



THE
Customer Service
MANIFESTO

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Never before in the history of business and marketing has customer service been as front and center as it is today. So much so that it is being transformed and reborn in front of our very eyes as arguably one of *the most* mission critical components that can make or break a business.

The Manifesto for Customer Service documents this sea change, introduces the 10 *new* rules of customer service and introduces a key hypothesis, namely that customer service needs to be elevated to the front office; to that of a strategic imperative which becomes *a*, if not *the*, key differentiator in the board room and beyond.

The rise of social media, social networks and word-of-mouth across a connected, digital and virtual expanse have given us a glimpse into the power and potential of the ability (or inability) to solve problems, address concerns head on, and on occasion, humble a mighty corporate behemoth and bring it to its knees. It all begins with what is perhaps the most important issue business and marketing execs will need to come to terms with in 2010 and beyond: how to create an organization that is mobilized, structured and empowered to be responsive, empathetic, accessible, connected and human in the hearts, minds, and wallets of their most prized assets—their customers *and* their employees.

Customer service is just one component of a much broader customer experience imperative. Yet it is the most tangible, impactful and actionable item in your portfolio of services that you can activate in a truly transformative manner.

What's Changed? What Hasn't?

Let's start with the fundamentals. The basic premise of treating people as you would want to be treated in return dates back far enough. Loving thy neighbor has always made good sense. Having a customer that loves you back in return makes for good business sense.

And yet there's an endless abyss when it comes to practicing these basic principles.

Today, for some unexplained reason, we seem to have taken a giant step backwards, and perhaps technology is to blame. Instead of using sophisticated, intricate systems and complex algorithms to better serve our customers, we've seen technology as a way to save us money—a false prophet of automation that serves as nothing short of a poison pill that strips our companies of any remaining shred of humanity it might have had to offer.

So here's what has changed: The Internet. Word-of-mouth; the Power of Social Media; connectedness in the form of Social Networks; growing distrust and dissatisfaction with corporations... I could go on.

The old marketing adage is that a satisfied customer will tell 5-7 of their friends about their experience, whereas the dissatisfied customer will tell 15-20. Today, an unhappy customer will tell “a million of their closest strangers.”

You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?

Loving thy neighbor has always made good sense.
Having a customer that loves you back in return
makes for good business sense.

The Stakes Have Never Been Higher

Regis McKenna once wrote that “marketing is everything” and that everything that touched a consumer was the domain of marketing. Today, a similar point could be made about customer service. Anything that affects a customer’s experience with a product, service and/or brand is essentially customer service.

Customer service is the new marketing.

And because of this—because of the ease with which customers can vent in frustration or lash out against a lethargic and inferior offering—customer service is quite possibly the most mission critical aspect of a company’s reputation, perception, image and market viability.

*But this is **not** your grandfather’s customer service.*

Strike every misguided thought from your mind about outsourced call-centers, 24-hour e-mail auto-responders, FAQ’s and the like. Customer service is very much alive and kicking and living large in the living rooms, mouse pads and mobile touch screens of our promoters, detractors, dissidents, advocates and influencers.

Take Nationwide Insurance for example, with its “app” that leads consumers who need to document an accident through an interactive walkthrough and step-by-step guide. While any consumer can complete the normal process without much help, the app has the additional ability to locate itself via GPS and take photos of the accident, and Nationwide customers can hit a button and submit the claim *then* and *there*. Now *that’s* progressive!!

Customer service is the new marketing.

Moving Customer Service To The Front Office

If there's any doubt in terms of where customer service fits in your organization, let me state emphatically: **Customer service is a front office strategic imperative that belongs at the same table as strategic planning, marketing communications, branding and advertising.** It is very quickly becoming a calculated driver that will be vital in providing brands with unique points of differentiation and businesses with sustainable competitive advantage. I'd even go so far as to say that customer service (as a foundation setting capability and a pivotal pillar of a customer experience imperative) may very well prove to be *the single* biggest and most defined strategic and competitive differentiator. Bar none.

However, in order to realize this, customer service has to move from being considered a “cost” to one hell-of-a sound investment. Secondly, the breadth and depth of customer service must be expanded significantly to cover a much broader spectrum of touch points and categories, with a commensurate deeper level of follow-through and interaction. Thirdly, this overhaul requires another kind of flip—one that's associated with recruiting, training, empowering and compensating those responsible for customer service.

Think about it for a moment: if I'm right (and I believe that I am), why on earth would you outsource a crucial function at a decentralized, offshore “cost center”? It makes no sense to essentially pawn off (at least in terms of proximity to the center of the organization's decision making and agenda setting core) the one capability that we *know with certainty* represents a direct connection between customer and company.

What is thus required is a major rethink; arguably a borderline overhaul of the current level of strategic importance, organizational relevance and cultural resonance associated with how we service our customers, *way beyond the sale.*

The 10 New Rules of Customer Service

If your customer service is to become a strategic differentiator, it has to embody a new set of rules, guidelines and best practices. As it combines and absorbs the full force of word-of-mouth, crisis communication and customer experience, here are 10 new rules, perspectives or attributes that will become increasingly influential and impactful for brands moving forward.

1 | **Customer service doesn't end at 5pm on a Friday.**

As was evidenced by the “Motrin Moms” story, Johnson & Johnson’s inability to address a mob of angry Mommy Bloggers cost the brand its entire campaign, which was subsequently pulled. The fact that this conversation erupted over a weekend certainly isolated the fact that the brand was not “plugged in” to its community or audience. Truthfully (and in fairness), the same outcome might have happened during the week, but the real lesson here is that a listening strategy tied to customer sentiment needs to be always on, 24 x 7 x 365.

I just argued that outsourcing elements of customer service offshore is not the best solution, but it can help to keep the lights on after hours. The important point here is to make sure customers can get a hold of you when they need to, and that you can contact them when you need to—and you do indeed *need* to when they’re having a problem, venting frustration, or simply calling out for help.

2 | **Move from “everything communicates” to “everyone communicates.”**

The paradox of customer service is that the lower down the totem pole you go, the more impactful and important customer service becomes. Every single employee in an organization represents the company. They are a window into or out of the business; and as far as your customer is concerned, they are the only window. Best to keep it clean, functional and make sure that what lies beyond the window is suitable viewing—don’t you think? Customers don’t care that you have 10,000 employees

in 200 offices in 80 countries; they just want their problems solved. They also don't care if the person they're speaking with has an Indian or American accent as long as—you guessed it—the person solves their problems.

When it comes to serving customers, creating a flat organization of democratized access, care and responsiveness makes a huge difference. Zappos puts an enormous emphasis on its frontline workers. All of its employees—431 total, pre-Amazon acquisition—are Twittering without the filter of a public relations department. The notion of opening the door for all employees to speak freely is exactly what “everyone communicates” is all about.

Perhaps this is why Zappos describes themselves as a service company that happens to sell shoes, or that Southwest Airlines describes themselves as a service company that happens to fly planes. Both enjoy incredible positive publicity that is driven from the inside out via passionate employees and engaged customer advocates.

Customer service is the new P.R.

Ironically, the people to whom angry customers are exposed most often are usually those whom we pay the least (both in terms of compensation and attention). Under these conditions, it takes major cultural mojo to inspire and/or motivate them to deliver brand magic at every twist or turn. The trick is to empower your employees to deliver world-class customer service, no matter where they stack up in the “who's who in your zoo” pecking order.

Customer service is the new P.R.

3 | All customers are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Every single customer—irrespective of their stature, seniority, and their status in life and with the company—deserves to be treated well, respected, and given appropriate attention and effort. In other words, the minimum level of your bar needs to be higher than the minimum level of your competitors' respective bars, and therefore higher than your industry averages. In cases where this becomes a cultural imperative within your organization and your minimum proves to be higher than your competitors' respective maximums, the top line and bottom line results should become self-evident.

That said, different levels or tiers of customers “deserve”—or perhaps necessitate—various levels of treatment. Conventional marketing theory holds that more loyal (per certain loyalty metrics and indices) and valuable (per tangible metrics such as purchase history, frequency, basket size etc.) customers should be treated with elevated levels of service. That absolutely still holds. However, I'd like to inject a new variable into this mix: influence.

We've all witnessed that awkward moment or major meltdown where a celebrity—self-proclaimed or otherwise—shouts at the top of their lungs to some poor soul working at the valet just to make a few extra bucks, “Do you *know* who I am?” This is obviously meant to instill fear in the valet, to essentially pull out all the stops to accommodate the self-entitled prima donna.

Well, guess what? Yesterday's ce-lebrity is today's web-lebrity. With websites such as “The Consumerist” waiting to pounce on big dumb companies' missteps—not to mention the ability to amplify a conversation, interaction or heated debate—it becomes critical to do your homework when engaging in conversations with your customers.

Playing the ignorance card is no excuse for not doing your homework on your customers. Train your customer service people to anticipate and respond to customers who have a word-of-mouth distribution platform such as a website, blog, podcast or, in the analog world, community pulpit.

If necessary, be a little more proactive with collecting information from customers—either through registration forms, profiles or surveys. Ask them explicitly: do you have a blog, and if so, document the URL and research the blog. From this, you'll gauge direction, theme and, more importantly, tonality (AKA, the “snark” factor). Using this lens, you'll be able to more effectively service three types of customers: loyal, valuable and loud.

Do your research and be proactive, and for heaven's sake, when a loud-mouthed influencer volunteers their social calling card, take them seriously!

4 | Customer service is not only about solving problems.

“Customer Service” should not necessarily be any different from “serving customers”. Solving problems is always important, but helping our customers improve their utility, experience or lives is just as compelling—if not more.

Can you imagine what would happen if Nikon contacted its customers via Flickr offering tips on how to improve their current snaps?

“Is there anything else I can help you with today?” has become rote and essentially meaningless. We need to be more proactive, productive and efficient with the precious time spent with our customers. Be more specific; suggest ideas; offer information of value; or recommend solutions from which both you and your customers will benefit. Use any form of real estate to upsell your customer on value... not revenue. The two not mutually exclusive. A simple: “did you know” portfolio of useful tips, tools, tricks and tutorials is a powerful and painless accompaniment to your usual 24-hour (or hopefully less) auto-responder.

5 | Customer service lives “in the now.”

The ability to solve problems in real time is the consummate difference maker. The more time that elapses between problem and solution, the greater the risk of that problem mushrooming out of control.

The good news is that this is exactly where everything is going... largely *thanks* to technology. If you have OnStar in your car, you practically have a call-center at your beck and call—a proactive and actionable one. For example: if you’re in an accident and your air bags deploy, OnStar is immediately alerted and initiates both a call to the driver to check that they’re ok, and (preparation to) to contact the local authorities—police, ambulance, fire department—if needed.

The home of the future will have similar checkpoints in place, largely due to RFID and Internet connectivity. When your water filter is low on your refrigerator, G.E. will either send you a new one automatically (assuming you chose this option) or send you a notification for express permission/approval.

One need look no further than Toyota’s perceived slowness in responding to their customers after their unprecedented recent recalls to see what a cacophony of dissonance, dissidence and distance can result when a company doesn’t get it right—right away.

Customer service is the new crisis communication.

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6 | Customer service can be a revenue generator.

Building on several of the earlier new rules is one fairly counterintuitive one: service can actually become a source of revenue for companies—not just directly (i.e., new business from old customers); but also indirectly (i.e. new business from *new* customers.)

Apple’s Genius Bars give us a glimpse of how premium customers will pay a premium for premium service.

Netflix and Amazon show how premium service is not always incremental, but instead manifests itself in terms of recurring revenue, repeat business, loyalty and higher barriers to entry.

7 | Customer service lives in the public domain.

“This call may be monitored to help improve customer service.” I’m not exactly sure what that means; but I can tell you that as far as I’m concerned, it’s like waving a red flag in front of a bull. For starters, why “may” and not “will”? “Why take a chance on service and inject randomness or serendipity into the picture? I kind of get why I’m being informed of this (corporations aren’t exactly sponsors of the Patriot Act). Perhaps it’s more for the customer service representative than for my benefit, meant to deter them from (further) disappointing me.

Why not allow your customers to record your phone calls—encourage it, even. Honestly, they’re going to do it with or without your permission. Responding to consumers via blogs, podcasts, social networks and twitter-like platforms is admirable, but a learned art. You’ll need to be adept at knowing when to open up a conversation, pull it in, and close it down. When a conversation “escapes” into the ether of public domain, don’t fight it; rather, address it head on—quickly, decisively, comprehensively and authentically.

Being exposed in the public domain is pretty much the biggest deterrent I can imagine. It certainly makes the random monitoring of a call seem understated in contrast. These kinds of isolated incidents tend to be microcosms that hold the entire company—as opposed to a hapless representative in some country no one’s ever heard of before—responsible.

Here’s a simple acronym with a profound message, ‘tis better to be **S.A.F.E.** than sorry:

Satisfy Curiosity | **A**ddress Concerns | **A**void **F**estering | **P**revent **E**scalation

Bottom line: the more time elapses, the more likely a customer is to move a problem from the private to the public domain and intensify it to a viral fever pitch in the process. The good news is that, typically, customers will always default to or begin in the private domain—in other words, give a company a fair and fighting chance to cut off a potential headache before it becomes a migraine.

8 | Customer service needs a memory. It is a commitment, not a one-off happenstance.

“Marketing is not a campaign; it’s a commitment.” And there’s no more important commitment than that which we make to our lifeblood—our customers. A commitment, like a relationship, is for keeps (at least, that’s our hope going into every marriage ceremony.)

It’s all well and good to talk about this; but the proof in the pudding is in the eating. We need to visibly demonstrate our commitment to our customers in practice and in action. They need to explicitly feel its effect and benefits.

One of the best ways to activate a long-term promise is to move from a goldfish approach to the elephant ninja-stance. Our customers have long memories. Now we need to show them that we do too.

How many times have you made that fateful call to a service center where you're asked to say or key in your 16 digit account number—only to have the agent on the line immediately ask you for your account number. In my case and with my accent, I typically have to repeat it several times! Once you've managed to clearly convey this all-important number, the agent will typically proceed to ask you a series of probing questions for even more information—including date of birth, social security number, mother's maiden name and where your first pet was buried. Only then do you get a chance to share your problem, upon which the agent tells you that you've reached the wrong department and needs to transfer you... after which the call gets disconnected. #FAIL.

We simply have to get smarter each time we deal with the same person—specifically in terms of how we treat them. It helps us become smarter as a company so we can learn, evolve and improve on the whole.

9 | Customer service needs to be proactive and anticipatory.

Old customer service “spoke when it was spoken to.” New customer service anticipates requirements, listens attentively for customers in need, and proactively searches for problems to fix.

Yes, I'm sure you believe you're already doing this; in which case, good for you. However, I'm talking about something a lot more strategic, genuine and deep reaching. Too many companies operate on a “don't ask, don't tell” level, and assume that just because the phone isn't ringing, their customers are “satisfied” and content. Not surprisingly, the same companies are equally shocked when they open up the customer cupboard to find it bare.

Instead, why not make a concerted effort to earnestly probe customers to find out how you rate and stack up against their high standard—and hopefully yours as well.

An active and engaged listening strategy will help to identify opportunities, spot problems before they balloon, and in doing so, surprise (and hopefully delight) consumers by making an unexpected

move in the form of responding to them. To fully understand how transformational this is, think about the real enemy here: silence. The sounds of customer silence are deafening. It leaves us defenseless to defection, misinformation, rumor and lost patronage.

When it comes to solving problems, we don't need to be invited to the table in order to be useful and valuable. If you were walking down the road and saw a small child crying because they'd lost their parent, would you turn a blind eye? Of course not! How about this scenario: you work for Toyota, and at a cocktail party, overhear a conversation where a partygoer is expressing concern—conflicted about purchasing a new Prius based on its recall and reliability fears. Wouldn't you interject, especially if you could allay their doubts (before they're convinced to go—gasp—domestic)?

Proactive or reactive? Both are fine, as long as you act. Whether anticipating next steps or responding to a clear and present complaint, as long as there's action, there's the potential to turn a negative into a positive—and even to capitalize on a speculative opportunity.

10 | **Customer service is alive.**

The final new rule is an obvious one. *Feedback loops need to be active, direct and effective at improving, evolving and moving the business forward.* This highlights an organization with an entirely new set of criteria, beliefs and characteristics that reflect a company truly in touch with its customer base.

If customer service is deemed a chance for the company to connect and evolve with its lifeblood—rather than a “cost center”—it becomes a cultural obsession instead of a mere “department.” It's a vital point of differentiation that propels innovation and creates new revenue streams, products, and barriers to entry.

Using the **C.O.S.T.** acronym, companies need to elevate customer service from:

Cultural – pretty much horizontal or pervasive within the organization

Organizational – its own core competency; perhaps in the form of a customer experience discipline

Strategic – a critical or key part of marketing

Tactical – an outsourced department

The pursuit for cutting-edge lessons, insights and ideas from the inside out cannot occur accidentally. There has to be a direct pathway back to the nerve center of the organization; and where better to begin than customer service?

It's time to transform customer service from a one-dimensional, one-off and transactional-based exchange into a fluid and integral part of doing business. Combining all physical or store encounters, live chat or e-mail exchanges—and most recently, social media or virtual conversations—in an evolved “Voice of the Customer” program is just the beginning. Incorporating this feedback into the very engine of the company—and communicating progress back to the point of origin—is equally, if not more important.

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Putting it all together

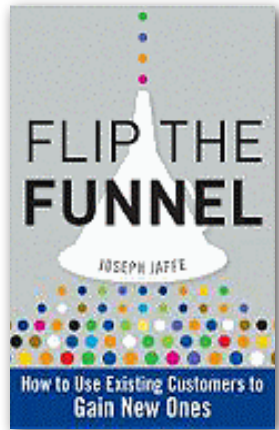
Remember today: it's the day you felt a drop of rain splash down on your balding forehead. It's time to build that ark, Noah.

In the truest sense of the word, this is a manifesto. It's a call to action, to elevate "customer service" to a front office mission critical strategic imperative.

There's a profound opportunity to transform retention into the new acquisition and it all begins with customer experience.

The ability—or inability—for a company to serve its customers in a way that is consistent with meeting or beating their expectations will prove to be the ultimate differentiator that separates the corporate winners from the losers in the near future. ☒

*Add your own great and not-so-great customer experiences (or view others)
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Joseph Jaffe is Chief Interruptor of Powered, and the author of three books, including *Life After The 30-Second Spot* and *Join the Conversation*. His latest, *Flip the Funnel*, focuses on the strategic incorporation and elevation of customer service, customer experience and customer initiated word-of-mouth, content creation and incentive-based referrals. Joseph has appeared on CBS, ABC, Bloomberg, NPR, in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and more. He is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School, as well as the Society for New Communications Research. Jaffe blogs and podcasts at "[Jaffe Juice](#)" and also hosts [JaffeJuiceTV](#) in an effort to prove he does not have a face for radio.

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