



# Sprinkles

An Antidote To The Demise of Customer Surprise

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# When I was ten years old, I did a very naughty thing. I secretly watched my parents hide all the Easter eggs.

As my cousins and siblings rushed into our backyard on the hunt for brightly colored eggs, I calmly went straight to all their hiding spots! I “found” a lot more eggs! But, *they* had a lot more fun. They squealed and grinned when they found an Easter egg; I was far less enthused.

Customer service for many years had more than its share of “squeals and grins.” My hometown grocer would give my sister and me a free fireball when my parents were there to buy groceries. Fireballs were a super popular hard cinnamon candy. It was not that long ago the mechanic would repair something he spotted defective when my car was on the rack and repair it without a fee. And, the baker behind the display case would sometimes throw in an extra cookie or donut if I ordered a dozen. Today, such generous, unexpected behavior is rare. Today, we know where the eggs are hidden.

What has made customer surprise such a scarcity? At least three culprits have robbed the glee of service. First, many organizations have been forced to apply austere expense cutting in the face of ever-diminishing profit margins; value-added amazement has gotten pricey. Second, rising customer expectations have elevated what it takes to be judged as enchanting. Customers live highly stimulated daily lives. Stores have become sensory theater; TV and the Internet as vibrant as Broadway after dark. To paraphrase an old song, “How you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Zappos.” There is a third reason... one subtler and far more challenging. But, first let’s examine the psychology of surprise.

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# Customers Long for Sprinkles

A good cookie or cupcake only becomes special when adorned with sprinkles. Just ask any granddaughter. And, customers today have developed a “sprinkles sonar.” Without “sprinkles,” service is simply good; with sprinkles good becomes distinctive. As customers, we do not tweet, blog, or speak about good service, only about service with sprinkles.

Surprise is not really a surprise if it is completely predictable. What is random about getting upgraded to first class any more as a frequent flyer with a coach ticket? You have the miles, the seat is available, and the computer delivers an upgrade. There are no squeals or even a thought of gratitude for the “generous” gesture. When randomness is gone, the well-intentioned value-adds become a standard customer expectation, adding no value at all. Attraction of loyalty has become programmed and apparent.

The Las Vegas strip can teach us something about surprise. Most of the revenue in a Las Vegas casino comes from the slot machines. The power of random reinforcement attracts and retains gamblers in a way that black jack, roulette, or poker do not. The squeals that accompany lights, bells and coins falling in a metal tray make all casinos animated with excitement. Everyone around the surprised winner is vicariously a participant, not just a spectator. Even low paying “three cherries in a row” can make a gambler’s heart race. It is the same phenomenon that made

Professor B.F. Skinner's pigeons opt for pecking the silver disk that randomly dispensed food far more than the pigeons in another cage that got food with each peck.

The third reason, the big kahuna of surprise demise, is this: surprises have been the target of six-sigma microscopes in search of quality variances to eliminate. Predictability and consistency heighten productivity and efficiency. Yet, they can be the enemies of innovation, novelty, and generosity. Surprise is by definition unpredictable and variable. Production thinking, while a boon to manufacturing and product making, has rendered too many service experiences mechanical and unemotional.

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# Trying to Drive a Nail With a B Flat

Let's take a quick look at how making stuff and making memories are substantively different! When you buy a product, you receive an object; when you buy a service, you get an outcome plus an experience surrounding that outcome. Unlike products, a service cannot be inventoried, but is created anew each time—therefore, no economies of scale for mass production and no stockpiling for a quick response to unexpected demand. The manufacturer controls the quality of product making and the processes that yield efficiency, not the buyer. Customers don't show up at the factory to help. The reverse is true for service—the buyer judges the quality of memory making.

Since the product-buyer is not a participant in product making, the manufacturer's focus is largely on the efficiency of internal processes. With service, however, the buyer participates in creating the service experience along with the service provider. Consequently, the focus must be on the quality of the relationship with the co-creator—the customer. And, in the end, the receiver of a service owns nothing tangible—thus the value of the service depends solely on a satisfactory outcome plus a positively memorable experience.

However, there is an even deeper dimension to the product-service difference. The core property of a product is form; the core property of a service experience is feeling or emotion. Just as uniformity is a virtue of a product, so uniqueness is a virtue of a service. The service paradigm, while honoring efficiency and frugality, recognizes the criticality of the human dimension and thus focuses on empowered employees able to adjust, adapt and custom-fit service experiences to match the unique requirements of customers.

So, what happens when you apply production thinking and variance eliminating to the delivery of service experiences? You get leaders trying to drive a nail with a B flat, so to speak. There is nothing wrong with B flats. Mozart used them all the time. However, when he was interested in doing a bit of carpentry, a hammer was much more effective for nail driving.

The most obvious examples of nail driving with musical notes are phone scripts. Remember, “Thank you for shopping at J-Mart, next?” or “Would you like fries with that?” Rather than relying on a consistent pattern—always warmly greet, put a smile in your voice, thank the customer—organizations require a precise script. Unless the call center operator is a world-class thespian, the customer experiences robotics instead of authenticity. The memory made is so vanilla it is no memory at all.

Application of affinity programs is another way the management of processes now trumps the true leadership of frontline ambassadors. There was a time the front desk clerk made decisions on room upgrades. Now, the computer, with its programmed rule-based fairness, makes the upgrade decision. Consequently, the formerly surprised guest is today non-plused by the dull procedurally driven event, and the hotel quest for customer advocacy is completely lost.

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What is the solution? Bringing inventiveness and generosity back to the front line. Wise leaders create cultures that arm employees with the capacity, authority, and encouragement to deliver service with sprinkles. Such leaders understand the difference in inspiration and attraction between foreseeable value-added and random value-unique. **Here are four principles for leading an organization famous for sprinkles.**



# Teach Employees to Think Like Owners

I walked into the restaurant off the lobby of the Park Inn west of Harrisburg, PA. From the back of the restaurant I heard, “Good morning, how would you like your coffee?” When I said black, the voice warmly responded, “Take any table you like, and I’ll have your coffee there before you can sit down!” My day was off to a captivating start, like a colorful merry-go-round!

“I’m Sandy. Do I get the awesome pleasure of serving you today?” she asked as she laid my menu beside the cup of coffee she had already poured. The breakfast was perfect and served quickly. Periodically Sandy checked to make sure all was well. There was no chitchat as I focused on my morning paper, just attentiveness and lots of smiles aimed point blank at my table. I finished, folded up my newspaper, and requested my check. It had been a joy to be served by someone noticeably passionate about customers. And then, it happened!

Sandy brought my check along with a go cup of black coffee! “This is great!” I exclaimed. “You have no idea how much I needed a coffee to go today.” Sandy smiled, winked and responded, “It’s our gift to you!”

I left her a tip almost as big as my breakfast tab and went straight to the manager on duty to compliment her over-the-top, high-spirited service. “I’m so delighted,” he said, “but, I will tell you we get comments about Sandy almost every day. In fact we have guests who tell us they drive way out of their way just get a shot of Sandy in the morning!”

“And, you are okay with her giving away a cup of coffee?” I asked, expecting him to recoil at her generosity. He smiled and said. “Sandy knows what she’s doing. And, she is well aware of the arithmetic of the restaurant P&L. If she thought it was a good idea, who am I to question her judgment. Besides, she is the star attraction customers come for. Scrambled eggs are scrambled eggs. But, Sandy is special.”

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## Create Cracker Jack® Teams

It is not the colorful box of caramelized popcorn that has enamored consumers for over a hundred years; it is the free toy inside. While financially worthless, it is emotionally priceless. And, it is a reminder of the clout of simplicity. When a customer traded in her Lexus for a newer model, she was surprised a week later. Turning on her radio for the first time, she discovered the service tech had programmed her radio stations from her trade-in. The birthplace of this hit-the-jackpot idea? At Dallas-based Sewell Lexus, service techs devote time in their weekly staff meetings to brainstorm simple but unexpected ways to delight customers.

The magic in the Magic Kingdom is perpetually polished and refined. When an employee originates a new way to put pixie dust on their guests' experiences, there are forums to share that idea with all the theme parks—from a magical way to handle an unhappy child to how to move souvenir toys around the hotel room to make them appear to a child as if the toys came alive while the child was away at the park. Bringing back the quality circles concept but repurposed to focus on innovation can make it a grass-roots idea incubation lab.

# Take Care of “Mad Scientists”

The label “mad scientist” is a catchall phrase for the gifted, unconventional wild ducks that occasionally enter organizations. For most organizations they bring mixed blessings. All “mad scientists” have common noble traits—brilliant, visionary, perfectionists, passionately driven. They can also be very challenging to work with, mercurial, extremely bull-headed, egotistical, irreverent, and once in a while borderline crazy. “Mad scientists” ignore tidy rules of corporate civility in pursuit of their bold visions. They poke around in areas outside their sandbox and beyond their pay grades. They try most leaders’ patience and can embarrass their team members who are seeking to make a good impression.

Every progressive organization needs a few “mad scientists.” They can make us better and more vigorous. Sure, they are complex, challenging, and downright difficult. But, they can springboard the organization to greatness. Of course they can make us wring our hands and shake our head. They can also ensure our advancement and competitiveness. Remember: how you treat these eccentrics can telegraph to the rest of the organization how much you really value the untraditional thinking needed for innovation and the creativity of surprise.

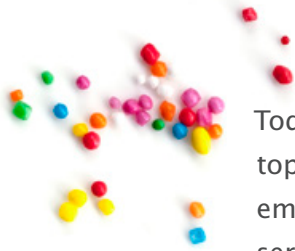
## Sponsor a Culture of Generosity

Salesforce.com, an acknowledged leader in innovation, gives employees six paid days a year to volunteer for a worthy cause. It signals to all that generosity is revered, rendering the culture a no-greed zone. When such a spirit of kindness is nurtured internally, it invariably gets infused in the customer's experience. Salesforce.com is annually on the "best companies to work for" list enabling them to attract and retain the best talent...and, concomitantly, the best customers.

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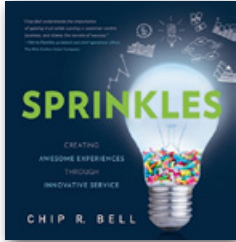
Google allows employees to spend 20% of their workweek focused on projects that interest them. It communicates respect while affirming the company mission of "maintaining the open culture often associated with startups, in which everyone is a hands-on contributor and feels comfortable sharing ideas and opinions." The payoff is dramatic. Over 50% of their new ideas come from that 20%. They know that innovation is about transformation, not incremental improvement. After all, Edison did not set out simply to improve the candle.

Few airlines in the world are more known for aviation innovation and passenger generosity than Southwest Airlines. Passengers rave about the airline's "assumption of innocence" approach to conflicts and disputes. While some airlines lean on rules as arbitrators and complaint stoppers, Southwest follows one of their three core values: "People are important—each one makes a difference." They also annually make the Civic 50 list as a leader in volunteerism.



Today's customers expect experiences to be sparkly and glittery with a cherry on top. Meeting the challenge of rising expectations requires rethinking the role of those employees who are face-to-face, ear-to-ear, and click-to-click with customers. When service people are asked to give more, they often think, "I'm already doing all I can." But if asked to pleasantly surprise more customers, they feel less like worker bees and more like fireflies. **Invite employees to create, not just execute, and they will feel esteemed... and their customers will feel enchanted.** 🦋

# Info



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