

# Imaginative Service

You need it more in tough times.

CHIP R. BELL AND JOHN R. PATTERSON

Take the Hertz shuttle bus at the Atlanta Airport, and you might meet *Archie Bostick*. Archie greets you with a welcoming grin. Instead of a tip jar, Archie paper-clips dollar bills across the front of his shirt. Nothing subtle about that ploy—it's an attention-getter that announces *this is a unique experience*. Once on the bus, Archie delivers a comedy routine and uses any excuse to break into song. As Archie pulls up to the terminal, he announces, "Now, I may never see you again, so I want us all to say together, 'I love Hertz!'" And everyone hollers, "I love Hertz!" You witness a service innovator at work—he takes your breath away.

*Value-added has been the service solution for many service exemplars*—take what the customer expects and add a little more. Nordstrom sales clerk escorts you to another department. Southwest Airlines gives you free peanuts with slapstick humor. And Rosie's Diner refills your ice tea glass without you being charged.

But value-added extras have gotten more expensive. That free snack on a flight is now \$8, and service charges are standard fare on most bills. Pursuing the extras can also send a mixed message. What do employees think when told to "wow" customers in the morning and are later informed of staff cutbacks and expense reductions? Challenging financial times call for a new approach: *value-unique service*.

*Value-unique is different than value-added*. For most customers, value-added means taking the expected to a higher-level: "They gave me *more* than I anticipated." But, value-unique is not about addition—it's about an imaginative creation.

When service people are asked to *give more*, they think, "I'm already doing the best I can." But, if asked to *pleasantly surprise* more customers, they feel less like worker bees and more like fireflies. If employees are asked to create a big customer smile instead of work harder, they feel a part of an adventure. And, when they get to create, not just perform, they feel prized. Just ask a Southwest, Disney, or Lexus dealership employee what they think of their job, and you will get a smiling "It's awesome," not a shrugging "It's all right."

*Imaginative service is sourced in joy and fun*. It comes from the same part of the soul that plans a prank, organizes

a party, or helps a friend. When that part is used regularly, it raises self-esteem, increases resilience, and improves morale. Take a look at *Fortune Magazine's* annual *100 Best Companies in America to Work For*—Nordstrom, Container Store, Marriott, eBay, Zappos.com, and FedEx—and you see the great service-high morale link. They boast the lowest turnover (a cost saver), the best recruits (an investment), the highest productivity (another positive) and the greatest profits.

## Five Ways to Deliver Unique Value

Here are five ways to foster service that takes your customers' breath away:

1. **Project realness.** Imaginative service is about *realness*, not *roleness*. The stereotypical leader gets caught up with looking, sounding, and "acting" executive, and employees get a message of "plastic power"—which may engender *compliance* but never *commitment*. Great leaders are unimpressed with the trappings of supremacy and more interested in communicating an authentic spirit and egalitarian style.

Imaginative service leaders know they get from employees the attitude they project. Employees do not watch the leader's mouth; they watch the leader's moves. As all leaders move in the floodlight of employee observation, their actions can telegraph either optimism or gloom; excitement or despair. An animated attitude is contagious. When we are around happy, upbeat people, we more easily join in the spirit—especially if the invitation comes from someone who prefers we enroll. An unbridled spirit has magnetic power on both customers and employees.

2. **Protect customers.** Tasks are important; rules are essential. But, revenue comes from customers. Imaginative service leaders encourage and empower employees to put customers (not procedures) first. This is not about deliberately violating rules or putting anybody at risk.

## ANNUAL EDITIONS

Zappos.com was founded in 1999 with goal of doing to on-line shoe apparel what Amazon.com did to online books. In 2000 they had \$1.6 million in sales; in 2008 their sales exceeded \$1 billion! CEO *Tony Hsieh* explains their growth this way: "We're aligned around one mission—to provide the best customer service possible. Rather than focus on maximizing short-term profits, we focus on how we can maximize the service to our customers. We are a service company that happens to sell shoes." They protect customers from being taken for granted or subjected to discomfort.

3. **Proclaim joy.** In times of frugality, staff reductions, cost controls, and cutbacks, employees tend to be somber. Optimism is replaced with anxiety; hope is overshadowed by fear. The receiving end of such dower dispositions are customers with money to spend. When customers most need a shot of enthusiasm, they are served by sleepwalking employees who seem indifferent and bored. The antidote to such melancholy is a leader with unmistakable passion and irresistible joy. "The ultimate measure of a man," said Martin Luther King, "is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

"To succeed," says *Scott Cook*, founder of Intuit, "you need people with passion. You can't just order someone to be passionate about a business direction." Passion comes from a deep sense of purpose—not the "ought to" sense of obligation that drives duty, but the "can't wait to" enthusiasm that sets an employee on fire. As Federal Signal President *Alan Shaffer* said: "Our goal is not merely to get buy-in. I want to put a lump in their throats and a tear in their eyes. I want to take their breath away."

The number one impact on customer relations is employee relations—happy employees create happy customers.

4. **Provide trust.** Imaginative service happens in a climate of trust—where people are considerate and supportive. If people are given license to criticize colleagues behind their back, the setting turns to suspicion. If manipulative or unfair behavior is tolerated, the climate turns to protection. It requires leaders disciplined to model thoughtfulness and hold others accountable.

Trustful cultures nurture appropriate risk-taking that leads to novel solutions and refreshing customer experiences. Trusting leaders view *error* as a chance to learn and *failure* as an

invitation to try another approach. They treat employees as valued gifts, not indentured slaves. They empower and encourage. They are open about their own foibles and upfront when they make mistakes. The word embedded in *trust* is *us*. Trustful leaders care for their employees with the same humanity they give their family. *Family-like* doesn't mean entitlement, paternalism, or nepotism. It means attention to fairness, justice, and compassionate conduct.

5. **Preserve integrity.** *S. Truett Cathy*, founder of Chick-Fil-A, has elected to remain closed on Sunday and gained favor for courageously remaining true and faithful to his values.

"I like dealing with an organization whose leaders stand for something!" comment customers when asked what they like most. Chick-Fil-A, Southwest Airlines, USAA, and The Container Store receive high marks. Stand-for-something leaders aren't the loud, flamboyant, publicity-seeking types. Instead, they are clear, focused, courageous, and committed to stay their course and stand their ground.

Imaginative service leaders are grounded in complete, no-exceptions integrity. They reek of integrity. As *Tom Peters* says, "There is no such thing as a *minor lapse of integrity*." They show their nobility when they courageously tell the truth, relentlessly do what they say they will do, and gallantly turn their backs on all shady actions. They send signals through their character.

*Customers seek more value for their money.* As you scramble to shore up value, the time is ripe for service with inventiveness—not just service with generosity. Leaders must ensure that the elements they add to their leadership advance service innovation.

## Critical Thinking

1. What do the authors of the article mean by a *value-unique* service?
2. With a small group of peers from your class, come up with a list of other imaginative services based on your own experiences and observations.

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