to achieve. They learn how people live their lives. They understand customer needs, creating a personal and human connection to them. They **imagine customers living their lives**, and design experiences to improve them.

Careem, the ride-sharing service in the Middle East, for example, thought beyond the borders of other car-riding services in order to find out what was important to meet the needs of their passengers. Upon learning that riders who become parents are uneasy about ride-sharing and child and infant safety, they took responsibility to deliver peace of mind to them.

To support this growing population of customers, Careem Kids was born. On their app, customers can select “Careem Kids” as the car type, and a dedicated fleet pre-installed with a child seat has been established for this service. “When our customers book a service with us, our primary objective is to simplify their lives, and when it comes to parents booking a car for their children, we want them to enjoy complete peace of mind”, Aura Lunde, GM of Careem UAE, said when describing the service. Like many of the Make-mom-proud companies, Careem achieves their goals by helping customers achieve theirs. Through this new experience inspired by the needs of parent riders, customer demand has doubled the “Careem Kids” service.

The Dorchester Collection, which includes such iconic properties as The Beverly Hills Hotel on Sunset Boulevard, Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, and Hôtel Plaza Athénée in Paris designs their luxury services with a blend of both precision and intuitiveness to cater to customer preferences and desires.

For example, delving into a pattern of social media reviews and consultations with kitchen staff in their restaurants uncovered that 80-90% of breakfast customers customize their order to cater to their dietary restrictions or lifestyle. Normally the first set of actions upon reviewing such complaints would be to amend the menu. But recognizing the lifestyle and highly catered experiences of their guests, The Dorchester Collection reimagined breakfast. Now, at the Beverly Hills Hotel, there is no breakfast menu. The waiter asks what you'd like that morning—and whatever your palette desires—it will be yours. Just reading complaints might have driven action to change menu items, rather than the breakthrough action of no menu at all. Ana Brant, who is the Global Director of Guest Experience and Innovation at the Dorchester Collection, calls this the “relentless pursuit of disruptive insights.”

This is our opportunity to move our priorities out and move customer's goals in. For example, do you know, I mean *truly* know, across your customer journey, what your customers' goals are in each stage? Are you aware of their life's realities in each? And their desires, needs, concerns? Do you operationalize to meet these customer goals?

As customers, we kind of feel like this is our time to get what we want. But the fact of the matter is, a lot of organizational goo, data, culture, and processes have to be worked through to get to this state for any company. So, as your mom would say... pace yourself. Break it into bite-sized pieces. Test and learn. Iterate.

But know that customers will be grateful the closer you can get to all of this. And while we have a lot of newfangled words to describe this new work, when you boil it down, give me choices that jive with what my life has at its core: respect.

“A mother is a person who seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announces she never did care for pie.”—Tenneva Jordan

That quote by Tenneva Jordan is at the heart of how the Make-mom-proud companies earn their spot in the marketplace, and their customers’ admiration. They step aside and make customer priorities their own. They operate at an elevated level, guided by the belief that achieving their business goals is attached to how much they assist customers in achieving their own goals. As a result, they establish a new order of design and decision-making that shows up to customers and employees—and earns their advocacy and admiration, and business growth.

So ask yourself, does this resemble the path your company is on? Are you earning the right to growth by improving customers’ lives and contributing to their growth? **Are you committing across your company to the fearless redesign of what’s always been done—inspired by the fact that to achieve your goals, you need to help others achieve theirs?** 📌



Info



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About the author

Jeanne Bliss pioneered the role of the Chief Customer Officer, holding the first ever CCO role for over 20 years at Lands' End, Microsoft, Coldwell Banker and Allstate Corporations. She has driven achievement of 95 percent loyalty rates, improving customer experiences across 50,000-person organizations. She is now the President of CustomerBliss, where her clients include AAA, St. Jude's Children's Hospital, Johnson & Johnson, The US Postal System, and Brooks Brothers. *Would You Do That to Your Mother?* is Jeanne's fourth book.



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