



# MICHAEL D. BROWN

*about*



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A pioneer in customer service, Michael D. Brown inspires and leads teams to deliver unprecedented results that improve customer loyalty and enhance the bottom line. A consultant, speaker, coach, and trainer, Michael has built his core values of determination, ambition, and creativity on the lessons he learned from life experiences, as well as 15 years of technical and functional leadership. He uses this knowledge to provide a ground-up approach that focuses on a company's most important asset—its employees—to create World-Class customer service.

The 7th of 10 children raised in rural Mississippi by a widowed mother, Michael began his understanding of customer service at a young age. He started a candy business at school that grew to generate \$300-\$400 a day that helped support his family. As he worked to put himself through college, Michael learned from first-hand experience as a frontline employee and manager that when businesses treated their employees as their most important asset, employee enthusiasm was unleashed and a passion for excellence poured out. And that passion is contagious.

Michael has worked with a number of Fortune 100 companies, independent businesses, non-profits, and entrepreneurs to improve their mission, service, and growth concurrently. He has cultivated his innovative Fresh Customer Service® message and delivers it through keynotes, seminars, workshops, executive retreats, and now a book of the same title. Michael has a BBA in Management from Jackson State University. He holds a MBA in Global Management.



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

*about the book*

## *Fresh Customer Service*

The status quo of customer service has done little to curb long lines, address customer issues, or increase customer loyalty. Luckily for business owners and managers, there's a revolutionary new approach.

*Fresh Customer Service*, by Michael D. Brown, turns the classic customer service philosophy upside-down by advocating that the key to stellar customer service and improving the bottom line is treating the employee as number one and the customer as number two. Featuring a proven system that Brown has used to rework slacking Fortune 100 companies and struggling small businesses, the book is a must-read for managers, business owners, and supervisors in charge of frontline employees.

In an age where products alone aren't enough to lure repeat business, it's service that makes the difference. Since frontline employees are the primary point of contact with customers, they are a company's most important asset—and creating an environment in which frontline employees are listened to and encouraged to take an active role in the company's success is essential. *Fresh Customer Service* lays out Brown's signature 6.5 Fresh Steps® needed to finally provide World-Class customer service that increases customer loyalty and improves the bottom line.

*Fresh Customer Service* acts as a step-by-step guide on how to assess and revise a company's service approach. It all starts with a "Side-By-Side Walk" to understand employees' daily challenges, then allows "Bubble-Up Innovation" and graduates to "Make it Right Power" to resolve issues immediately before customers walk out the door. Other steps include "Smart Tasking" service priorities, developing a "What-If Arsenal," and "Relentless Focus" on a service standard.

Written in a humorous yet thought-provoking and action-oriented style, the book uses anecdotes, such as standing in a poorly-run checkout line, to pinpoint service issues that plague every business and shows the reader how to implement the best steps to remedy the root cause.

Customers have long demanded better service. Finally, Brown's fresh approach will give 21st century businesses the ability to deliver it to them. Because turning customers into loyal customers is what everyone's bottom line depends on.



*Fresh Customer Service*  
Acanthus Publishing, October 2007

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U.S. \$24.95



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

*speaking topics*

## *Fresh Customer Service®*

Customer service initiatives all recognize the importance of the customer experience. But too many programs focus on the reasons “why” without providing the concrete “how” to the people who create the frontline experience.

The ideas encompassed in Fresh Customer Service® make the frontline staff the ultimate source of both the customer experience and the solutions to any problems that arise. It supports frontline employees in their core mission of customer satisfaction through their tasking, training, tools, recognition, the Fresh Customer Service® philosophy, and the empowerment to “make it right.”

### **What is Fresh Customer Service®?**

Fresh Customer Service® is a customer service program that builds on an understanding of the frontline customer experience, allows the people who deliver the service to correct problem areas, and continually refreshes itself in response to a changing environment.

### **What are the steps involved in Fresh Customer Service®?**

In order to create a World-Class customer experience, the organization must undergo three phases: Fresh Understanding, Fresh Empowerment, and Fresh Thinking. It is these three steps that will provide the foundation, or business model, that equips the frontline employees with the tools and skills necessary to provide Fresh Customer Service® 365 days a year.

### **What are the concrete results of Fresh Customer Service®?**

1. Aligning corporate strategies to better incorporate the core mission of customer service, ultimately enhancing the bottom line.
2. Improving frontline execution of corporate strategies without sacrificing the customer experience.
3. Creating the awareness, empowerment, and tools that can be utilized by the Frontline Employees to “Make-it-Right Now” when customer problems/opportunities surface.
4. Increasing the confidence of the frontline staff for the resolution of customer issues and improved consistency in response.
5. Establishing a competitive, grounded customer service program as a part of the core business model.
6. Providing high-speed response to market competition allowing a sustained competitive advantage.



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*speaking topics*

## *Get a Brand or Die a Generic®*

The world is changing, especially the business world. Technology, outsourcing, insourcing and process reengineering are all altering the landscape. At the end of the day there will be fewer people required to perform the necessary business tasks. Those who survive this onslaught of change must reinvent themselves (quickly) into a brand that is marketable. Michael takes the audience through a journey of what's happening and provides the tools and techniques that inspire them to meet the challenge head-on with a winning brand.

This engaging session will leave the participants with the power to create a distinct logo and image, as well as the skills they need to consistently deliver the WOW factor in their personal lives and careers. Participants will be inspired to create a more powerful and competitive brand in their personal lives and on their jobs.

This session is great for individuals or organizations who desire to move from the ordinary to the extraordinary. An audience favorite is learning how to impress in three seconds! Michael is often cornered after the session by participants searching for more information and the opportunity to share with him what they regard as their new-found brand.

## *program topics and presentations*

### *The Passion of Success Program*

Michael Brown's engagement programs are packed with rich practical experience, proven and timely solutions, passion, excitement, inspiration, and energy for individuals and organizations that are settling for mediocrity or who genuinely believe that they can't achieve and/or exceed their goals. Despite growing up in extreme poverty and being faced with a challenging environment, Michael was able to hold on to his *Passion*, which has led to a highly successful personal life and a distinguished professional career.

He has formulated "The Passion of Success Program," an organizational and personal development engagement experience that provides the framework for him to share the tools, techniques, and principles that underpin his amazing success. By emphasizing the critical role of *Passion* in achieving success, Michael inspires behaviors and cultural changes that foster positive results.

Michael blends his wealth of technical and functional experience acquired from working within Fortune 100 companies with a powerful, motivating, and captivating delivery style.



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*speaking topics*

With a track record of proven results, Michael has been able to drastically increase the bottom line of a number of Fortune 100 companies through motivating and inspiring their people to successfully deliver unprecedented results.

Michael does not deliver canned speeches and presentations. He takes the time to understand the organization and weave each one's corporate and individual goals into the presentation. Groups and organizations from all over have employed his skills and expertise when they are struggling to motivate and grow their staff and bottom line.

## **The Passion of Customer Service Success**

Michael has spent over 15 years in the customer-facing business. He clearly understands the anatomy of customer service from the viewpoint of both the hourly employee and CEO. Far too often we instill the slogan "The customer is always right" into our employees without providing them with the tools and techniques to provide a WOW customer experience. Customer service is of major importance in today's competitive market. No business or organization can afford not to provide a consistently positive customer experience.

Participants will walk away with tools and techniques that can easily be implemented and will positively enhance their bottom line.

A combination of role playing, videos, music, and participation makes this an exciting, content-filled presentation.

## **The Passion of Leadership Success**

This engaging program provides tested and proven best practices, tools, and principles to empower participants to yield high levels of output and deliver results. Through leading highly successful and productive teams all over the country, Michael has gained invaluable experience he shares with his audience, including how he led a team of 22 managers from 16 different nationalities to unprecedented results.

During this program, Michael shares his seven *Passion* principles that will spark the leadership flame and inspire participants to lead highly effective teams that deliver results.

The audience will play an active part in this learning experience. Through Michael's engaging presentation style, relevant and meaningful content, and a bit of humor, the audience will come alive.



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*clients*

## Current and Previous Clients:

Alabama A&M University	Florida A&M University	Philander Smith College
The Aldridge Company	Ford Foundation	Ralph & Kacoo's
The Alternative Board	Grambling State University	Romano's Macaroni Grill
AMOCO	Greater Houston Partnership	The S.F. Foundation
ARCO	Highlander Research EC	Sonic
Bethune Cookman College	Houston Rockets	Southern University and A&M College
Big Brothers Big Sisters	Inroads	Sanford Brown Institute
BOMBAY Bicycle Club	J and S Visual, Inc.	Tate Tax Service
BP	Jackson State University	Techness Group
Capital One	Jason's Deli	TriNet
CEO Roundtables	KRM Information Services, Inc.	The United States Marine Corp
Children's Defense Fund	Landry's Seafood House	The United States Navy
Clark Atlanta University	Marriott	University of Arkansas
CTWO	Mississippi Valley State University	The University of Findlay
Definition Fitness™ Studio	Murphy Oil Corporation	US Army
EEPB	NORWEST	VisionSpot Consulting, LLC.
Excargo Services Inc.	Omni Hotels	Wells Fargo
Express Employment Services	Prairie View A&M University	Wendy's
First Baptist Church of Lincoln Garden		



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*in the media*

## *bylined articles*

**BusinessWeek**

**SmallBiz**

“Why Innovation is so Important for Improving Customer Service”  
January 8, 2008

“Improve Your Customer Service”  
January 4, 2008

“A What-If Arsenal Can Solve 90% of Your Customer Complaints”  
January 3, 2008

“Customer Service Is About Relentless Focus”  
January 1, 2008

“Improving Customer Service by Trailing Employees”  
October 12, 2007

“Employee Recognition Improves Customer Service”  
September 28, 2007

“Empower Employees to Handle Customer Problems”  
September 27, 2007

“The Customer Isn’t Always No. 1”  
September 24, 2007

display & design ideas



“Employee is #1”  
July 23, 2007



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**THE ECONOMIC TIMES**

“Employee Recognition Improves Customer Service”  
October 2, 2007



“Make Your Customer Number Two”  
November 1, 2007

**INSIDE BUSINESS**  
THE HAMPTON ROADS BUSINESS JOURNAL

“Put Employees First”  
November 20, 2007

*The Manager's*  
**INTELLIGENCE**  
*Report*

“Make Every Job Visit Count”  
January 2008



“Customer Service: Are You Being Served?”  
May 2008

 **RETAILCROSSING**

“Registering the Importance of the Frontline Employee”  
January 7, 2008

“Start With Gratitude, Then Walk Together”  
January 28, 2008



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*in the media*



**"Empower Your Frontline — Customer Service Starts With Employees"**  
March 1, 2008



**"Know Your Customer"**  
By James Bickers  
February 13, 2008



**"Front Office Staff Can Make or Break Your Practice"**  
June 2008

## THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

**"Outsourcing Comes Home"**  
By Marilyn Gardner  
October 22, 2007

### *media mentions*



**"Lexington Native Sets Forth Business Philosophy in Book"**  
By *Holmes County Herald* Staff Writer  
February 20, 2008



**"Make Your Customer No. 2:  
Want to Provide Fresh Customer Service?  
Ignore Conventional Wisdom"**  
November/December 2007



**"Putting the Customer Second"**  
By Dan Berthiaume  
February 20, 2008



**"Jackson State University Grad Developing a Formula for Personal Branding"**  
By Lynn Lofton  
November 1, 2007



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*in the media*



"Black MBAs in Retail"

By Sheryl Nance-Nash

September 18, 2007



"Minority Firms on the Rise"

By Ann Brown

August 10, 2010



"Personas Help Retailers Connect With Shoppers"

By James Bickers editor

March 25, 2008

*radio interviews*



Fresh Customer Service

October 12, 2007



"Friendpreneurs: How to Find Success, Preserve Relationships"

By Ann Brown

January 13, 2009

Black Friday Fresh Customer Service  
November 20, 2007



WLRN Tropical Currents

Fresh Customer Service

November 1, 2007



Is Your Customer Service Staff in Jeopardy?

By Jeremy Nedelka

April 13, 2009



KUHF Business Hour

Fresh Customer Service

November 8, 2007



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*in the media*

## Profitability Channel

“Fresh Customer Service”  
The Ugly Truth About Business show  
March 17, 2008

The Small Business Book Club  
March 28, 2007



Fresh Customer Service  
June 9, 2008



"Real Talk on How You Can Rise & Truly  
Shine in 2009"  
January 08, 2009

## *book reviews*



“‘Fresh Customer Service’ Focuses on Employees”  
By Tina Manzer  
November 28, 2007



“‘Fresh Customer Service’ Focuses on Employees”  
By Vicki Gervickas  
September/October 2007



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

## *testimonials*

“This book takes you along the path of not just thinking outside the box, but throwing the box outside the window. This is a new breed of customer services you’ve never seen before!”

**Nido Qubein, President, High Point University,  
Chairman, Great Harvest Bread Co.**

“Empowering employees to provide World-Class customer service is a sure-fire way to accelerate your success. This book is packed with powerful recipes to produce top results!”

**Tony Jeary, Author of over 35 books, including  
*Life is a Series of Presentations*, Coach to the World’s Top CEO’s**

“Michael D. Brown has given us a valuable ‘tool kit’ that is theoretically grounded, yet simple and practical enough that my managers can use it on a daily basis. This book is must-reading for those who supervise tough customer relations areas on campuses like admissions, records, and financial aid.”

**Dr. James E. Lyons, Sr.  
Secretary of Higher Education, State of Maryland,  
Past President, California State University, Dominguez Hills**

“It certainly is a ‘fresh’ and detailed approach to obtaining customer satisfaction.”

**Cathy Hughes, Founder and Chairperson, Radio One, Inc.**

“If you depend on customers for revenue, you must read this book. *Fresh Customer Service* will transform the way you treat your employees, which will transform the way your employees treat your customers, which will transform your bottom line.”

**Dr. Tony Alessandra, Author of *The Platinum Rule* and *Charisma***



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## *testimonials*

“Michael D. Brown’s 6.5 Fresh Steps® for delivering a World-Class customer service experience are truly fresh and right on! It’s a salad bar of fresh ideas for enhancing that most important experience... that experience the customer has with you and your business.”

**Sam Allman, Speaker, Consultant, and Entrepreneur**  
*Author of Heart and Mind Selling: The New Secret to Closing the Sale and Winning the Customer for Life*

“*Fresh Customer Service* is a wonderful resource that helps managers and leaders change their priorities to keep business booming. I would recommend it to anyone who works with a staff under him.”

**Calvin Mackie, Ph.D.**  
*Author of A View from the Roof—Lessons for Life & Business*

“Until reading Michael D. Brown’s *Fresh Customer Service* I had no idea how much placing the customer ahead of the employees was damaging the bottom line. I am confident that if businesses adopt Michael’s strategies, profits, customer loyalty, and workplace morale will all increase dramatically.”

**John Napolitano CPA, CFP, PFF**  
**Chairman and CEO of US Wealth Management, LLC**

“Michael D. Brown is a man on a mission. This book will transform your customer service experience. If you want first-class results then you need to read this book and then share it with everyone you know. It will change their lives.”

**Willie Jolley, CSP, CPAE**  
**America’s Leading Motivational Speaker-Singer-Author**  
*Author of It Only Takes a Minute to Change Your Life*



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## *testimonials*

“A ‘must-read’ for any frontline manager. Michael D. Brown provides great clarity into why it is important to treat the employee as #1. His insight is truly refreshing but also spot on.”

**Ian D. Bishop, ChFC CMFC Branch Manager, Ameriprise Financial**  
(An American Express Company)

“Michael D. Brown’s new book, *Fresh Customer Service*, outlines a brilliant, hands-on approach for customer service. Not a theoretical book, it presents concrete, proven examples that are working in today’s time-sensitive, high-stress customer driven environments. These practices show that customer service can be transformed from pretty posters on the wall to efficient and effective actions on the frontline. All industries should be looking at these fresh breakthrough concepts.”

**Juanell Teague**  
Author of *The Zig Ziglar Difference*

“Michael’s concepts are real and the results are proven everyday in top companies across America. It really is about the frontline employee—they are the ones that touch your customers every day. Michael’s 6.5 Fresh Steps® put the focus where it should be—on the employee!”

**Bob Furniss**  
President, Touchpoint Associates

“Refreshing (pardon the pun) is the word I’d choose to describe this new book on customer service. So many have written on this subject and said pretty much the same, but Michael D. Brown has actually found a new and practical approach to this well traveled topic. He says we should focus first on our employees and second on our customers. I agree. When we start treating the caregivers with the care we want them to give, then we get loyal, happy and profitable customers.”

**Jim Cathcart,**  
author of *Relationship Selling, The Eight Competencies of Top Sales Producers*



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MICHAEL D.  
BROWN

*articles*

## *Shift Your Customer Service Paradigm to Grow Your Bottom Line*

By Michael D. Brown, MBA  
BusinessWeek.com 2007

Customers expect businesses to provide the best customer service. However, many businesses have failed potential loyal customers by holding on to the tired customer service strategy of treating the customer as number one, only to see their sales stagnate, retention erode, and repeat business dwindle. What businesses need is a fresh approach and that is to treat their employee as number one and the customer as number two.

The trick is to reprioritize who's most important in your customer service strategy. Who knows how to handle customers better than your frontline employee? They regularly see and hear the complaints that customers have and if you listen to them, they usually have the best solutions.

In order to deliver a World-Class customer service experience, businesses need to build their approach and strategies around those who execute it. It can be as simple as listening to employee suggestions and incorporating them. If you want to take it a step further, give them the power to think independently and to instantly solve customer problems.

Treating the employee as number one is the only way to attain the service that creates repeat business and improves your bottom line. It shows employees that you are concerned and committed to their well-being. This leads to passionate and enthusiastic employees who unleash their enthusiasm onto the customer experience.

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## *Employee Recognition Creates World-Class Customer Service*

By Michael D. Brown, MBA  
BusinessWeek.com 2007

Customer service is crucial for businesses hoping to compete with chain stores, larger companies, and even the business next door. While there are a number of steps to ensure that you are offering World-Class customer service, the first approach is simple: make sure that your frontline employees feel respected and valued.



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

## *articles*

Businesses need happy employees because they unleash their enthusiasm and passion from within, and that passion is infectious. It transmits to everyone around them and most importantly to the customers.

The easiest way to do this is with positive feedback. Managers usually only thank their employees when they go above and beyond their job description, which they should. Why not thank them for just doing what they're supposed to do? It can't hurt.

After voicing your recognition, follow up by treating them likewise. The frontline employee is the most important asset to your customer service experience. So treat them with the utmost respect, honesty, and trust. They need to know that you are committed to their well-being.

Giving your employees the recognition and gratitude for a job well done is a simple but overlooked act. It can be the difference between a disgruntled and motivated employee. Which do you want delivering the customer experience?

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## *Empower Employees to Handle Customer Problems*

By Michael D. Brown, MBA  
BusinessWeek.com 2007

Nine times out of ten a customer problem starts with a simple issue that can be solved in a matter of minutes. These issues can make the difference between one-time customers and loyal patrons. Frontline employees typically encounter and discover customer problems and should therefore be equipped and enabled to instantly resolve them.

This is what I call "Make-It-Right Power." It makes the frontline experience run more smoothly and efficiently for both customers and frontline employees. To incorporate this into your business, you need to engage Frontline Employees to ensure it is valuable and effective.

Here are some steps to give frontline employees Make-It-Right Power:

- Spend some time with the frontline employees to understand how they currently solve customers' problems.
- Find out from the employees what would make it easier for them solve these problems.



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

*articles*

- Record this gathered knowledge into a “best practice document.”
- Establish Make-It-Right authority for every employee in the organization.
- Define a policy and procedure around how to administer Make-It-Right Power.
- Provide the necessary training.

Once a frontline employee has Make-It-Right Power, he or she can solve the problems that customers want resolved instantly. This is a simple step that will improve customer loyalty and improve your bottom line.

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## *Walk First or Crawl Later!*

By Michael D. Brown, MBA  
BusinessWeek.com 2007

Businesses can learn a lot about their customer service from their employees. One lesson is to walk a day in their shoes or as I like to call it, “Side-By-Side Walking.” It offers a ground-up view of the service that customers receive while understanding the needs and tasks that employees require to deliver World-Class customer service.

Performing a Side-By-Side Walk will inform you on the necessary policy changes and processes that will increase your service experience, employee moral, and the bottom line. The following are steps for a successful Side-By-Side Walking evaluation:

- Before walking, write down your interpretation of employee tasks.
- Assume the full role of your frontline employee in all areas including the uniform.
- Do all employee tasks, from opening to closing.
- Follow all processes that are in place without influencing protocol.  
Work as they work and observe as you go.
- Compare your work experience with the formal job description and note the necessary improvements that will enhance your service experience.

Once your business understands the ground-up approach, infuse your new-found knowledge into your customer service strategy. You will be armed with information that will aid you in creating a frontline environment that your frontline employees can be passionate about and your customers will notice.



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

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## *Make Your Customer Number Two*

### **Want to Provide Fresh Customer Service? Ignore Conventional Wisdom**

By Michael D. Brown, MBA  
*The Toy Book*, 2007

The vast majority of customer service strategies use the idea of making the customer their top priority and cornerstone. Yet, lines are still long, information is scarce, products are out of place or stock, and no two employees have the same answer to the same question. If today's public-serving organizations really are making the customer number one, they have a funny way of demonstrating it.

The business world needs a makeover. A new perspective. An approach that I like to call "Fresh Customer Service." Fresh Customer Service® demystifies the process of attracting loyal, happy customers who return again and again and recommend your business to their friends and families. This type of customer reaction can actually tip the scales and prove the difference between a prosperous organization and a bankrupt one. So what's the secret? Treating the employee as number one.

The struggle to turn just any old customer into a loyal customer is unyielding, and the burden of competition is so stiff you don't have time to think about what Mary Jo at the cash register and Frank the janitor have to say about things.

But these are the exact people to whom you need to listen and show your appreciation. The only way you can hope to deliver a World-Class customer service experience is by listening to, equipping, empowering, involving, and valuing the feedback and expertise your frontline employees can offer.

The key to running a successful operation is believing in and practicing the concept that customers should always come second—employees matter more in the immediate sense and should therefore come first. After all, happy employees unleash their enthusiasm and passion from within, and that passion is contagious. It infects everyone around them, including customers.

The first step to treating the employee as number one is positive feedback. Management receives feedback, why not the frontline employees, the most important asset of an organization? Giving your employees the recogni-



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tion and gratitude for a job well done is a simple but overlooked act. However, it can make the difference between motivated and disgruntled employees. Here are some simple steps to putting this plan to action.

- Thank your employees every day. Thank them for going above and beyond their job descriptions. And why not thank them for doing what they're supposed to be doing? It sure can't hurt anyone.
- Treat each employee with the utmost trust, honesty, respect, integrity, and commitment to his or her well-being. The frontline employee is the most important asset, resource, and ally to an organization's operations. He or she and his or her quest to deliver a World-Class customer service experience are paramount. We must take care of all of our frontline employees first if we ever hope to effectively and consistently reach the customer.

Once the employees are respected, Fresh Customer Service® is on its way. The next step businesses should take is to learn from their employees by walking a day in their shoes. Side-by-Side Walking offers businesses a way to interact and learn from their employees. It offers an insider perspective that is usually lost between front-line employees and management. By understanding the tasks and experiences that workers encounter, a better service plan can be created with employees in mind to highlight their strengths. Helpful tips for Side-by-Side Walking include:

- Before starting the experience, be sure to secure a copy of the formal job description for the job being observed. Write down your interpretation of what you think the job involves. After completing the experience, reflect on the reality of the employees' day versus the formal description.
- Complete an entire shift, from the pre-shift work through the closing process. You can't cut corners if you expect to make a change. Observing all aspects of customer service is the only way to make informed decisions.

Once businesses understand the ground-up approach to customer service they are likely to develop a plan for efficiency. However, don't make the mistake of not keeping the employee in the forefront. They are the brand ambassadors of any business, so make sure that they are empowered employees: Trusting your employees to make decisions and act with authority gives them not only a heightened sense of responsibility but also the freedom to handle a customer's complaint—not just directing him or her to a manager. Tips to creating empowered employees include:

- Listen. All employees should have the right to be involved in the planning of the work affecting them. They encounter and discover customer problems. Ask and listen to their feedback when developing new procedures because they may solve an issue that management hadn't thought of.



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- Give workers Make-It-Right Power. Customers want to see an instant solution to their problems. Allowing employees authority can transform a customer's bad experience into a positive one.
- When deciding how much power employees have to make things right, make sure that firm, well-documented policies are in place.

For many individuals, organizations, corporations, mom-and-pop stores, and entrepreneurs, delivering a World-Class customer service experience through Fresh Customer Service® will require a cultural change. But embracing this experience, no matter how much work it will take, will deliver a competitive edge unlike any other.

If you are a manager, frontline leader, supervisor, entrepreneur, director, HR rep, business owner or CEO, you must offer your frontline employees a healthy, fruitful, cohesive working environment where their contributions are valued and respected. Remember that if you first take care of the frontline employees, they will take care of the customers, and the bottom line will take care of itself.

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## *The Experts: Customer Service Put Employees First*

By Michael D. Brown, MBA  
*insidebiz.com*  
December 3, 2007

Lured by the pressure of holiday gift-giving, sales and discounts, people flock to the stores every year, searching for the perfect present. Lines are long, tempers are short. When done, customers leave tired, frustrated and hoping they can avoid the mall for the foreseeable future. Retailers may be thrilled with the boost in seasonal revenue – but are they creating lasting customer relationships?

There is a way to build a satisfied customer base and deliver world-class customer service on the busiest of shopping days. If you treat your employees as your most important priority and your customers as No. 2, you will provide a level of service that will thrill your buying public while making your employees feel empowered and fully engaged.

Putting your employees ahead of your customers may seem like a radical concept, but it is the perfect way to be proactive about achieving world-class customer service – and it's easier than you think. There are only two simple initiatives you need to improve your holiday customer service: Arm your employees with “Make-It-Right Power” and listen to their “Bubble-Up Innovation.”

The most immediate service issues that managers and business owners need to resolve are customer complaints. The best way to do this is to arm your employees with “Make-It-Right Power.” Most customer complaints begin with what should be simple, easily resolved situations. Your frontline employees are the ones who are face-to-face with these problems – and they should be the ones equipped and empowered to provide the solutions. This way, when there is a simple complaint, the employee can address the issue immediately rather than requiring the customer to wait for a manager. This makes the process run more smoothly and can make the difference between a disgruntled customer and a loyal, repeat shopper.

Sounds simple, right? It is. And the easiest way to put it into practice is to treat it like you would any other store initiative. If you listen to your staff, set guidelines as to how to resolve each issue and train everyone accordingly, the transition to empowered employees will be a smooth one.

Listening to your employees is key. Because of their frontline status, your employees have a special understand-



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ing of your customer's needs and expectations. After all, they deal more directly with the customers than anyone else in your operation, including you. Since your staff can offer a unique perspective on your customers, it is critical that you spend time with them to understand how issues of customer service are resolved. You can use their experiences to create a "best practices" document – a document that establishes and details the bounds of authority that an employee has to deal with any issues.

While you're imbuing your employees with "Make-It-Right Power," you will discover that your employees will have ideas and suggestions for all aspects of your store's operation. This leads to the second initiative, "Bubble-Up Innovation." This is when you allow fresh ideas on how to run things come to you from your frontline employees.

Your employees have experiences that only they can articulate. Set up a zone where they can freely share their ideas and experiences – be that via tape recorder, suggestion box or any other means. Create a rewards and recognitions program for the most innovative suggestions; gift certificates, movie tickets and spot bonuses are all excellent incentives for your employees to give you their very best ideas. And when they do, you will have insight into how to set yourself apart from your competitors. And if you can make your business stand out, you will enhance your bottom line.

If you put your employees first, you give them a sense of empowerment and ownership in their work. They will become more engaged, more helpful and more enthusiastic. And it will translate into a vastly improved customer service experience – no matter the season.

Make this happen, and you will show your customers that you can deliver a world-class customer service experience during the busiest shopping days of the year. Do that and you will undoubtedly create loyal customers who will be yours long after Dec. 25.

Michael D. Brown MBA, a professional speaker, coach and trainer, has worked with BP, Wells Fargo Financial, Ford Foundation, Amoco and Wendy's International. Information about him and his book, *Fresh Customer Service*, is available at [www.FreshCustomerService.com](http://www.FreshCustomerService.com).

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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

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## *Retail industry needs to re-evaluate customer service*

By Wendy Elliott/The Advertiser

[novanewsnow.com](http://novanewsnow.com)

December 8, 2007

Last week in The Advertiser, we reprinted a 40-year-old photo of retail buildings in Wolfville and the image took one of our gentle readers back in time.

Great-grandmother Joan Eaton called to reminisce about a Christmas when the proprietor of Porter's Grocery refused to sell her some turkey. Apparently, he felt she couldn't afford a whole bird, so he cut one in half and sold her that.

Can anyone imagine that happening today? With Christmas on the horizon, I can feel the shopping Mecca called New Minas getting busier by the day. As my friend Barb says, this season is like living in a pressure cooker of consumerism.

It's no accident that a Berkeley environmental activist turned filmmaker by the name of Annie Leonard launched her new 20-minute webflick called The Story of Stuff earlier this month. Leonard distills succinctly years of research and advocacy into an online documentary about what she calls the "materials economy."

According to her, the corporate giants conceived of our consumerist lifestyle after WWII to build on ramped-up wartime production. Today we buy and buy and only keep one per cent of all we purchase, all the while devaluing the planet. Check out her little film before you go Christmas shopping. I'm going to select presents from the World Vision catalogue.

MLA David Morse was quite taken, he told me, with a speech given by Lil MacPherson, one of the winners of a Maritime Business Ethics Award recently. Lil and her partner run the Wooden Monkey Restaurant in Halifax that features organic local food, fair trade coffee and sustainable fish. It avoids the industrial food system and attracted the Rolling Stones when they were in town.

Try doing something small



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Lil told those at the awards dinner, “if everyone just looked at the effects of the product they are buying, it would make a big difference.... If you feel that you can’t do something big in life, then do something small in a big way.”

The New Minas branch of the Valley Credit Union practices that philosophy when it comes to banking services. The credit union aims to keep money in the community, and the staff work hard at good customer relations.

Not too long ago village resident Russell Walsh wrote a poetic testimonial to his credit union.

Among the several verses, Walsh said, “The staff are oh-so-friendly, they greet you with a smile. It’s really nice to know that they go the extra mile.” Consequently, a pleased staff presented Walsh with a Credit Union watch. What goes around comes around.

American customer service consultant Michael D. Brown, who has a new book out, believes the retail industry needs to re-evaluate its customer service strategies to lure shoppers to become a loyal customer who adding to their bottom line.

“Consumers often cite customer service over price when it comes to where they spend their money,” he contends. “Regardless if a retailer is a box store or a specialty shop, consumers want a hassle-free and positive service experience that will refresh their sense of shopping, even during the hectic season.”

For New Minas shopper Carmen Hines, positive experience means not being charged the old Canadian price on U.S. magazines now that our dollar is worth more. She wanted to warn her fellow consumers to check out what area stores are charging since the rise of the loonie. And Hines described the frustration of trying to reach a human being to protest the pricing she saw in a local grocery store.

“I’m not a passive consumer any more,” she told me, “and I always buy local.” If we could shop intelligently and buy less, how much better off the planet will be.

Note: In last week’s column I equated high tides and global warming. Dr. Liz Kusters tells me the tidal reach in the Minas Basin is still growing. She will bring her expertise to the Blomidon Naturalists’ meeting Jan. 21. The topic is sediment in the Bay of Fundy, a look at results by different researchers on tidal currents and the challenges for tidal power development.

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## Make Your Customer Number Two

### Want to Provide Fresh Customer Service? Ignore Conventional Wisdom

by Michael D. Brown, MBA



The vast majority of customer service strategies use the idea of making the customer their top priority and cornerstone. Yet, lines are still long, information is scarce, products are out of place or stock, and no two employees have the same answer to the same question. If today's public-serving organizations really are making the customer number one, they have a funny way of demonstrating it.

The business world needs a makeover. A new perspective. An approach that I like to call "Fresh Customer Service." Fresh Customer Service® demystifies the process of attracting loyal, happy customers who return again and again and recommend your business to their friends and families. This type of customer reaction can actually tip the scales and prove the difference between a prosperous organization and a bankrupt one. So what's the secret? Treating the Employee as #1.

The struggle to turn just-any-old customer into a loyal customer is unyielding, and the burden of competition is so stiff you don't have time to think about what Mary Jo at the cash

register and Frank the Janitor have to say about things.

But these are the exact people to whom you need to listen and show your appreciation. The only way you can hope to deliver a World-Class customer service experience is by listening to, equipping, empowering, involving, and valuing the feedback and expertise your frontline employees can offer.

The key to running a successful operation is believing in and practicing the concept that customers should always come second—employees matter more in the immediate sense and should therefore come first. After all, happy employees unleash their enthusiasm and passion from within, and that passion is contagious. It infects everyone around them, including customers.

The first step to treating the employee as number one is positive feedback. Management receives feedback, why not the frontline employees, the most important asset of an organization? Giving your employees the recognition and gratitude for a job well done is a simple, but overlooked act. However, it can make the difference between motivated and disgruntled employees. Here are some simple steps to putting this plan to action.

- Thank your employees every day. Thank them for going above and beyond their job descriptions. And why not thank them for doing what they're supposed to be doing? It sure can't hurt anyone.
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organization's operations. He (or she) and his (or her) quest to deliver a World-Class customer service experience are paramount. We must take care of all of our Frontline Employees first if we ever hope to effectively and consistently reach the customer.

Once the employees are respected, Fresh Customer Service is on its way. The next step businesses should take is to learn from their employees by walking a day in their shoes. Side-by-Side Walking offers businesses a way to interact and learn from their employees. It offers an insider perspective that is usually lost between frontline employees and management. By understanding the tasks and experiences that workers encounter, a better service plan can be created with employees in mind to highlight their strengths. Helpful tips for Side-by-Side Walking include:

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*As a successful professional speaker, coach, and trainer, Michael D. Brown draws upon his own life experiences and highly successful corporate career to deliver unprecedented results that enhance the bottom line. With 15 years of technical and functional leadership experience, Michael delivers his message on Fresh Customer Service through keynotes, seminars, workshops, and executive retreats. Read more about Michael's fresh approach to customer service in his soon to be released book Fresh Customer Service and visit [www.themichaeldbrown.com](http://www.themichaeldbrown.com) for more information.*

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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

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## *Jackson State University grad developing a formula for personal branding built on PASSION*

By: Lynn Lofton  
Mississippi Business Journal, Dolan Media Newswires  
Issue Date: 12/03/2007

JACKSON, MS—"Get a brand or die a generic" is the blunt advice Jackson State University (JSU) alum Michael D. Brown delivers to college students and others across the country. The speaker, trainer and author spoke to student leaders at his alma mater last week with that message.

He says his philosophy is resonating with students because they, like others, are finding that companies only want to hire the best and the best is getting better.

"I tell students they must have something different that makes them stand out — they must be known for something," he said. "Without that, their careers begin to die and that affects their personal lives.

For Brown, it's all about passion. Using the word passion, his program, which is not just applicable to students, sets out an admonition for each letter as follows:

P — preparation; work on it every day.

A — aspiration. What do you want to be?

S — stay focused.

S — setting the piece in place.

I — invigorate yourself; keep yourself excited.

O — omit the negative. Things happen in your life; you learn from them and move on.

N — nailing the brand. Now that you've figured out what you want to be; you must make it happen.

"People who are memorable such as Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart and Donald Trump have a brand they have



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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

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created for themselves, and they never stop working on it,” he said. “Find your passion and connect to it.”

He finds that most students don’t realize they have to work at branding themselves. His words often are a wake-up call to those who haven’t participated in activities or done anything to set themselves apart.

“Many students are moving home with their parents because they can’t afford to live on their own, or the pay increases they get aren’t enough,” he said. “I try to tell them how to not graduate into poverty.”

Brown earned an MBA in global management after leaving JSU and worked for a number of Fortune 50 companies. He was often called upon to set up and conduct training sessions for employees. Fueled by the passion he felt for training and the encouragement he received from others, he developed his own training points for customer service and personal advancement.

This highly-motivated 35-year-old’s passion keeps him going. “My goal is to give more than I receive,” he said. “Getting e-mails and notes from students and professors telling me that I’ve helped them or they’ve changed the way they teach motivates me. I can stay energized because I’m doing what I love so it’s not work.”

He uses the passion and ability-to-stay-fresh formula and says it’s how he survived corporate downsizings before he started his own training/coaching business. Now a resident of Los Angeles, Brown grew up in Lexington where god parents in the neighborhood and three Catholic nuns influenced his life and values.

“Because my mother worked, they took me on and made sure I was okay,” he said. “They were a good influence on me. They taught me that I could get respect and still drive people in a for-profit world. I find that motivating people works in today’s world where they want more than a competitive salary, want more out of a job.”

Toward that end, Brown developed a customer service presentation that was recently published as a book, “Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life.” His expertise in customer service has led him to consult with Fortune 100 companies such as BP and Wells Fargo Financial along with nonprofits including the Ford Foundation.

“In years past, workers stayed in one job and didn’t expect their employers to care about them,” he said. “Today, employers have to be more creative in attracting new talent and keeping it.”

Now he is working on a second book around the “get a brand or die a generic” theme. “I like to get away to develop new ideas, to travel, reflect and write,” he said.

In addition to being a speaker and trainer, Brown is a contributing writer to BusinessWeek.com and has been featured in The Christian Science Monitor and Diversity MBA Magazine on developing customer service strategy and business management.

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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

articles

## Make Your Customer No. 2

**Want to Provide Fresh Customer Service? Ignore Conventional Wisdom**

by Michael Brown, author of *Fresh Customer Service*

The vast majority of customer service strategies use the idea of making the customer their top priority and cornerstone. Yet, lines are still long, information is scarce, products are out of place or stock, and no two employees have the same answer to the same question. If today's public-serving organizations really are making the customer No. 1, they have a funny way of demonstrating it.

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The key to running a successful operation is believing in and practicing the concept that customers should always come second. Employees matter more in the immediate sense and should therefore come first. After all, happy employees unleash their enthusiasm and passion from within, and that passion is contagious. It infects everyone around them, including customers.

The first step to treating the employee as No. 1 is positive feedback. Management receives feedback, why not the front-line employees, the most important asset of an organization? Giving your employees the recognition and gratitude for a job well done is a simple, but often overlooked, act. However, it can make the difference between motivated and disgruntled employees. Here are some simple steps to putting this plan to action.

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- Complete an entire shift, from the pre-shift work through the closing process. You can't cut corners if you expect to make a change. Observing all aspects of customer service is the only way to make informed decisions.

Once businesses understand the ground-up approach to customer service they are likely to develop a plan for efficiency. However, don't make the mistake of not keeping employees in the forefront. They are the brand ambassadors of any business, so make sure that they are empowered employees. Trusting your employees to make decisions and act with authority gives them not only a heightened sense of responsibility, but also the freedom to handle a customer's complaint—not just directing them to a manager. Tips to creating empowered employees:

- Listen. All employees should have the right to be involved in the planning of the work affecting them. They encounter and discover customer problems. Ask for and listen to their feedback when developing new procedures because they may solve an issue that management hadn't even thought of.

- Give workers make-it-right power. Customers want to see an instant solution to their problems. Allowing employees authority can transform a customer's bad experience into a positive one.

- When deciding how much power employees have to make things right, make sure that firm, well-documented policies are in place.

For many individuals, organizations, corporations, mom-and-pop stores, and entrepreneurs, delivering a world-class customer service experience through Fresh Customer Service will require a cultural change. But embracing this experience, no matter how much work it will take, will deliver a competitive edge unlike any other.

If you are a manager, front-line leader, supervisor, entrepreneur, director, human resources rep, small business owner, or CEO, you must offer your front-line employees a healthy, fruitful, cohesive working environment where their contributions are valued and respected. Remember that if you first take care of the front-line employees, they will take care of the customers, and the bottom line will take care of itself.

*As a professional speaker, coach, and trainer, Michael Brown draws upon his own life experiences and corporate career to deliver results that enhance the bottom line. With 15 years of technical and functional leadership experience, Brown delivers his message through keynotes, seminars, workshops, and executive retreats. Brown's fresh approach to customer service is detailed in his new book, Fresh Customer Service. Visit [www.themichaelbrown.com](http://www.themichaelbrown.com) for more information.*



Source: Specialty Toys & Gifts Nov/Dec 2007

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## Make every job visit count

Managers are often advised to spend a day closely observing an employee at work or even taking a turn at the job. Sounds good, but you rarely receive advice on how to go about this. These five tips should help you make the most of this chance to learn about your employee's work close-up:

1. **Do your research.** Start with the job description for the position and your group or organization's mission statement, customer service policy, or other relevant documents. Make an observation chart with column headings such as Job Title, Tasks, Methods, Goals, Challenges, and Customer Service Opportunities, or use other relevant topics. Under each heading, write the officially correct answer—but leave room for real-life observations.
2. **Adjust your attitude.** Commit to seeing and experiencing what actually occurs on your job visit. Lay aside your management point of view and usual behavioral style. For example, leave your cellphone and Blackberry at home.
3. **Dress the part.** Don the uniform, equipment, and safety gear that the employee wears, from safety shoes to headsets. Notice the fit and appearance of your outfit—how does it make you feel? Comfortable or uncomfortable?

Attractive or embarrassed? Record how your work and customer relationships are affected.

4. **Commit to the visit.** Plan to spend the entire day with the employee, especially the preparation at the start of the job and the close-out and clean-up at the end. Prep work such as clocking in, chopping vegetables, attending shift meetings, and so on affects the employee's frame of mind and thus the customer's experience. Closing jobs such as totaling money or locking up are affected by the employee's tiredness. You need to experience these states for an accurate impression.
5. **Do the job as is.** Don't simply go through the motions or use your authority to change the procedure. Concentrate on learning what your employee experiences—the best and the worst.

At the end of the day, fill out your observation chart and note the differences between your expectations and reality. Make the changes you need to in order to bring the job description closer to reality and job performance closer to what you need accomplished.

—Adapted from *Fresh Customer Service*, by Michael D. Brown (Acanthus)

Source: *Manager's Intelligence Report* January 2008





# MICHAEL D. BROWN

*articles*

## *Lexington Native Sets Forth Business Philosophy in Book*

By: *Holmes County Herald* Staff Writer  
*Holmes County Herald*  
February 20, 2008

“Treat the employee as #1 and the customer as #2 and you will get customers for life.” This statement may seem farfetched in today’s world, but it is the philosophy set forth by Michael D. Brown, MBA, in his book *Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers For Life*.

Brown is a 31-year-old native of Lexington, son of Ella R. Brown, and a graduate of McClain High School and Jackson State University. He sets forth his principle of 6.5 fresh steps for delivering a world-class customer service experience. Brown says that putting your employees first by treating them with respect and kindness will motivate and equip them with the tools they need to do their job and unleash a passion in them to serve your customers like they have never been treated before.

Brown, a former Frontline employee, is a leader at the fourth largest Fortune Global 500 company in the world. He is a successful professional speaker, coach, and trainer who draws upon his own life experiences and highly successful corporate career to deliver unprecedented results that enhance the bottom line, according to his fly leaf.

For more information on Brown, visit the website [www.FreshCustomerService.com](http://www.FreshCustomerService.com).

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## HOW TO COLUMN

## Empower your frontline

Customer service starts with employees

By Michael D. Brown

RETAILERS RELY on attracting loyal, devoted customers who return again and again and recommend your business to their friends and families. However, many businesses fail to provide a customer service experience that satisfies, much less exceeds expectations.

So what's the secret to creating a world-class service strategy? Treating the employee as No.1.

In order to deliver a proactive customer service experience, businesses need to build their approach and strategies around those that execute it. And who knows how to handle customers better than frontline employees?

Businesses hoping to deliver superior service need to utilize frontline employee knowledge by listening to, equipping, empowering, involving and valuing the feedback and expertise they can offer. If companies can show employees they are concerned and committed to their well-being, then they can expect passionate and enthusiastic employees who unleash their enthusiasm onto the customer experience.

There are a number of ways to assess

and formulate an employee-centric service strategy, but there are three important steps that managers and owners can enact for immediate results: Gratitude, Bubble-Up Innovation and Make-It-Right Power.

Gratitude is a building block for motivating employees and business. Management receives recognition, so why not frontline employees, the people who act as the face of the company? Appreciation, a simple, but overlooked act, inspires employees to work to their full potential.

Respecting frontline staff seems simple, but is often overlooked when developing a manager/employee relationship that's necessary to initiate innovative training and service advances.

Businesses that create positive relationships with their employees will soon find workers are a treasure trove of ideas on how to improve service and efficiency. Harnessing their knowledge and input is a phenomenon called "Bubble-Up Innovation."

Frontline employees have viewpoints and experiences from face-to-face time with customers that only they can articulate. A concerted effort to tap into knowledge from these experiences can prove invaluable.

But how can managers utilize such a resource?

Place a tape recorder in a Bubble-Up 'zone' where employees can record their ideas. They're more likely to give you ideas if they don't have to spend a lot of time writing them down. Try rewarding innovative behaviors. Gift certificates, movie tickets and spot bonuses (instant cash recognition) are all good incentives.

By incorporating the ideas and feedback employees provide, businesses will see a decline in the number of customer complaints and issues. However, there will always be complaints.

Nine times out of 10, a customer problem starts with a simple issue that can be solved in a matter of minutes. These issues can make the difference between one-time customers and loyal patrons. Frontline



employees typically encounter and discover customer problems and should therefore be equipped and enabled to instantly resolve them.

This is what I call Make-It-Right Power. It makes the frontline experience run more smoothly and efficiently for both customers and employees. What follows are some steps to give frontline employees Make-It-Right Power:

- Spend some time with the frontline employees to understand how they currently solve customers' problems.
- Find out from the employees what would make it easier for them solve these problems.
- Record this gathered knowledge into a "best practice document."
- Establish Make-It-Right authority for every employee in the organization.
- Define a policy and procedure around how to administer Make-It-Right Power.
- Provide the necessary training.

Once a frontline employee has Make-It-Right Power, they can solve the problems that customers want resolved instantly.

By incorporating these three service strategies, businesses will deliver a competitive edge unlike any other. Remember, it starts by offering frontline employees a healthy and cohesive working environment where their contributions are valued and respected.

*Michael D. Brown is a customer service consultant for Fortune 100 companies and the author of the book "Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life" (Acanthus Publishing). For more information visit [www.FreshCustomerService.com](http://www.FreshCustomerService.com)*





## LEADERS TO THE FRONT

LEADERS SUCCEED WHEN THEY TAKE PRIDE IN AND OWNERSHIP OF THEIR WORK—and convince employees to do the same. So, how do you do that convincing? One approach is to look for points in each employee's job where he or she can become a sales and service leader.

A grocery retail chain wanted to boost revenue by having cashiers cross-sell items at the register. For example, if a customer purchased milk, the cashier was prompted by a card placed at the register to suggest buying bread; if the customer bought beer, chips were suggested.

The product choices, cards, and training were carefully thought out by marketing experts. Unfortunately, the planning didn't consider the effect on customers. To purchase cross-sold items, customers had to leave the line and retrieve the items. Many customers who wanted the suggested items—and the customers waiting behind them—were put off by the delay. Revenue did not increase.

Service expert Michael D. Brown suggested a two-stage plan to make cross-selling work. Step One was to involve the store managers. They were asked to select the items to promote.

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This time the items were placed in a basket next to the register. Customers could add an item without leaving the line and suffering a delay—and the ire of the shoppers behind them. Revenue improved accordingly.

Step Two, however, really improved customer response. Now the cashiers were included. The change was simple: Assign the cashiers themselves to choose items for cross-selling. This approach drew on their detailed knowledge of what their customers actually bought. It also added personal pride, belief, and ownership to their sales effort. As a result, their suggestions were accepted more than 50 percent more often, and revenue again went up. The more employees can step into a leadership role, the further your organization will go.



Adapted from *Fresh Customer Service*  
MICHAEL D. BROWN  
Acanthus Publishing

**When employees know their opinions count, their contributions add up.**

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# Hiring time

Experts say a recession is the perfect time to build your team

An ad for a store manager for sports equipment, apparel and accessories retailer dELiA's in the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Neb., says the chain is looking for a leader who will maintain optimum store staffing while adhering to budgetary goals.

Like hundreds of other stores, dELiA's has the bottom line in mind when making store-related decisions, but like getting a teenage daughter to walk willingly into the mall with her middle-aged father, the balance of maintaining staffing and the budget isn't easy to accomplish.

It's a dilemma most retailers would rather not face in a period of economic recession — keep the current level of staff, lose money now but gain customers in the long-term, or maintain profit by letting go of staff and possibly losing customers through poor service.

A number of retail stores will face this conundrum when they can't afford to maintain their current level of staff because not enough customers are coming through the door, says Michael Brown, customer service expert and author of "Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life."

But some retail experts say a recession is the perfect time to make a business stand out. Not only that, but it's an opportunity to hire some of the best employees.

## UP-SERVICE THE CUSTOMER

"The quick and easy answer in a time of recession is to let go of staff in hopes that [retailers] can make that work," Brown said.

Cutting off one employee who used to work a couple of hours may save \$14 up front, but that's nothing compared to what you will lose in the end, Brown said.

Customers are not happy to spend money during a recession. They realize they have to spend frugally.

"A lot of times they are already on edge and, by the stores making the experience unsatisfactory, it makes the situation even worse," Brown said. "When times get better, they will remember you and not come back."

Brown says retailers shouldn't cut back during this time because this is when other stores are cutting labor, giving bad service and not delivering a quality customer experience.

"You go the extra mile and, since the bar has been lowered by other stores, customers will see a diamond in the rough and remember that in the future," he said. "If [retailers] can make my day, even for a brief moment — particularly when I'm not happy about what is going on in my life — I will remember that when a recession is over," he said.

Brown says if you have to make cuts, don't cut anything that interferes with the customer experience. Instead, cross-train front-line workers to do simple tasks they normally would call a manager to do, for example.

Hire Me  
Now





# MICHAEL D. BROWN

articles

**"You go the extra mile and, since the bar has been lowered by other stores, customers will see a diamond in the rough and remember that in the future."**

— Michael Brown, customer service expert and author

"Instead of having what amounts to a robot on the front line, you can empower them and train them to solve problems themselves."

## HIRE UP

Making a quality customer experience often relies on having the right workers. And a recession can be the best time to attract top-line retail talent, said Roberta Matuson, principal of consulting firm Human Resource Solutions.

"This is the perfect time to reshuffle the decks," Matuson said. "Some great people with strong customer service skills will be hitting the pavement looking for work."

If we spin into a recession, it's not just going to be the losers out there, it's going to be some really great people who just got caught in the middle, she says.

"So you're going to have some great opportunities to pick up talent that you wouldn't have if the economy kept chugging along," Matuson said. And now that you know you can get these people, don't be afraid to get rid of the ones who aren't working out.

"This is the perfect time to evaluate who to keep and who to let go. You will have no trouble replacing them with customer-oriented people."

## NOT THERE YET

While 61 percent of the American public believes the economy already is suffering through a recession, according to a January 2008 Associated Press-Ipsos poll, we're not there quite yet.

In 2007, the economy grew by just 2.2 percent. That was the weakest performance since 2002, when the country was struggling to recover from the last recession. But, according to the National Retail Federation, retail sales in 2008 will start out slow and pick up in the second half of the year.

The NRF predicts that retail industry sales (which exclude automobiles, gas stations and restaurants) will increase 3.5 percent from last year. So far, sales in 2008 are doing all right. Retail sales rose 2 percent over last year.

A recession can particularly be a boon to discounters and wholesale outlets such as Wal-Mart and Costco, according to a CNNMoney.com article, because consumers try to control their expenditures.

To that point, Wal-Mart and Costco have seen better-than-expected store sales recently. Whereas Wal-Mart's rival, Target, which sells a majority of apparel and home goods, has seen its sales take a hit.

Addressing a members-only lunch crowd at the National Retail Federation's 2008 trade show, Ben Stein — lawyer, economist, White House speech writer, Emmy-winning game show host and actor — said retailers don't need to worry about an imminent recession.

"There has never been a recession where retail sales fell from one year to the next," he said. "It would be very, very unlikely that we'd have a fall in retail sales from 2007 to 2008."

## IT'S NOT AS EASY AS IT SOUNDS

Though it's important to maintain a certain level of customer service and keep the best talent, it really is not that simple, is it?

Retailers have to keep a store open with money; therefore, they have to be frugal with what they have, particularly in a recession, said Dan Butler, NRF's vice

president of retail operations.

When sales are soft, retailers typically adjust advertising and staffing dollars proportionately.

"It's never their intent to reduce customer service," Butler said. "But sometimes they have to get creative in how they do things."

To maintain the same level of staff and thus the same level of customer service, stores often will ask current employees to work additional hours, and then only when absolutely needed.

"(The stores) take it day by day, hour by hour to make sure they are not wasting staffing," Butler said.

But experts hold firm to the idea of standing tall even when the economy slumps. In the end, customers will notice, and reward, stand-out service, Brown said.

"The way you win in retail is to do even better when your competition is down. The people that do it right will be considered the crème de la crème." ■

Patrick Avery is editor of selfserviceworld.com and a regular contributor to this magazine.

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## What is a Recession?

By one rough rule of thumb, a recession is what occurs when the economy shrinks for six consecutive months. That was not the pattern for the last recession, though. The economy contracted in the first quarter of 2001, turned positive in the second quarter, shrank in the third quarter and turned up again in the final quarter of that year.

The National Bureau of Economic Research, the recognized arbiters for dating recessions, uses a more complicated formula. It takes into account such things as employment and income growth. By that measure, the 2001 recession started in March and ended in November.

Source: Associated Press





**A shift from “service with a smile” to “strategic business operation”  
now makes customer service everyone’s job.**

## **The “New” Customer Service Model: Customer Advocate, Company Ambassador**

BY JOANNE M. LOZAR GLENN

**N**o doubt you’ve heard—or had—more negative customer service interactions than you’d care to remember. Walking into a retail establishment, for example, and being completely ignored by the two saleswomen chatting behind the counter. Calling your internet/phone service provider on Saturday about your service outage and learning you can’t get a technician until Wednesday. Having to repeatedly contact a computer vendor who can’t or won’t fix a failing hard drive problem that began in October 2007 and is still ongoing in February 2008. Placing an online order, having the order confirmed, then learning the item is out of stock. Waiting in a long line at the bank to cash a \$2000 check, only to learn that checks in that amount must be handled by a manager not a teller.

Then there are the positive encounters. They seem more rare. A customer service representative who actually calls you back to resolve a complaint. A car salesman who does such an outstanding job acting as your advocate (imagine!) over the years that you buy six more cars from him.

You can speculate on the reasons behind the different outcomes, but according to the report of a March 2007 Capitol Hill briefing on global competitiveness, the unsettling truth is that the ability of American companies to provide acceptable, let alone outstanding, customer service is a serious concern. The briefing, which included data from a poll of about 400 companies, concluded that “new entrants to the workforce generally disappoint those who would like to give them their first job” (Schoeff, 2007). Even though businesses deemed new hires exceptional in information technology, these same employees were rated lacking in communication and leadership, some of the core soft skills for providing quality customer service.

It doesn’t seem fair to harangue new workers for their lack of customer service skills, when so many longstanding companies have poor track records in this area. (One wonders how these companies stay in business, but that’s another article.) The more relevant question is why, to put it bluntly, some companies “get” customer service, and others don’t.

At least part of the answer seems to lie in redefined expectations—about what customer service means today—and the need for a more sophisticated worker to deliver on those expectations. This article explores the metamorphosis in customer service from being a portfolio of “nuts and bolts” skills to being a business strategy that companies use to win and retain customers. How do forward-leaning companies expect their employees to approach and to practice customer service? And how can business educators use that information to raise students’ awareness about the roles they will play as they become the “face” their future employers show to the world?





### Freshening Up Customer Service by Turning Conventional Wisdom Upside Down

Most customer service experts say companies should put customers first. Fortune 100 consultant Michael Brown says they should put employees first instead.

He even wrote a book about it—*Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life* (Acanthus Publishing, 2007). The thinking goes like this: Treating employees well nurtures their enthusiasm for treating customers well. Satisfied customers become loyal customers, and that's good for business.

"When you take care of the employee," Brown explains, "the employee will take care of the customer and the bottom line will take care of itself."

Brown's service model challenges businesses to value and recognize the contributions of frontline employees. It's a ground-up approach that focuses on empowering employees to solve service issues without having to refer problems to management. He calls the approach "Six-and-a-Half Fresh Steps":

**1. Walk side by side** with the employee to better understand what goes on between the customer and the employee.

**2. Smart task**, i.e., instruct employees to do intrusive tasks (like vacuuming) only when there are no customers.

**3. Give employees "make it right" power**—e.g., if the employee shortchanges a customer, that employee can correct the error immediately rather than wait for the manager to unlock the register.

**4. Create a "what if" arsenal.** Make a list of typical problems and the solutions the employee can propose. "Customers do not care how you get to the solution," Brown says. "They just want [their problem] solved."

**5. Let innovation "bubble up"** from the frontline. A Starbucks employee in Santa Monica, California, for example, invented the company's signature Frappuccino®.

**6. Relentlessly focus on customer care.** This is everyone's job.

**6.5 Go and make it happen!**

In this model, training plays a big role. "It starts with describing to employees the kind of experience they want all customers to have," Brown says. "If you don't know what [that experience is], then you can't create it."

Understanding how to deliver world-class customer service can give students an enormous competitive edge, Brown believes. His advice for job seekers? "Figure out your brand—really dig inside your DNA and figure out what you're passionate about [and can offer the company]," Brown says. "Then develop skills around your passion."

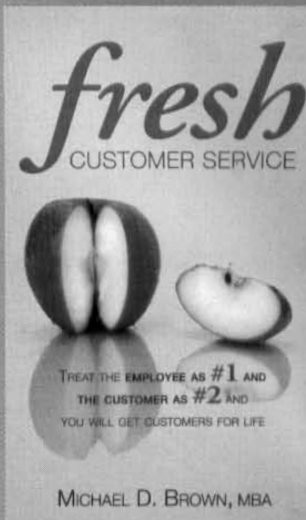


Photo Credit: Sarah Martin

### Customer Service, Then and Now

Customer service used to mean mastering "boot camp basics": eye contact, greeting, handshaking, helping customers with product selection and order entry, and doing it all with a smile. But that is no longer enough.

"Customer service has moved away from the nuts and bolts of service delivery skills and toward viewing customer

service as a strategic part of a company's business advantage," says Denise Roseland, Program Manager, National Girls Collaborative Project Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, Bothell, Washington. "It's about developing long, sustained relationships [rather than just selling something]. Selling something once doesn't work in the marketplace anymore."

This strategy, coined "Customer Relationship Management" (CRM)<sup>1</sup> in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, means that customer service is no longer just the province of "greeters" and "order takers." It's everyone's job—from accountant to advertising director, custodian to CEO. Employees, even those hired to be "customer service representatives," can't just worry about the polite courtesies of

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Martha Rogers and Don Peppers (founders of the Peppers and Rogers Group, a division of Carlson Marketing) are credited with coining the term "CRM" (and with popularizing the terms "mass customization" and "one-to-one, B2B marketing"). Integrated CRM was made possible by advances in technology, which spawned a host of CRM software by vendors such as SAP, Siebel, Oracle, Salesforce.com, etc. Sources: Assignment Zero ([http://zero.newassignment.net/assignment/dr\\_martha\\_rogers\\_coined\\_term\\_crm](http://zero.newassignment.net/assignment/dr_martha_rogers_coined_term_crm)); Peppers and Rogers Group (<http://www.peppersandrogers.com>); Wikipedia, Customer Relationship Management ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Customer\\_relationship\\_management](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Customer_relationship_management)).





customer transactions. They have to be a customer's advocate and a company's ambassador.

"[Customers] want ... information, solutions to problems, and support in learning to use the products they're [purchasing]," Roseland explains. "Service people have to be knowledgeable. Their role has quickly become a blend of responsibilities, customer care, completing sales transactions, and all the things that go along with it.

"It takes a more sophisticated person to deliver that kind of customer service," she reflects. "I guess customer service becomes a matter of building a service-minded culture in an organization, along with developing the communication and problem-solving skills to get it done."

Consequently, when Roseland teaches customer service and customer service training at the University of Minnesota, she and her students spend a lot of time talking about how companies define their mission and core values, and their goals for customer acquisition and retention.

Most of Roseland's students are undergraduates. They understand the "nuts and bolts" aspect of customer service. But many of them don't have much corporate business experience. "This strategic [aspect] is a foreign concept," she says. "[So we] spend time showing how the nuts and bolts skills support or don't support the company's vision and competitive strategy."

A typical assignment, then, might involve observing and analyzing a customer interaction. Students discuss their experiences and relate them to the concept of customer service as a competitive business strategy.

"Then the class shifts from defining corporate strategy to the company's responsibility to [provide and increase] support to its frontline personnel," Roseland says, "and to how the company can create an experience whereby customers feel loyalty, trust, and commitment to the company and the product." This is an issue consultant Michael Brown examines in his book *Fresh Customer Service* (see sidebar, "Freshening Up

Customer Service").

It's not that the nuts and bolts skills of service delivery aren't important—they are, as everyone who has had a poor customer service experience can attest.

"But anyone ... who has aspirations beyond frontline customer service [must also understand] how these encounters impact the company's [ability to deliver] its vision [of the customer experience]," Roseland says.

### Companies That "Get" It

Not all companies, of course, "get" the strategic aspect of customer service or provide the intensive and continuous training that implementing such a strategy requires. Bill Withers, who's assistant director of the Institute for Leadership Communication at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, says 60–70% of store managers and directors believe they don't have the time and resources to train their employees. But that's being penny-wise and pound-foolish.

"Organizations that really hold their brand dearly understand the role

### Eight Essential Customer Service Skills

Some companies complain about poorly skilled workers. Enterprise Rent-A-Car, on the other hand, simply focuses on hiring well, reports John Moore, recognized by *Fast Company* magazine as a leading customer service and marketing expert.

Enterprise is a privately owned, \$9 billion business renowned for delivering great customer experiences, Moore notes. Here are eight customer service skills Enterprise considers essential:

1. A passion for taking care of customers.
2. A willingness to be flexible.
3. A work ethic based on dedication to the company and its mission.
4. An eagerness to learn a new business and work their way up.
5. Self-motivation and goal-orientation.
6. Persuasive sales skills.
7. Excellent communication skills.
8. Leadership ability.

"As a result of their (sic) desire to hire candidates that aspire to greatness," Moore writes in his blog, *Brand Autopsy*, "Enterprise is able to retain 70% of its full-time employee base every year and have a ready pipeline of qualified candidates to promote as the company grows."

#### Source:

Moore, J. (2007, February 5). Eight critical customer service skills. *Brand Autopsy*. Message posted to [http://brandautopsy.typepad.com/brandautopsy/2007/02/eight\\_critical\\_.html](http://brandautopsy.typepad.com/brandautopsy/2007/02/eight_critical_.html)





### Portrait: A Call Center That Gets It Right

Customers generally dread contacting a call center. But the call center at Minnesota Life Group Insurance (St. Paul) provides such superb customer service that 98% of its customers (Fortune 1000 companies and 11 state governments) would recommend Minnesota Life to another company, earning it a Net Promoter score (NPS)<sup>1</sup> of 87 (out of 100). High scores mean growth because these loyal customers, or promoters, account for 80–90% of positive word of mouth. Net promoter leaders grow at more than 2.5 times the rate of their competitors.

Maria O'Phelan leads the customer service unit at Minnesota Life, a company that provides insurance packages to employers that then offer coverage as a benefit to their employees. In her role as second vice president of customer service and technology, O'Phelan has two levels of customers: employers and their employees.

"We generally take an old-fashioned approach to customer service—we train our employees to treat customers as they want to be treated," O'Phelan says. "If we can't say 'Yes' to their request, we try to give customers options. We train our operators on how to be creative. They all have experience being customers themselves, and we try to get them to use that experience when dealing with a customer."

Training includes traditional content like how to work with upset or angry customers, such as those who've experienced a death in the family. It also includes training on the technology that allows them to give accurate, real-time information to customers calling with questions about benefits. Trainees pair up with experienced call operators to learn the more than 100 screens that store information about customer accounts.

"Insurance can be kind of intimidating. Customers can be already on guard when they call us," O'Phelan says. "That's why we don't use an automated call system. Customers are already confused; they'll get more confused if you throw them into a [phone] tree. It's customer service 101: answer the phones."

The company is currently revamping its training to build in competency testing. "But we hope to have fun with it, like maybe a scavenger hunt...more of a video game approach," O'Phelan says. "If the person doesn't get it [on the first try], we'll do the training again."

One strength of the training program is the value the company puts on letting customer service solutions originate with employees. For example, O'Phelan recently conducted an exercise with employees in which she described her experience waiting to check out in a department store. "The cashier took a phone call and ran around the store trying to locate a size 12 for the caller. So I asked, 'What's the equivalent of that here?'"

"[The answer was] e-mails going to the bottom of a pile, and phone calls getting priority. E-mails go into a queue now, with phone calls," she says. "So generally we answer our e-mails within 10 or 20 minutes. It's another 'Wow' factor for us."

Another example occurred when the company decided to redo the bills that went directly to customers' homes. "We had our employees bring in bills from home and we listed what we liked and hated about them," O'Phelan says. "Then we redesigned the bills and made sure we didn't include the 'hates.'"

Practices like these create community, and a sense of "I know what makes me happy, and my customer happy." Of course, hiring the right kind of employee—the one with a combination of people skills and problem-solving skills—is key.

"[We want] people who are curious to know how things work instead of just 'What am I supposed to do?'" she says. "We use the call center as the entry point into our customer service team. Curiosity can be trained, but we would prefer to hire it."

O'Phelan says Minnesota Life tracks results through surveys to find out if it is on target with meeting customer needs. Considering its Net Promoter score, it looks like the company's succeeding.



Members of the Minnesota Life Group Insurance customer service unit gather around Betty Quayle, Customer Service Supervisor, to discuss service strategies. Back row: Patty Torres; Tricia Suchy, Brenna Sauro. Front row: Hannah Hermanson, Betty Quayle, Anne Robinson. Credit: Patty Dunlap, Publications Editor, Securian Financial Group

<sup>1</sup>Customers are asked, on a scale of 1 to 10, how likely they are to recommend a company to a friend. Respondents fall into one of three categories: (1) promoters (customers who are highly likely to recommend a company or product); (2) passives (satisfied but unenthusiastic customers looking for a better deal); (3) detractors (people who are less likely to recommend a company or product). NPS is the percentage of promoters minus the percentage of detractors. Source: Riedenbach, R. E., & Goeke, R. W. (n.d.). Net promoter score: a number for businesses to grow by. Six Sigma. Retrieved February 8, 2008, from <http://www.isixsigma.com/library/content/c071210a.asp?action=print>





service provides," Withers says. He cites Ritz-Carlton Hotels as an example (see Business Spotlight, p. 14). "They empower everyone on staff to respond to a customer's need up to a certain financial threshold without calling for permission."

Empowering employees to solve customer service issues is a key characteristic of companies that "get" customer service. They realize that addressing problems promptly saves time and manpower costs. It also wins back customers who don't want to wait long for their problem to be resolved.

"[These companies] flip the organizational chart upside down," Roseland says. "They create policies based on recommendations from the 'bottom' rather than on those that trickle down from boards of directors."

These kinds of companies also work on tearing down communication barriers that delay and sometimes even prevent employees from resolving customer problems. Those barriers can be interpersonal, such as departmental "silos" in hierarchical organizations, or technological, such as a lack of easy, timely access to the information or internal processes (like order entry, customer order history, on-hand inventory, shipping, etc.) necessary to support a customer's needs.

Roseland notes that it takes time before companies see measurable financial results from instituting practices that promote superior customer service. But they notice other positive indicators: less turnover in face-to-face customer service positions, employees who feel more valued and able to leverage company resources to serve customers, and positive "word of mouth" (see sidebar, "Portrait: A Call Center That Gets It Right").

### Raising Students' Awareness about Customer Service

If Roseland's undergraduates have a hard time understanding the strategic aspect of customer service, what are students at the high school and community college levels ready to understand?

"They're ready for more than we give them credit for," asserts Linda Hefferin, a business educator at Elgin Community College (Elgin, Illinois). "Their own experience is a great place to start—what kind of experiences have they had even in the past week, right at this school or where they shop or bank? They know bad service. As soon as they start giving examples, they start to understand."

Susan Jaderstrom, who teaches a communications class at Santa Rosa Junior College (Santa Rosa, California), agrees that even teenagers are quite capable of appreciating the nuances of customer service interactions. "So many of them have experience with electronic items," she says—including her own son, who's now a college freshman.

"I told him when he started getting into video games that it didn't make sense for me to call ... I wouldn't know how to talk to them," she says. So he's been handling any problems that come up with his cell phone, Xbox, and other electronic devices.

Delve into these kinds of transactions, Roseland notes, and it's easy to see how students could start discussions about relationships between all parts of a company.

"High school students have the ability to see these connections," she says. "When I look back [at having taught high school marketing-related courses], I never talked about how accounting and shipping made any difference [in customer satisfaction]. But I do think there's tremendous value in helping students at the high school level see that responsibility [for good customer service] is not just on frontline employees."

Roseland thinks that the school-based enterprise, such as a school store, is a perfect context for these kinds of discussions. More of her ideas for getting the "big picture" follow:

- **Have students act as mystery shoppers**, observing and analyzing service experiences in the field. Have them rate services in 15–20 retail establishments, including online businesses. How

was the initial purchase experience? Was there a problem with returns? How were refunds handled? Can customers get information and service when they need it, and not just during regular business hours?

- **Use case studies** from non-retail service companies or nonprofit service providers.

- **Review and critique companies' customer service plans** or service-related policies and propose improvements.

- **Interview professionals in service management positions.** Discuss trends in their work, the role of customer service in the organization, training, and challenges related to customer service, etc.

- **Develop a training plan to address a need in a real company or organization** that will help the company improve service. For example, once Roseland's students get the sense of the interconnectedness needed between departments and processes in a company, then they talk about the role of training—and the required nuts-and-bolts skills and tasks.

### From Big Picture to Boot Camp Basics

Understanding the relationship between customer service mishaps and the need for training offers teachable moments for seeing the relevance of, and learning and practicing, basic "boot camp" skills. The following activities, arranged by skill area, reinforce these concepts:

- **Etiquette.** Discuss the experience customers—including themselves—want to have when entering a retail establishment. "Customers, even the picky ones, are very forgiving," Withers says. "They just need to be acknowledged and they'll wait to have their needs met. They want to be thanked and invited back into that experience."

- **Listening.** When Hefferin belonged to an international listening association, she used its taped drills for practice in listening. "Or you can do something as simple as [having students] watch a video without taking notes," she suggests. "When the video is over, [have them] recall three points."





Name games, memory drills, and the "telephone game" where students relay a whispered message are fun ways to practice these skills.

- **Clear communication.** Jaderstrom's communications class includes four weeks devoted to telephone skills. One assignment involved having students call her voice mail and leave a simple message about why they're taking the class—and assume that she will want to all them back.

"It seems like such a basic exercise. But they speak their names quickly, slur their phone numbers, and might even forget to leave a number," she says. "If I can't write their information in the time they're giving it, if I have to listen twice, if I recognize a 'script,' I make them do it over. They usually get it right after the second time."

- **Being "personable."** "I use the book *Fish!* [Hyperion, 2002]—it [teaches] four simple principles for customer service," Hefferin says. "It's really on motivation, but what else is customer service except motivation?"

The importance of being personable was brought home to Hefferin in a recent conversation with her sister, who works in a hospital. Her sister is told to chat with anyone who comes in, no matter what, and to make sure she connects with that person before the person leaves her desk. Management has made the value of relationships clear. "You can't buy loyalty even with quality and good price—customers still need a 'human touch,'" Hefferin says.

- **Professionalism.** The last session of Jaderstrom's communications class is earmarked for role playing customer service situations using a call-in telephone system. "It's truly amazing, even after studying this, how much trouble students have with role playing," she says. "We work on answering the phone, being polite, thinking on your feet, and ending the call professionally."

Jaderstrom presents students with situations they might encounter at the college, for example, getting directions to the college from a particular street,

requesting a faculty member's home phone number, handling a student who's upset about a grade and wants to speak with the instructor immediately.

In the beginning of the role-playing exercise, students tend to put "customers" on hold. "They yell to the rest of the class, 'What should I say?' After the class, students [tell me] that anytime they are on the phone or leaving a voice mail message they are acutely aware of how to conduct these calls in a professional manner," Jaderstrom says.

- **Learning to ask the right questions.** "Customer service representatives often don't know how to ask the right questions in the right sequence to understand a customer's true needs," says Jerry Sparger, Virginia-based founding partner of Selling Up ([www.selling-up.com](http://www.selling-up.com)). He recommends borrowing from common sales training techniques, such as confirming the purpose of a call, asking the customer how he came to a particular conclusion, and asking the outcome an individual expects.

"You use different types of questions, depending on the audience and what you're trying to accomplish," he says. Asking the right questions nets information that helps solve customer problems, and if the representative listens well, helps sell customers other products to meet their needs. Simulations and role playing are useful for practicing this skill.

- **Problem solving, and win-win negotiation.** Sparger relates these two skills to the previous point: knowing how to get at what's really concerning the customer, and being able to have a conversation about it. "[Learning how to] understand what it is you're trying to do so I can help you—and being able to push back if you're being unreasonable—would be helpful," he says.

Sparger says he was struck by how an especially motivated local high school student chose to learn about interacting with people. The student had decided to sell knives door-to-door and asked Sparger to listen to his presenta-

tion—with the intent of having Sparger critique him on his performance.

- **Manage the social processes of business,** such as leading teams and "reading" large groups and individuals. This last point, made by John Timmerman, Ritz-Carlton's Vice President of Quality and Program Management (Chevy Chase, Maryland), concerns developing a student's emotional intelligence and suggests a focus on learning rather than on teaching/training.

He emphasizes the power of "getting inside customers' heads" to understand what they need. This, of course, is something business educators already do as they work with advisory councils to understand business' needs in customer service and in other business competencies, and to adjust their curriculum—often via project-based learning activities—so that students are appropriately prepared to enter the workplace.

## The Human Touch

The evolution of customer service to customer relationship management with all of its technological advances—and new challenges for real-time data retrieval—confirms once again the centrality of human interaction in whether companies achieve their goals for growth and high performance. "Rather than reducing human contact," notes an article from the International Customer Management Institute, "technology seems not only to redefine it, but increase its value" (Read, 2000).

Timmerman reflects that whereas the Industrial Revolution focused on "hands," making workers a commodity, they are now called to be the differentiator, the head and heart, of the company.

"The hierarchy that worked yesterday is not going to be effective today and into the future," he says. "We need hard skills (spreadsheets, space planning, etc.), but what transcends all of it is that ability to engage the heart and mind. It is the key to retention and the competitive advantage of the high-performing organization."





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#### Organizations/Training Programs

Customer Service University  
<http://www.customerserviceuniversity.com/>

Merced College Customer Service Training Academy  
<http://www.customerserviceacademy.org/>  
Contact: Jonae Pistoresi

Phone Pro  
<http://www.phonepro.com/>

Santa Rosa Junior College Customer Service Skills Achievement Certificate  
[http://busapp02.santarosa.edu/SRWeb/SR\\_ProgramOfStudy.aspx?ProgramType=1&Program=005017&Version=01](http://busapp02.santarosa.edu/SRWeb/SR_ProgramOfStudy.aspx?ProgramType=1&Program=005017&Version=01)  
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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

articles



## PLASTIC SURGERY PRACTICE ADVISOR

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A HealthLeaders  
Media publication

### Front office staff can make or break your practice

Staff members often not familiar with your Web site, fail to direct patients

Is your front office staff helping you grow your plastic surgery practice, or are you losing patients because prospective customers get a bad impression of your practice? Some surgeons and customer service experts caution that you might not realize how much damage is being done out front while you're working hard in the back.

In particular, front office staff may be unfamiliar with your practice's Web site and not directing prospective patients to the site for more information.

That appealing Web site that you put so much effort and money into might go unseen by prospective patients because your staff members are not directing them to it.

Ryan Miller, president of Etna Interactive, a practice management consulting firm in San Luis Obispo, CA, says he has found that many plastic surgeons have no idea how poorly their front offices are run. They assume that everything is fine because the staff members are pleasant and helpful when the surgeon is around. Or worse, the surgeons may never venture out to the front office to see the patient experience.

Miller says he recently did an informal survey of plastic surgery and bariatric surgery practices across the United States and found that front office staff members in most surgical practices are overworked, disconnected from the sales process, and undercutting Web marketing efforts. His firm called 300 plastic surgery practices and 200 bariatric surgery practices selected randomly from across the country and asked just one question: "Does Dr. X have a Web site?"

"As I expected, the first 10 or so offices we called weren't sure if they had a site or what the address was. A few took the time to look it up and read it back to us," he says. "But here's the thing that made me stop and expand the data we gathered: Not one of the first 10 practices we called asked if they could answer questions about the doctor or practice, and no one invited us in for a consultation."

**"Your clients want a personal connection, and they don't want to wait."**

—Ryan Miller

Although he concedes that the simple question used may have suggested to staff members that the call represented only a casual inquiry, Miller says they still should have offered more information and attempted to build some kind of connection.

The following are some highlights of Miller's survey:

- » 27% of the practices that were called had no Web site.
- » Among practices with Web sites, 60% were not sure initially whether they had a site or what the address was. Only a fraction of that group took the time to hunt the address down for the caller.
- » Only three practices in 500 (that's just 0.6%) detailed any helpful features of the Web site that the caller could check.

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- » 93% of the practices hung up immediately after answering the question. (The caller was instructed to say “thank you” after the address was discussed but did not say good-bye or hang up until the office ended the call.)

Miller says that last point is particularly troubling. Only 7% of the offices asked whether the caller had other questions, tried to determine what procedure the caller was considering, offered information about their surgeon’s credentials, or encouraged the caller to come in for a consultation. (See p. 3 for advice on improving your staff’s response to callers.)

**Educate staff members about important role**

So what can you do to improve the performance of your front office staff? Miller says you must educate staff members about the importance of excellent client care. And you must get rid of cumbersome phone systems, long hold times, bad on-hold music, dropped calls, and transfers to voice mail.

“Your clients want a personal connection, and they don’t want to wait,” Miller says. But before you blame any problems on your front office and start taking them to task, Miller says you should ask yourself these three questions:

1. Have I made it clear to my front office staff that every call is valuable and every caller should be treated well, even the price shoppers?
2. Does my staff member training reinforce this idea? Can the front office explain why I am worth a consultation? Do they know how to cultivate a lead?

3. Does the front office have time to give each call personal attention and immediate priority?

The answers can guide you toward improving your practice, Miller says. Be careful not to blame poor front office performance on the staff without looking at how you may have driven them to that behavior. If you are trying to get by with too few staff or less experienced (and less expensive) staff than you really need, they may not be able to give patients the attention you expect.

**Treat your staff members well first**

Getting your staff members to treat patients better may require that you first treat your staff members better, says **Michael D. Brown**, a New York City–based customer service consultant for Fortune 100 companies and the author of the book *Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life* (Acanthus Publishing, October 2007). He believes that customer service is one of the most important issues for a plastic surgery practice because it creates the repeat business that drives the bottom line. “Many practices that sell services forget that front office staff are the vessels that take care of the customer service aspects of their business,” he says. “Without incorporating their specialized knowledge and experience into a company’s business plan, they fail to meet the expectations and needs of the customer and helping make the next sale.”

Brown says practices can start improving their service and office cohesiveness with a basic principle he calls “gratitude to growth.” Recognition is the building block for motivating employees and business, he says.

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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

articles

A HealthLeaders Media publication

Doctors receive feedback from grateful patients, Brown says, so why shouldn't surgeons give positive feedback to the front office staff, which is a vital asset of the organization? "Gratitude—a simple, but overlooked act—inspires employees to work to their full potential that will reach the customer," Brown says. "These office workers are in daily contact with customers and understand how company policy affects their experience."

Brown says the No. 1 reason most companies fail, and that includes plastic surgery practices, is that they provide poor customer service. His advice runs counter to the adage that you should always put the customer first. He says you should put the employee first and the customer second and, in return, the employees will treat your customers better. (See p. 4 for more of Brown's advice on improving staff interaction with patients.) "You end up getting customers for life and great employee retention," he says. "They are the people on the front line who must translate all your good work to the customer, so it behooves us not to put

them second. Make sure they understand the level of service you are trying to give and the impression you are trying to convey to the customer."

Brown says plastic surgery customers are becoming more demanding as the economy tightens up, because they want the most for their money when they buy elective services. That means the pressure is on front office staff, who will determine whether that customer feels welcomed and cared for, he says.

"Unfortunately, a difficult economy can mean that people start looking to cut costs and they decide that they can get by without as many front office staff," Brown says. "In a lot of cases, that is going in the wrong direction. You're saving some money in the short run but just making your customer service worse."

## Uncertain staff members can turn off patients

Brown points out that overworked or insufficiently

*continued on p. 4*

## Quiz staff about your Web site, offer scripted remarks

**Ryan Miller**, president of Etna Interactive, a practice management consulting firm in San Luis Obispo, CA, suggests an exercise that might be useful at your next staff meeting: Ask each staff member to write down the practice's Web site address, and then list three reasons a prospective patient might want to visit the site and two reasons a current patient might want to visit. Give them several minutes to write, then collect the sheets, and discuss the results.

"Don't be surprised if many of your staff members do not know your correct Web address, if they are not familiar with what is on your site, or if they find it difficult to explain how the site will benefit current or prospective clients," he says. "Your goal should be to have a well-trained and poised staff who can recite your Web address from memory and talk intelligently about the benefits of your site, both for current and prospective patients."

If your front office staff is not as familiar with your Web site as you would like, Miller suggests conducting a group tour of the site, with everyone going through the site together and

becoming familiar with its features and how it can help both prospective and current patients.

Scripted conversation starters about your Web site also are a great way to help your staff members talk with people on the phone about it. Miller offers the following examples, which could be posted by telephones to give staff members a quick prompt during a call:

- » "On our Web site, you can learn more about Dr. Smith. Her bio is available under the heading ..."
- » "You can learn more about your procedure on our Web site. Our surgeon has performed ..."
- » "We have dozens of before-and-after photos on the site, and many more are available in our office. Would you like to schedule a consultation to meet the surgeon and see all of our photos?"
- » "If you're worried about fitting a procedure into your budget, we offer convenient financing. You can apply right on our site ... or we can help you with it when you come in for your consultation."
- » "Oh, and, of course, you can get acquainted with our whole staff at the Web site. I'm Sandy, and my picture is second on the page. What was your name?"

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## Front office staff

*continued from p. 3*

trained staff members can end up inadvertently turning away patients, even if they're trying to do their jobs well. The patients expect staff members to be forthright with them, so any uncertainty from the staff can be construed negatively.

"If they don't seem like they know everything about this practice and are very comfortable, that can be a turnoff to the prospective patient," Brown says. "When someone is considering something as serious as elective surgery, any wavering by the staff can be a turning point for them."

Gary Burton, MD, a general plastic surgeon practicing in Baltimore and Bowie, MD, says it is important to remember that front office staff members are valuable to your practice. Usually, there will be a hierarchy among front office staff, as each staff member is not equally experienced or entrusted with more important duties, but Burton cautions against devoting all your attention to the senior members.

"They're all important to your success," he says. "It's also necessary to remember that they all bring different experiences to the table, that they're all from different life experiences and can contribute to your practice in different ways."

Some front office staff may have dominant personalities and overshadow other employees. "If that happens, the talents of the other employees may not be fully recognized and utilized," he says. "You don't want one person taking over the whole show, because chances are that person does not bring all the skills and capabilities that you might find in the rest of the staff."

**"You don't want one person taking over the whole show, because chances are that person *does not bring all the skills and capabilities that you might find in the rest of the staff.*"**

—Gary Burton, MD

Burton says he makes his expectations clear but then tries not to smother the staff with too much supervision.

"The front office staff keeps things going," Burton says. "They can be one of the most important parts of a practice because if they don't interact well with the patient, the surgeon may never even get a chance to see the patient and employ your skills." ■

## Seven steps to improve front office customer service

Michael D. Brown, a New York City-based customer service consultant for Fortune 100 companies and the author of the book *Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life* (Acanthus Publishing, October 2007), says you can improve your front office staff's customer service with seven steps:

**1. Try side-by-side walking.** Spend some time walking side-by-side with the front office staff to see what their real work experience is like. This requires a time commitment—you need to see the ongoing demands on staff members, rather than just standing at the front desk observing for several minutes and thinking you understand their jobs.

"You will realize that what you thought the customer is getting is really very different. You will see that the policies and procedures that you thought were routine every day are not practical or just don't work the way you expected,"

Brown says. "You will cringe at some point."

**2. Use smart tasking.** Multitasking is a necessary part of any front office job, but Brown says a practice often heaps too many disparate tasks on a person and still expects him or her to serve the customer well. The solution is to categorize and prioritize those tasks, making it clear that customer service always trumps other assignments.

Also, make sure staff members aren't, in effect, shutting down your front office an hour early so that they can do all the end-of-the-day tasks in time. Arrange their schedules and their workloads so that the patient who walks in at 4:30 p.m.—perhaps at the only time she could stop by for information—doesn't get a cold shoulder because the staff members are too busy with other tasks.

**3. Give staff members the power to make it right.** Empower your staff members to address patient problems

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as directly as possible, without requiring a lot of back-and-forth or clearance from superiors.

"A lot of times, we put prisoners on the front line. They're not really empowered to do anything. They're just there to guard the door," Brown says. "Some controls are always necessary, but people should have the power to take care of the customer. People want their problems solved now, and making them wait just makes their problems get bigger."

**4. Develop an arsenal of solutions for common problems.** There should be standard options for addressing many of the issues that occur in the front office. If a patient needs to reschedule but the day is full, what are the options? Give staff members some guidelines on how to handle the most common challenges quickly and effectively.

"You want to avoid having staff freeze up and get that deer-in-the-headlights look," Brown says. "You don't want someone saying, 'I haven't been here long, so I don't know how to handle that.' Give them some solutions up front, based on what you know can work in that situation."

**5. Mine your staff members for ways to improve.** At least once per year, take your staff members off-site for a casual get-together in which you ask them for suggestions and ways to improve. In particular, ask what they hear from patients. The improvements may be relatively simple, with patients asking for *Architectural Digest* in the waiting room instead of *Better Homes & Gardens*. These are the small things that staff members are not likely to pass on until you specifically ask.

**6. Keep a relentless focus on the customer experience.** Everyone in the practice must remember that providing a good customer experience is always the key, always the focus of everything you do. It's not just the surgeon's job to make the patient happy; it's everyone's job.

**7. Go away and let the staff do what you've told them.** Once you are sure your staff members understand what you expect, leave them alone and let them do it. Constant harping or looking over their shoulders will only aggravate them. "And most importantly, you have to do all the same things," he says. "They have to see that you are just as committed to serving the customer as you expect them to be." ■

## MRSA a growing concern for plastic surgery patients

Research shows disturbing rate of infections in face-lift patients

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) has become a significant health issue in plastic surgery practices throughout the United States, with research showing that in recent years, MRSA has become the leading contributing pathogen in postop skin and soft tissue infections. The evidence is clear that MRSA infections are a growing problem and that plastic surgery is not exempt.

A new study from the Lenox Hill Hospital—Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat Institute in New York City reveals that one out of every 200 face-lift patients develops a serious MRSA infection.<sup>1</sup> In the Lenox Hill study, about 0.5%

of people undergoing face-lifts developed the so-called superbug infection. MRSA is a particularly virulent strain of *S. aureus* that is resistant to the class of antibiotics that includes penicillin, amoxicillin, and methicillin.

MRSA can cause boils, skin cell death, and even death. In past years, it has been seen mostly in hospital settings and crowded environments such as prisons. However, more community-associated cases of the disease started appearing in 1999.

In the Lenox Hill face-lift study, Richard A. Zoumalan, MD, and David B. Rosenberg, MD, looked at the medical records of 780 patients who had face-lifts at one outpatient surgical center between 2001 and 2007. They found that five patients developed infections at the surgical site, and four of them (0.5% of all patients) tested positive for MRSA.

*continued on p. 6*

### Questions? Comments? Ideas?

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Plastic Surgery Practice Advisor 5

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### *Customer Service: Are You Being Served?*

By: Chris Petersen

[www.usbusiness-review.com](http://www.usbusiness-review.com)

Friday, 16 May 2008

No matter how you define 'customer,' however, 'customer service' has the same definition, and your customers will agree that it's one of the most important aspects in determining whether or not they come to you again. All companies, no matter how big or small, have one thing in common: They all have customers.

Depending on the nature of your business, the term "customer" can mean different things. Maybe your customers are the general public, maybe they're other companies or maybe your customers are governments. No matter how you define "customer," however, "customer service" has the same definition, and your customers will agree that it's one of the most important aspects in determining whether or not they come to you again.

Consider the fictional case study of DVD A-to-Z ASAP Inc., a start-up that specializes in alphabetizing customers' DVD collections. The company is off to a good start, posting modest success and single-digit growth in each of its first 12 months. The company has recently hired some new employees and they've undergone the company's standard training program – they know that "Bridge Over the River Kwai" comes before "The Godfather" and "Star Wars" goes after "Return of the Jedi," alphabetically speaking. George is one of the company's newest hires, and as far as alphabetizing goes, he's a wiz.

One day, George makes a routine house call to the home of a client, Mrs. Taylor, who has been a regular customer since the company's inception. Mrs. Taylor leads George into the living room and shows him her DVD cabinet, which is a complete mess. What's worse is that the Taylor's DVD collection includes "2001: A Space Odyssey." Panic-stricken, George has no idea where the movie should go, as movies beginning with numbers weren't covered in the training.

George spends the better part of the afternoon trying to place the movie, eventually settling on tossing it underneath the couch so no one sees it. When George's boss comes into work the next day, there's an angry message from Mrs. Taylor. The company has lost a customer, but it could have been easily avoided.

#### *Thinking Ahead*

Renee Evenson has been in the customer service field for more than 30 years and wrote the book Award-Winning Customer Service: 101 Ways to Guarantee Great Performance. She says great customer service isn't something





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that should be talked about only when there's a problem, but should be a key focus of your company all the time.

"I believe that the most important thing is that customer service begins with creating a culture of service within your organization," Evenson says.

Evenson suggests that a company should begin by defining who its customers are and what they will expect from it. Then, she suggests finding ways to exceed those expectations. "Once you know who your customers are, then you can write a customer focus plan," she says. "One good way to start is asking yourself, 'What are we going to do for our customers that's going to set us apart from our competition?'"

In George's case, the company did not fully consider all of the customer's potential needs, and therefore did not prepare George for the situation. That caused him to panic and make the situation even worse. His lack of honesty about the situation also exacerbated things, and Evenson says honesty can go a long way toward keeping customers satisfied – even when they don't get the service they expect right away.

"The companies that I have researched that have been very successful are those that have been very ethical," she says. "That goes a long way with customers." George's situation could have been vastly improved if he simply admitted to Mrs. Taylor that he wasn't sure of what to do.

### ***Empowering Employees***

For Michael Brown, customer service consultant and author of *Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers For Life*, George's boss did him a disservice by sending him out unprepared and without the authority to solve the problem himself. In fact, one of the key tenets of DVD A-to-Z ASAP's employee handbook is "Don't Do Anything That's Not in the Handbook." It's great advice in theory, but it also shackles the employees from applying creative solutions and only prolongs the agony for customers.

"The frontline employee is the face to the customers, so oftentimes what we will do is say we have this great customer service, but you haven't done anything to empower and equip the employee to deliver the customer service experience," Brown says. "They will take care of the customer and the bottom line will take care of itself."

Brown details what he calls a "six-and-a-half-step" plan for developing good customer service skills in employees. The first step is for managers to literally stand side-by-side with employees to get a feel for how they interact with customers. George's boss had never spent any time out in the field with customers since he hired his first employees.



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Next, Brown recommends “smart tasking,” which means scheduling tasks not related to customer service for either before opening or after closing so that they are not “intruding on the customer experience.” Third, he says employees need to be empowered to make snap decisions that solve problems.

“They’re usually very simple things, but the thing that exacerbates that is the amount of time they have to wait because the employee is not empowered to fix it and they have to get a manager,” Brown says.

The next step is developing a “what-if arsenal,” a series of common problems that all employees should be prepared to solve on their own. “2001” has been in the Taylors’ collection for years, but no one in the company shared their solutions for it with George. The fifth step is allowing “bubble-up innovation,” which puts faith in employees to come up with solutions because they know what customers want more than anyone else, Brown says. The sixth step, according to Brown, is instilling a relentless focus among employees and making sure they understand customer service is always going to be something they need to concentrate on. Lastly, the final half-step is putting it into practice.

Giving employees the power to serve customers effectively can make the difference between a long-term customer and a lost customer. “You never know who you’re impressing, so you have to make that first impression count,” Evenson says. “If you’re too busy to take care of your customers and make sure that your employees are giving great customer service, you may not be too busy for a while.”



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## *Friendpreneurs: How to Find Success, Preserve Relationships*

***Shared vision, understanding can lead to good partnerships***

By: Ann Brown  
Black Enterprise  
January 2009

When Morehouse buddies Patrick D. Smith and Ozzie E. Smith (no relation) both entered the dental field, it seemed only logical they should start a practice together. Based in Chicago, the Smith & Smith Smile Studio was launched in spring 2007 and opened April 2008. "We initially knew that we would one day want more than to be owners of a small business," Patrick says. "Working as a team would allow us to collaborate with ideas and knowledge. Also, we figured that as a startup company looking to expand in the future, having two people able to man the ship at any given time gives us more options for future expansion."

But going into business with a friend can be a risky endeavor. "There is a risk of meshing the business with friends, as now a dispute or difference of opinion not only affects the business relationship, it affects the friendship," says business consultant Michael D. Brown, author of *Fresh Customer Service* (Acanthus Publishing; 2008) and CEO of the Michael D. Brown Co. "If not handled properly you can diminish and/or lose both the friendship and the business."

But there are steps to take to help friends become friendpreneurs.

***AGREE ON A VISION FOR THE PARTNERSHIP:*** Having a shared vision was the key to the successful partnership between high school friends Candace Sandy and Dawn Marie Daniels. Both entered the publishing field and at one point worked together at Simon & Schuster. Daniels and Sandy had a vision of creating self-help books for African American women. So, they authored one together, *Souls of My Sisters: Black Women Break Their Silence, Tell Their Stories and Heal Their Spirits* (Kensington Publishing; 2000). Realizing they found a unique niche, they formed Souls of My Sisters Inc. and have produced self-help workshops, published several follow-up books, created an online resource, and inked a publishing imprint deal with Kensington under which they publish self-help and inspirational books by other authors. "What is wonderful about this partnership is that two women can pool together their resources and have an opportunity



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to provide a service or a product to fill a niche and with the right strategy, hard work, and determination can become the American dream,” notes Sandy, who is also the communications director for Congressman Gregory W. Meeks (D-NY).

**DEFINE BUSINESS ROLES.** “Discuss each person’s strengths and weakness and map out who will do what within the company,” says New York-based business consultant Byron W. Perry, founder of entrepreneurial workshops Kids Inc. When Kristen Poe Hill and Renee E. Warren formed Noelle-Elaine Media, Hill says it was important that their work styles were similar. In business since 1993, the event management, media relations, and production firm counts such powerhouse companies as Black Enterprise, Ariel Mutual Funds, BET, and L’Oreal as its clients. To stay on the same page, the partners have an annual retreat in addition to their weekly staff meetings.

“Even if we just camp out at one of our homes, we have a strategizing session outside of the office,” says Hill, who recently co-authored *You Buy the Peanut Butter, I’ll Get the Bread: The Absolutely True Adventures of Best Friends In Business* (Penguin Group; Feb. 2009) with Warren. “This way we can map out our goals and plans for the future and bounce ideas off another without the distractions of the office.”

**TALK MONEY.** “Figure out what each person is bringing to the table,” Perry says. “Will each invest money, or does one have the contacts and skills?” For dentist Smith, discussing finances with his partner was easier, he says, because of their friendship. “Having a business-first attitude allows us to prioritize the money conversations around that in a team effort,” he adds. “Put it all on the table, from how much money you have in the bank, credit history, family plans, expected income, etc. Don’t let friendship cloud your mind when making business decisions.”

Make it legal. “Devise a solid business plan and agree to a contract,” Brown says. “If there is no initial shareholder agreement and decisions are made on the fly and are inconsistent, this leads to chaos and instability.”

**MERGE.** “Sometimes the best business partnerships with friends develop from businesses that merge,” Perry says. That’s what restaurateurs Joseph Dowell and William Parks discovered. Parks opened Mamma Nems.com in Stone Mountain, Georgia in 2006. Dowell meanwhile operated his own restaurant in New Orleans until it was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. When Parks, who had no prior no restaurant experience, found himself overwhelmed with running the business, his longtime friend Dowell came onboard as an equal partner. “I knew my financial investment would go much further in a restaurant that was already up and running verses opening a new one,” says Dowell on his decision to join Mamma Nems. “William and I share similar core





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values that keep the business strong and on a vision and the basic principles on how to get there.”

Friend time. In the office, Dowell says it’s important to put business first. “The friendship is separate from how you provide for your family,” he says. Hill and Warren also find while it’s a good idea to give each other space, they make time to socialize as friends outside of work. “At the end of the day, we are still friends. There’s Kirsten my business partner and Kirsten my friend.”

**CONFLICTS AND RESOLUTION.** Emotions can run high when you are in business with a friend. To mount these hurdles, have a plan, Brown says. “Identify the dispute resolution methodology (i.e. Will a third identified person come in and help you solve personal and business disputes?) Decide how you will maintain the friendship if the business doesn’t go well or the business if the friendship doesn’t. Document a “prenuptial scenario agreement. If x happens, this is what will we do,” Brown advises. Compromising is also important, says Noelle-Elaine Media’s Hill. “Renee and I have always been open and honest with each other and that honesty has allowed us to clear any hurdles that may come up. We do not always agree, but we do always agree to compromise when worse comes to worse.”



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## *Is Your Customer Service Staff in Jeopardy?*

1to1 Weekly  
Date: 04/13/2009  
Issue: April 13 2009

This is the second in a series of stories about how the economic downturn is affecting employees in various customer-facing job functions. Last week's article discussed marketing jobs/positions/executives; this week we discuss whether customer service professionals should be worried about downsizing.

If fewer customers are buying fewer things, does that mean fewer customer service employees can adequately serve them? The economic downturn has forced companies to make tough choices, none more difficult than the decision of whether to lay off employees. Many business leaders may be tempted to cut the customer service budget, but as a result may damage customer relationships by diminishing the experience.

"I don't think security is a word anyone can take ownership of right now regarding employment, but in customer service it's even more pronounced," says Michael D. Brown, author of the book *Fresh Customer Service*. "If customers aren't coming in, companies can only cut product costs so much before they sacrifice quality, and they'll look to customer service to do more with less."

Lucky for consumers, executives still do consider customer service an important function for long-term health. Recently Forrester Research authored a report that examined how executives felt the economy would affect their customer service spending (2008 Customer Experience Peer Research Panel Survey). Nearly two thirds of those surveyed said customer service will be even more important during the recession, and 90 percent said customer service will be either critical or very critical in 2009. Twenty-eight percent indicated they would cut spending on customer experience at a lower rate than everything else, and only 12 percent said they would cut that spending at a higher rate.

"The economy is making companies more aware of their customers because they aren't growing at the pace they used to," says Natalie Petouhoff, Forrester Research senior analyst for customer service and social media. "The financial, retail, and auto industries are failing in part because they weren't concerned about customers."

### *Steps to customer service success*

Any enterprise considering a cut in service staff needs to consider how it will affect customers-thus, revenue. Efficiency and cost savings are worthy goals, but companies need to take a longer view to avoid repeating the mis-



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takes that led to the current economic state. “I don’t think reducing staff is the proper decision,” author Brown says. “It’s a short-term gain for a long-term loss.” To avoid that trap, he has created six-and-a-half steps to help companies focus on customers.

1. Side-by-side walking: Walk a mile in frontline employees’ shoes to understand their perspective.
2. Smart tasking: Define critical processes that support the customer experience and examine how efficient or inefficient they are.
3. ‘Making it right’ power: Ensure employees are empowered to solve customer problems.
4. The what-if arsenal: Give employees as many solutions to problems as you can that don’t need approval.
5. Bubble up innovation: Ask for ideas or suggestions from employees that help reduce costs.
6. Focus on customer service: From the janitor to the CEO, make sure the organization is focused on making it happen.
7. ½. Make an official commitment to customer service.

The increasing array of interactive vehicles for “broadcasting” one’s personal opinions means that social media will receive many of these complaints. As a result, reps have the opportunity to demonstrate their value and diversify their skills simply by learning more about social media. “Social media is going to be like a megaphone for companies, so if employees want to become more involved that’s the perfect opportunity,” Petouhoff says. “Information found in an online community or social network is much more detailed than most knowledge bases.”

While some companies have no choice but to reduce staff, the recession does have a silver lining, at least for customers. “It’s scary to be in a downturn because everyone is afraid for their job, but I think this will make us all better,” Petouhoff says. “We were too content before, and now I think we’ll appreciate customers more and stop taking them for granted.”



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## *Minority Firms on the Rise*

### *Increase in Numbers Marred by Economic Parity*

By: Ann Brown  
The Network Journal  
August 4, 2010

The news is good—and bad—for minority business. According to a recent report issued by the U.S. Commerce Department's Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) and the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of minority-owned firms increased by 46 percent to 5.8 million between 2002 and 2007. But while the numbers have increased, the “economic parity remains elusive,” said MBDA's National Director David A. Hinson in a press statement. “While the number of minority-owned businesses continues to grow, they are still smaller in size and scale compared to non-minority-owned firms.” The study found while in 2007 average gross receipts for minority-owned firms increased to \$179,000 from \$167,000 in 2002, it was still below gross receipts for non-minority-owned firms, which had average gross receipts of \$490,000.

In fact, Black, or African-American-owned businesses jumped 61 percent from 2002 to 1.9 million firms in 2007-- the largest increase among all minority-owned companies; and generated \$135.6 billion in gross receipts, up 53 percent from 2002.

Michael D. Brown, author of *Fresh Customer Service* (Treat the employee as #1 and the customer as #2 and you will get customers for life) and founder of business consultancy firm The Michael D. Company, Inc., is not surprised by the increase in black businesses, even in a depressed economy. “This economic tsunami and corporate job watershed has left many individuals with only one choice and that is to start a business. Many of my clients have seen this as the quickest and most viable way to keep and/or gain some level of “economic security” as they weather what is turning into a relentless economic hurricane,” he notes. Brown is also not surprised by the economic parity, which he says is due to a lack of capital, planning, and experience on the part of many minority business owners. “Many minority entrepreneurs are painfully discovering that an ill-prepared, naïve entry into the world of entrepreneurship can cause great economic, personal and business loss and set the individual back for years,” he points out.

According to Hinson, the MBDA hopes to close the economic gap. “The data on minority business growth clearly shows that minority-owned and operated firms are a significant contributor to the long term health of the United States economy,” he said. “We must aggressively grow minority-owned firms and assist them in contributing to President Obama's goal of doubling exports over the next five years.” Earlier this year, Obama launched the



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National Export Initiative to support export and domestic jobs. He also established the Interagency Task Force on Federal Contracting Opportunities for Small Businesses, which will make recommendations to the president on how to increase government contracting opportunities for small and minority-owned businesses.

Brown says he feels the MBDA can do a great deal to help minority businesses increase their gross revenue. "As minority entrepreneurs play a critical role in our economic and jobs recovery, it is imperative that the U.S. Commerce Department's Minority Business Development Agency apply a laser focus on helping entrepreneurs get access to robust training, capital, coaching and consultancy (at a reasonable cost) early in the process," he says. "A level of support should continue to be made available after the minority entrepreneur has started his or her business as the first year is critical to long term financial health and stability."

But Brown also says minority businesses have to play their part. "I advise my clients to take a moment and focus on their passion, ability to deliver a world-class customer service experience (the lack of this is the number one reason why businesses fail), skill sets, network, access to capital, consumer demand and industry trends before investing their limited financial resources into a business," he explains. "The lack of doing the above will leave the entrepreneurs with a losing business, damage to their personal and professional brand and a setback that can be difficult to recover from."



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## *NEW BOOK TEACHES THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY A LESSON Fresh Customer Service Throws Conventional Theories Out the Window*

LOS ANGELES, Aug. 6, 2007—Northwest Airline Corp. is the newest airline to be rocked with cancellations and delays that are wearing thin the airline industry's customer service reputation. Business consultant Michael D. Brown, author of the forthcoming book *Fresh Customer Service* (Acanthus 2007), says the airline industry needs to turn conventional customer service wisdom on its head—and treat the employee as number one and the customer as number two.

“Leaders have been operating under the premise that the customer is number one for decades,” says Brown, who is a professional speaker and consultant to Fortune 100 companies. “However, lines are still long, information is scarce, and no two employees have the same answer to one question. Focusing solely on the needs of the customer is just not working.”

In fact, the lack of even basic customer service in the industry has even given rise to the Coalition for Airline Passenger's Bill of Rights, which demands better service and set standards. If Northwest had treated their employees as their number-one priority, Brown argues, they wouldn't have had the pilot fatigue that caused over 3,100 cancellations.

Pilots, flight attendants, and customer service telephone operators are the first point of contact customers have, and they make an airline run properly. When these workers—and employees of all service-providing organizations—have the tools to do their job and work in an environment that fosters positive attitudes, great service naturally follows. Brown points out that Northwest's hiring of additional pilots and offering bonuses for perfect attendance are great starts to building a World-Class customer service experience, but additional efforts need to be made.

In *Fresh Customer Service*, Brown describes 6.5 Fresh Steps® to achieving a World-Class customer service experience. They start with valuing and recognizing the contributions of the frontline employees. Brown believes that empowering employees to make decisions and act with authority will result in a heightened sense of responsibility and accountability, as well as the freedom to handle a customer's complaint rather than directing the customer to a manager.

“If Northwest and other airliners expect to reshape their customer service, they're going to have to do more than just add pilots and wave money at their employees,” Brown says. “They need to take the time to ensure that their employees are treated as the company's most important asset by approaching their customer service from the ground up.”

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# MICHAEL D. BROWN

*press releases*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## *THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY NEEDS A LESSON IN SERVICE* *Michael D. Brown Offers Airlines a Fresh Customer Service Strategy*

HOUSTON. April 10, 2008—American Airlines is the latest airline to be rocked with cancellations, further wearing thin the airline industry's customer service reputation the same week as the annual Airline Quality Rating study showed a 60% rise in complaints. Management consultant Michael D. Brown, author of the book *Fresh Customer Service* (Acanthus, 2007), says carriers like American Airlines need a new customer service strategy to take off, or risk seeing their passenger numbers and company image grounded.

"The airlines are no different than retailers in the eyes of consumers," warns Brown, who is a management consultant to Fortune 100 companies. "If your lines are long, information scarce, and delays prevalent, flyers will leave you and your rewards program for an airline that provides a customer service program that delivers. What airlines need to do is refocus their attention to service and build a ground-up model that treats employees as a priority and empowers them to better help customers. The tired theory that focuses solely on the needs of the customer is purely reactive."

The lack of even basic customer service in the industry has given rise to the Coalition for Airline Passenger's Bill of Rights, which demands better service and higher standards. Brown maintains that an employee-focused strategy can reflect these passenger rights. If Northwest, for example, had listened to and paid attention to its employees, Brown argues, they wouldn't have encountered the pilot fatigue that caused over 3,100 cancellations last fall.

Pilots, flight attendants, and customer service telephone operators are the customers' first points of contact, and they make the difference between a well run and a poorly run airline. When these workers—and employees of all service-providing organizations—have the tools to do their job and work in an environment that fosters positive attitudes, great service naturally follows. Brown points out that empowering employees to make decisions and act with authority will result in a heightened sense of responsibility that will be seen by customers as a positive service culture.

"If airlines expect to reshape their customer service, they're going to have to do more than just add pilots and wave money at their employees," Brown says. "They need to take the time to ensure that their employees are treated as the company's most important asset by approaching their customer service from the ground up."

For more information, to request an interview, or to obtain a review copy of *Fresh Customer Service*, please contact Luke Messecar at 617-230-2167, [Luke@ictusinitiative.com](mailto:Luke@ictusinitiative.com).

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## *THE ACSI SAYS CUSTOMER SERVICE IS STAGNATE New Book Helps All Industries Finally Satisfy Their Customers*

LOS ANGELES, Sept. 12, 2007—Customer satisfaction is stagnating according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index's (ACSI) newest survey that found second quarter customer approval up just 0.1 percent to 75.3 percent since 2006. Customer service consultant Michael D. Brown, author of the forthcoming book *Fresh Customer Service* (Acanthus 2007), says it validates his theory that the outdated adage of "treating the customer as number one" only provides average results.

To achieve World-Class customer service, Brown says management must treat the employee as number one and the customer as number two. This innovative new approach may be counterintuitive, but it's fresh and it works.

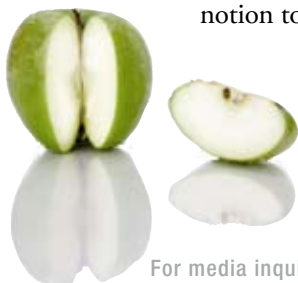
"The statistics are showing us that if industries were students, they'd be C students at best," says Brown, a professional speaker and consultant to Fortune 100 companies. "The problem is that they never think outside of the box and miss the point of what 'service' means all together. It's the frontline employees who are in control of the service experience. If they are taken care of properly, treated with the utmost respect by management, and equipped with the tools needed to get the job done, then the customer will have a great experience."

In *Fresh Customer Service*, Brown describes 6.5 Fresh Steps® to achieving a world-class customer service experience. They start with valuing and recognizing the contributions of the frontline employees. Brown believes that empowering employees to make decisions and act with authority will result in a heightened sense of responsibility and accountability, as well as the freedom to handle a customer's complaint rather than directing the customer to a manager.

Brown's service model is a ground-up approach that challenges businesses to create an environment for employees that fosters positive attitudes and great service. His method improves the bottom line by nurturing employee enthusiasm, which is inevitably felt by the customer who is in turn not only satisfied, but becomes loyal to the business.

"In order to please the customer," says Brown, "the employees must be given the information and permission they need to deliver quality service. Industries have micro-managed and forced employees to follow an outdated service notion to the point where the results have languished. It's time for a fresh approach to customer satisfaction."

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## *A FRESH APPROACH TO STARBUCKS CUSTOMER SERVICE* *Michael D. Brown Offers a New Service Strategy for Howard* *Schultz*

LOS ANGELES, CALIF. Jan. 8, 2008—Howard Schultz is retaking the reins as CEO of Starbucks after a year of falling stock prices, internal bureaucracy, and growing competition. While Schultz acknowledged a number of changes, one area he intends to concentrate on is “re-igniting the emotional attachment with customers” by improving customer service. A matter that customer service consultant Michael D. Brown says starts by returning to the company’s philosophy of treating employees as number one.

Brown believes that Schultz’s focus on renewing Starbucks’s service operations is the quickest way to revitalize the brand. However, Brown sees hard work ahead for the returning CEO and offers a few suggestions.

“Starbucks’s initial customer service, which I reference several times in my book, was based on an employee friendly model, but it eroded over time and through the quick expansion of the company, increased bureaucracy, and a cookie cutter-type in store experience, the employees’ ability to deliver what they had become famous for – delivering a best in class customer experience – was hampered,” says Brown, author of *Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life* (Acanthus Publishing 2007). “If Mr. Schultz is focused on creating world-class customer service that drives customer loyalty and the bottom line, he’s going to have to put the frontline employees first.”

Based on his tenure as a service consultant to Fortune 100 companies, Brown believes that Schultz’s primary concern should be a return to an employee-centric company of knowledgeable, empowered, and equipped frontline employees. When they are provided with the tools necessary to do their jobs, and they work in an environment that fosters positive attitudes, great service naturally follows.

“In order to reignite the customer relationship,” says Brown, “the employees must enjoy the work they do and also be given the information they need to deliver quality service. Employees who are micro-managed are going to dread coming to work and pass their discontent on to the customers. But if a company takes the time



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to listen to and empower its employees, then they are on the road to delivering a world-class customer service experience.”

In *Fresh Customer Service*, Brown lays out his 6.5 Fresh Steps, starting with valuing and recognizing the contributions of the frontline employees. His steps show managers how to empower employees to make decisions and act with authority – which results in a heightened sense of responsibility and accountability as well as the freedom to handle a customer’s complaint rather than directing the customer to a manager.

Brown’s service model is an approach that challenges businesses to create, from the ground up, an environment for employees that fosters positive attitudes and promotes great service. His method improves the bottom line by nurturing employee enthusiasm, which is inevitably felt by the customer – who will not only be satisfied, but will become a loyal patron.

If Schultz hopes to restore Starbucks’s customer service reputation then he’s going to have to try something beyond the status quo. Brown’s method flips conventional logic to get the service results that the company needs to re-establish itself.

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## *RELIEF RETAILERS ARE CRAVING:*

### *An Empowered Sales Force Provides the Solution to Weak Holiday Sales*

LOS ANGELES, Jan. 16, 2008— Yesterday the U.S. Commerce Department\* reported that December, 2007 suffered a 0.4 percent decrease in national retail sales, ending the weakest holiday sales season since 2002. Customer service expert Michael D. Brown advises retailers to refrain from deep discounting and employee lay-offs to compensate for holiday sales decline. Brown asserts that when sales figures fail to reach projections, enhanced customer-employee interaction is critical to escape the sales-loss cycle.

“Many managers fight to improve sales numbers through rushed up-selling maneuvers,” said Michael D. Brown, MBA and author of *Fresh Customer Service: Treat the Employee as #1 and the Customer as #2 and You Will Get Customers for Life* (Acanthus Publishing, October 2007). “Without thoroughly examining how these new strategies will integrate into the daily work of the front-line employees, these procedures will ultimately fail.”

According an article by AP\*\*, many retailers also are compensating by cutting personnel. Brown emphasizes that this decision is a mistake, and the only way to rebound successfully from disappointing sales results is by enhancing the role of the front-line employee.

“Managers must focus on empowering and motivating employees to supply the most remarkable shopping experience possible to the current customer base,” said Brown. “This strategy will lead to increased profits and a customer return rate with a much higher value than the cost reduction of a laid-off employee.”

\* To access the information released by The U.S. Commerce Department visit:  
<http://0-www.msnbc.msn.com.millennium.unicatt.it/id/22664451>.

\*\*To access the information released by AP visit <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22589403>.

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“In order to reignite the customer relationship,” says Brown, “the employees must enjoy the work they do and also be given the information they need to deliver quality service. Employees who are micro-managed are going to dread coming to work and pass their discontent on to the customers. But if a company takes the time to listen to and empower its employees, then they are on the road to delivering a world-class customer service experience.”

In *Fresh Customer Service*, Brown lays out his 6.5 Fresh Steps, starting with valuing and recognizing the contribu-



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## *CUSTOMER SERVICE OR BUST*

### *Employees are the Secret Weapon to Escape the Pending Recession*

LOS ANGELES, CALIF. Jan. 30, 2008—Customer service consultant, Michael D. Brown, asserts that businesses need to offer more to customers in the wake of further decline in consumer confidence. The numbers released by The Conference Board yesterday show confidence at just 87.9 points, as well as a drop in the expectations index. Brown emphasizes that as consumers limit their spending, businesses need to empower their employees with the skills necessary to provide outstanding service that retains customers.

“The further drop in consumer confidence is a wake-up call to businesses that the trend is going to continue,” says Brown, author of *Fresh Customer Service* (Acanthus Publishing) and customer service consultant to Fortune 100 companies. “In a pessimistic market, consumers have the upper hand. They are more selective where their money is spent. And the customer service experience they receive plays a large part in their purchase decisions.”

Businesses need to provide customers with service that goes above and beyond expectations if they hope to retain customers and differentiate themselves from the competition. Brown points out, the key to this experience is the frontline employees who have daily contact with customers.

It’s up to owners and managers to provide employees with the necessary skills to create a world-class experience. While there are a number of steps involved in creating a proactive service culture, empowering employees to make decisions and act with authority is an initial step that has become a necessity.

“Frontline employees act as brand ambassadors and their performance can make or break whether a customer continues to choose your business or the one across the street,” says Brown. “In the current economic climate, businesses can’t afford to lose any prospective customers. Providing customers with anything less than extraordinary service could make the difference between a stable business and a bankrupt one.”

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## *CUSTOMER SATISFACTION ON THE SKIDS* *Customer Service Expert Offers Business Advice on How to Stop the Bleeding*

**Rancho Cucamonga, CALIF. February 20, 2008**—The University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) fourth quarter findings, released yesterday, showed a second consecutive quarter drop in customer satisfaction—with department and discount stores reaching their lowest levels since 2001. Customer service expert Michael D. Brown asserts that the ACSI findings coupled with the rise in Consumer Price Index are a wake-up call and businesses must focus on service to survive the coming months.

"The latest ACSI report provides further solid proof that it is the customer experience that will sustain your business," says Brown, who is a customer service consultant for Fortune 100 companies and author of *Fresh Customer Service*. "Retailers that are trying to weather the economic downturn through price cuts and layoffs will force themselves out of business. Now, more than ever, the customer experience needs to be at the forefront of business strategy and any decisions that affect customer satisfaction should be fully vetted.

The ACSI measures retail, finance and insurance, and e-commerce every fourth quarter. While overall satisfaction fell, e-commerce reached an all-time high—showing that in brick-and-mortar outlets are not meeting the needs and wants of customers. .

"When customer satisfaction declines, consumers have less enthusiasm for repeating experiences that no longer provide the same gratification," wrote Professor Claes Fornell, of the Univ. of Michigan, in his commentary for the report. "The experiences in question are the matters relating to shopping, buying, and consuming. If satisfaction affects consumers' willingness to spend, household debt ratios to income affect consumers' ability to spend."

Brown points out that traditional storefront businesses need to recharge their customer service strategies. And it starts by providing customers with service that goes above and beyond expectations if they hope to retain customers and differentiate themselves from the competition and the web. He stresses that the key to this experience is the frontline employees who have daily contact with customers.

In *Fresh Customer Service*, Brown describes 6.5 Fresh Steps to achieve a world-class customer service experience. They start with valuing and recognizing the contributions of the frontline employees. He believes that empower-



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ing employees to make decisions and act with authority will result in a heightened sense of responsibility and accountability, as well as the freedom to handle a customer's complaint rather than directing the customer to a manager. This ground-up approach offers customers a knowledgeable and able company representative that improves customer satisfaction.

“Leaders need to take a quick timeout and get everyone laser focused on delivering upon the main strategy – to deliver a world-class customer service experience via the frontline no matter the distractions,” says Brown. “After making a commitment to deliver upon this strategy they should move to ensuring that their frontline employees are empowered and equipped to deliver it.”

For more information, to request an interview, or to obtain a copy of Fresh Customer Service, please contact Luke Messecar at 617-230-2167, [Luke@IctusInitiative.com](mailto:Luke@IctusInitiative.com).

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