



Humanize It

Bring a five-star sparkle to your customer interactions and watch your business flourish.

By Leonardo Inghilleri & Micah Solomon

The best thing you can do for your business is not about new technology, brute force, or first-mover advantage. It's nothing like that.

It's something simpler.

It's something more dependable.

Humanize each customer interaction in order to turn your product or service into much more than a commodity.

In your customer's mind, commodities are interchangeable and replaceable.

Humanized relationships are not.

YOU HATE FACELESS, DISRESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS. SO DO YOUR CUSTOMERS.

Business life becomes better—and more profitable—when you take the time to learn about each of your customers personally, and then use simple systems to leverage that knowledge into *enduring business relationships*.

Why is this essential?

Unless you have unique technology and a small army to roam the globe enforcing your patents, your current business model *is* going to be knocked off, and sooner rather than later in this era of accelerating change. This makes commoditization the *primary* threat to a business in today's economy.

More why:

The speed with which information spreads on the Internet can turn even your “least important” customer into a public relations land mine—or gold mine.

- » Tom Farmer and Shane Atchison were denied “guaranteed” hotel rooms at 2 AM. They formatted their complaint to the hotel as a bitter (but humorous) PowerPoint presentation and sent copies to a couple of friends online, who then sent it along to a couple of their friends, and on and on it spread. Within weeks the hotel had a public relations fiasco on its hands.
- » Online shoe merchant Zappos provided special help to a woman who couldn't handle their return shipping procedures in the immediate aftermath of her mother's death; the good word spread quickly throughout the blogosphere.

Systematically use relationship moments with your customers to build your brand and your bankbook...not imperil them.

OK, *but how?*

Humanizing isn't rocket surgery. Let's get started.

Many of the principles we're going to lay out here were first developed in the 1980s to transform customer service at The Ritz-Carlton. They have since been used, to great effect, by Lexus and other great brands. They're simple and they're solid, and they'll work for you, too.

(You say you aren't in a glamour industry? Micah isn't, either.)

A humanizing approach is how Micah transformed a small manufacturing company called Oasis in a low-margin industry into a renowned and unusually profitable enterprise. That transformation earned his company Seth Godin "Purple Cow" recognition and attracted the attention of *Success* magazine—and, ultimately, some serious capital. The transformation happened because all customers—fancy and not—respond to the human touch.)

PRINCIPLE 1. BUILD SIMPLE HUMANIZING SYSTEMS.

To start building the customer service systems at The Ritz-Carlton, the staff was given notepads to write down guest preferences and concerns. The goal then was to anticipate those preferences *every time* the guest arrived at a Ritz, *anywhere in the world*.

What kind of preferences? Anything, really. One guest was only comfortable with hypoallergenic pillows and 10 boxes of tissues in her room. Another, who was trying to stop drinking, wanted the mini-bar emptied prior to his arrival—a request the staff certainly would want to honor on *each* subsequent visit without the need of an awkward reminder!

In every industry, the customer information you should capture will be a little different.

At Oasis, Micah (who works with independent music-industry types) successfully personalizes what is otherwise a commodity business by using software to not only capture preferences, but also *what makes the customer unique*: what instrument and genre (even sub-sub-sub genre) of music a customer plays, what big names she's played with, and what industry awards make her the proudest to date.

Keep it simple, don't track too much stuff, and have it right at the fingertips of your frontline staff.

This is crucial, but not complicated. Simplicity is what makes a humanizing system sustainable.

Regardless of your industry, there is one additional humanizing system you're going to need to track: **changes in the level of your customer's happiness over the length of her interaction with you.**

How you track this will depend on the role time plays in your business—how long your product or service takes to deliver, *and* how long until a customer (hopefully) reorders.

One of the simplest customer happiness tracking systems is used at Patrick O'Connell's acclaimed Inn at Little Washington. Each server discreetly notes the level of guest happiness at the beginning of a meal, from 1 to 10. The goal of all who work there is to then bring the mood of the guests up to at least a 9 before they hit the limo for the ride home.*

**So discreetly, in fact, that we've never noticed them slyly assessing us or logging their conclusions, no matter how often we sit down for "research" at Patrick's delicious facility. But he does 'fess up to his method in Harvard Business Review, March 2006 if you want all the details.*

**PRINCIPLE 2. TO ASSIST AN UPSET CUSTOMER,
TRANSFORM YOURSELF INTO LEONARDO'S ITALIAN MAMA:**

"Oh my darling, look at what happened. Oh you skinned your knee on that walkway, my little bambino; do let me kiss your ouchie. Let's watch a little TV. Oh, and here's some ice cream for you while I disinfect that awful wound!"*

The reaction to complaints in conventional companies is nothing like that.

It's:

"Let's sort out the facts of the situation. What was the angle of the cement sidewalk at time of impact, and were you wearing proper protective clothing per the user's manual at the time your knee impacted the walkway?"

And:

"Were you exceeding the sidewalk speed limit?"

**THIS JUST IN FROM HR: DO NOT—REPEAT, DO NOT—OFFER TO KISS ANY CUSTOMER KNEES!*

Here is the a-b-c method of Instant Customer Pacification*:

- a) “Please forgive me.”
- b) “Let me address your issues.”
- c) Then, fix it in 20 minutes or follow up in 20 minutes to tell what your progress is.

Caution: Step a) will get a substantial number of boxers twisted up in most organizations. Therefore, it’s crucial to stress the following when you train your people: if they hear you apologize, they know it doesn’t mean you’re blaming your own staff. *You’re taking the customer’s side because the customer is the customer! Period. Customers pay our bills.* We can laugh about it later; we don’t have to prove we’re right while we’re on the phone with them!

**We do realize that “Just treat them like you’re Leonardo’s Mama!” may not be a professional-sounding phrase you can toss around at meetings at your organization. So, perhaps Instant Customer Pacification, which is a classic a-b-c formulation from legendary hotelier Horst Schulze, will better fit your organization’s formality requirements. Just figure out a way to get your people to use these techniques, whatever you call them. You’ll make Mama proud.*

How should you compensate a customer for a service or product failure?

It depends. And that's what's most important—your people handling customer complaints need to be given enormous discretion. But, here are some guidelines and pointers.

- » **Customers understand that things can and will go wrong.** What they do not understand, accept, or, frankly, find very interesting are excuses. Pay attention. Listen. Then just say you are sorry (sincerely) and fix the problem!
- » **Don't panic:** The studies we've conducted are 100% conclusive: customers who've had an issue that was resolved effectively became more loyal than those who experienced trouble-free service! Why? Because until a problem occurs, the customer doesn't get to see us strut our service.
- » **Don't be arrogant enough to be sure you already know what a customer wants as a solution, or what a customer should want.** Ask. And then see if you can do it. And for crying out loud, don't try to be "fair." Remember: an Italian Mama wouldn't try to verify if her bambino exceeded the sidewalk speed limit before comforting him.
- » **Learn from customer issues, but don't use them as a chance to discipline or train your staff in front of your customer, or with your customer's assistance.** (Sounds obvious, but it happens more often than you'd think.)
- » **Don't imagine you're doing something special for a customer by restoring things to the original what-should-have-happened-in-the-first-place.** Where's the value in that? Time cannot be given back—it's gone. The chance to get it right the first time? It's gone. Forever. So, fix the particulars of the situation back to how things should have been (if that's still what the customer wants), and then give the customer a little something extra. Remember: Leonardo's Italian mother bandages his knee and gives him ice cream.
- » **Remember the lifetime value of a customer.** Then multiply it by the potential internet value—positive (if they become a "sneezer" and spread word of your great resolution) or negative (if they do a PowerPoint of your suckworthiness)—before you decide to argue over an overnight shipping bill. Then, don't.

**PRINCIPLE 3. DOING BUSINESS ON THE INTERNET,
NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE A HUMAN BEING.
SO, GO OUT OF YOUR WAY TO PROVE IT.**

Examples:

If you send anything mass-electronic (email, etc.), build in a true and immediate way for customers to reach a real person. If you are one of the more than 80,000 people who get a canned “from Micah” email every month or so, try responding to it. What do you get? The *real* Micah. (If your question is better answered by someone other than Micah, Micah may ask the real Bob to respond, or the real Jenn. Regardless, if you have a specific concern that needs a custom response, buddy, Micah personally makes sure that you're going to get it.) Compare this with what you get with, well, let's see... any of the very competent but oh-so-chilly online merchants out there.

If you put live online chat on your website, make sure it's clear you're not staffing it with plastic people. Even if you offer—as you should—expert, individual advice through your online website chat, people using the service will still expect the worst of your service unless you *provide your first and last names*. Otherwise, no matter how expert your chatmeister is, if she keys “Hi, this is Jane, how may I help you?” your prospect will picture “Jane” as a corporate drone sending canned phrases to someone she doesn't care to hear from again. It's not your Jane's fault; it's the fault of all the Janes before her. But it's easily remedied by calling her who she is: Jane Chang-Katzenberg.

PRINCIPLE 4. THINK SPECIFICALLY ABOUT THE LANGUAGE YOU USE WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS—YOUR WORD CHOICE IS CRUCIAL.

This is absolutely crucial. Don't let this choice happen by accident.

Words have immense power. *This is why The Ritz-Carlton created its own distinctive vocabulary that has now infiltrated much of the hospitality industry. (You know the terms, such as “My Pleasure” and “Certainly.”)**

When you're working with new employees, it's a heck of a lot better to provide them with a great lexicon than to have them stumped for a response or answering not quite appropriately. Even your most articulate staff members can benefit from *specific examples* of what good and bad word choices are. Spell out exactly which words they'd do best to use and not use in the situations they encounter repeatedly.

These will vary by industry, clientele, and location. For instance, “*No worries*” may sound fine coming from the clerk at a Bose store in Portland, *but it would grate on your ears like a flat violin if you heard it from the concierge at the Four Seasons just off Park Ave.* (You won't.) Identify terminology that best represents your brand position and identity and use it consistently.

**Over time, it's been a treat to watch (hear) the original Ritz phrasebook spread to unaffiliated hotel brands around the English-speaking world. This has happened through emulation, of course, but also via Ritz alumni who bring with them a now-natural second language of service when they move to a position at a new company.*

Here are some good/bad language choices Micah's business uses as examples in training:

Good: *"Our records show a balance of..."*

Not good: *"You owe..."*

Good: *"We find it usually works best when..."*

Bad: *"You need to..."**

Better: *"May I place you on a brief hold?"*

Worser: *"Please hold."*

**(If you were a customer, you'd think, "I don't need to do jack, buddy!")*

Some of the most destructive language the average business uses is in the way it screens calls. There is no faster way to lose a potential customer or business ally than to make him think he has to pass some test of his worthiness before you'll condescend to get on the line.

Our advice about screening your calls: don't do it. Don't!

You may think we're out of our mind, and we understand that our advice here is not possible for every business, but it works for most.

If you absolutely *must* screen your calls (maybe you're Jeff Bezos and the world won't give you a moment's peace, or maybe you have ADHD and one more interruption from a vendor will unglue you), have your calls screened in a way that at least callers don't *know* they're being screened.

Good Screen: *"You bet. Can I get your name so I can let Mr. Bezos know who is calling?"*

Bad Screen: *"And what is your name? And what is the nature and purpose of your call?"*

PRINCIPLE 5. REMEMBER, WHAT PEOPLE CRAVE IS WHAT'S OFTEN THE LEAST EXPENSIVE TO GIVE THEM: ATTENTION.

What's most expensive to give customers—a defect-free product—just gets you in the door with them. Only human attention to, love shown to, your customers is going to buy their loyalty in return. *(If you're making parts for airplanes, please, PLEASE ignore this paragraph. We like a defect-free flight. A lot. Concentrate on that, nix giving us attention.)*

In many, many industries a large part—significant enough to make a crucial competitive difference—of what you're selling is *attention*. This is where the smaller business can clobber the bigger one, where the upstart can get ahead because, well, you're *paying attention*.

Micah's business isn't just selling optical disc manufacturing. It's selling careful attention. The new, ultra-luxury Capella Hotels' business isn't renting rectangular floor plans by the night. Its business, among other things, is attention. Lexus' business isn't selling transportation. Its business is, among other things, attention.

Who should do customer service?

You know this is a trick question. The answer is *everyone*.

No, we're not nuts. We don't mean you can't hire any more engineers and you have to fire the ones you have. (*That, by the way, was a cheap shot and we didn't mean it.*)

We use "*everyone*" as a shortcut for "everyone, to the extent of their abilities, to the extent of their trainability and to the extent they interact with customers."

We think about customer service in terms of only three levels.

Level 1: Bad service. ("*No!*")

Level 2: Compliant service. ("*Uh huh.*")

Level 3: Exceptional service. (Anticipating customer wishes)

All the people who work in your organization—at least all the people who should work in your organization—can get to level 3. But only if they *desire* to make the extra effort to anticipate customer wishes.

This happens when you hire the right people, train them properly, and follow up daily.

(Sorry. You've got to. It's worth it.)

PRINCIPLE 6. UNDERSTAND THAT SUCCESS IS NOT PLEASING EVERYBODY, ALL THE TIME—IT'S TRYING TO.

There are a small percentage of customers—2-3%—who, if you please them completely, will make everyone else unhappy. **Hand them a hundred dollar bill when they walk in the door and they'll say, "Um, could you make that two fifties?"**

Nonetheless: *Your primary objective must be 100% customer retention!* This is the only goal you can convey to your staff. There are only a finite number of customers, and therefore each lost customer is irreplaceable.

Only you (upper management) may fire customers, or you'll find it done willy-nilly (explicitly or through attitude).

Train your staff to do everything in their power to please each customer 100%, and to send to you anyone with whom they cannot accomplish this goal. You, and you alone, can then end your business relationship with these few customers if *you choose* to do so. **Do it quietly, using your own thoughtful discretion, and with kindness.**

The picture of customer service we want you to get out of your heads—and out of your business—is the old one: Customer service as an isolated clerk on the unfurnished sixth floor of an ancient department store where, if you were a toddler of Micah's vintage and background, your Bubbie schlepped you with her when she had to return a brassiere.

TWO FALSE FIRING ALARMS:

It's easy to think a customer is just "looking for trouble" if, after one significant failure on your part, he starts noticing more and more additional issues. But the more you work in service, the more you realize how often this "piling on" seems to occur. We call it the "three problem rule" and here's why it happens: The first time your company falls down on the job, your client's perception changes and he's sensitized to the possibility of other issues.

Everybody has a bad moment. (We're guessing you do, too.) Some people are more gracious, generally, as customers than they are in their civilian lives and some are more brusque. Either way, they may have a bad moment in their customer role. If a customer gets disproportionately angry over something one day, it is quite likely the next day they will feel badly about how they acted and it's unlikely they'll repeat their little tantrum. Be kind.

PRINCIPLE 7. YOUR CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP SYSTEMS WILL FALL APART WITHOUT CONTINUAL UPKEEP AND IMPROVEMENT.

They need to be reinforced. Tested. Checked. A lot. Ask us how.

Congratulations. You're well on your way to humanizing your customer relations. And here's some more good news: with the world moving at breakneck speed, your competitors are never going to catch up with your newfound knowledge about building lasting customer relationships.

Why? Because they're busy. Busy spending their money fishing for new customers to replace the old. Busy trimming profit from their pricing so they can appease a less-than-loyal customer base. Most of all, because they'll never believe how much difference a loyal customer can make to a business, especially in today's revolutionary, lightning-speed marketplace. Watch for these competitors in your rear view mirror. *And don't worry: they won't be closer than they appear.* 📌

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Leonardo is the Managing Partner of West Paces Consulting and part of The West Paces Hotel Group, which is helmed by legendary hotelier Horst Schulze and known for its recently launched ultra-luxury hotel brand Capella Hotels & Resorts. Prior to this, Inghilleri worked with Schulze developing The Ritz-Carlton and Bvlgari hotel brands and systems. He will be pleased to hear from you at linghilleri@westpacesconsulting.com.

Micah is President of Oasis Disc Manufacturing, a company he bootstrapped with a credit card and a single room in his basement. It is now one of the top brands in the optical medial industry. His Ultimate Customer Service Blog and website are at <http://www.micahsolomon.com>. Reach him at: music@micahsolomon.com.

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