

THE OF SERVICE

Lessons in Customer Service
from the top and the bottom!

SHAUN HOON

About the Author

Shaun has something to say about customer service. He has been in the service industry for more than a decade and has experience in selling \$8,000 advertisements in Singapore as well as \$8.00 worth of kebabs to the layman on the street of Australia, in this ironic sequence as his career unfolds.

Moving to Australia in 2002, Shaun started his life all over again from the bottom, where he had to relearn the ropes in several different industries; a move that he highly recommends for any marketing enthusiasts aiming to master a solid foundation of the game. It is these experiences that taught Shaun valuable lessons in life and in business, where he encountered first hand interactions with customers from 8 months old to 80 years old.

In Australia, Shaun started two shoe shops, worked in Levi's for a brief period, where he achieved outstanding results, and then moved on to Cash & Carry, the largest Food wholesaler in Australia, and progressed in the field of purchasing.

Shaun's experience in marketing is diverse. The companies he worked for will provide the reader with a glimpse of understanding on the pages of ideas and wit presented in this book. Such include: Great Eastern, Pizza Hut, Asia-Inc, City Walker, Levi's and Cash & Carry.

At the young age of 33, Shaun grasped the secret of happiness when he realized that a happy wife equals a happy life. It is for this reason that Shaun and his wife Deon, together with their dog, Maki moved back to Brunei in March 2010. You will be able to recognize Shaun if you live in the Menglait area; he is the person who walks the white dog by the roadside without fail each morning and evening.

In early September this year, with the assistance of investors who believe in him, Shaun started a marketing agency called Catalyst with the ambitious goal of Sparking the Economy by empowering businesses with practical tools and advice.

Shaun documents his thoughts and observations in a blog called www.visionforabetterasia.com.



Why Me?

Experts speak of Customer Service through the lens of research, case studies and observations but they often neglect the practical aspect of things. Front liners speak on the subject through personal hard knocks and experiences. Perfect, if only they could articulate in details the depth of their experience and the big picture.

The ideas introduced in this book are not mine, they come from some of the most admired organizations in the world namely, Zappos, Nissan, Starbucks, Levi's, and Louis Vuitton. I merely digest their best practices on your behalf, and throw in a dozen other examples I learned along the way by rolling up my sleeves, actually serving customers on a day-to-day basis over the last 15 years. Beyond that, I also identified individuals who have got it right locally, whose businesses you can actually visit and learn from!

It is my goal to bring you clarity, objectivity and inspiration on the subject of Customer Service. This book will have served its purpose if it results in a more conducive environment for your team and customers, which results in a more profitable business.

The Genesis

Everything was perfect. The lighting, the temperature control and the scent of the entire room were tailored to my preferences. Even the music and the ambience were set to transport me back to Mother Nature, right in the midst of the busy city. This upscale spa couldn't have thought of a better way to delight their customers. One would think. Would I go back again? Not likely.

Don't get me wrong, the masseur carried himself extremely well throughout. At the end of his service, he stood with a straight posture and uttered a scripted verse thanking me for choosing his company. He executed the speech flawlessly and even managed to carry a smile on his face the whole time he spoke (I have no idea how he pulled that off).

That was it! His performance was the equivalent of watching a peacock rehearsing a speech with fake emotions.

As I tried to analyze what was wrong, I realized **what was wrong was not the lack of professionalism, but the exact same word; "professionalism"**.

Too often companies wear the slogan of customer service on their lips and, like this elite spa, they have strict measures to ensure a certain level of 'customer service' is being achieved and steps are being ticked off the list.

One may think that there is probably not much more a company can do to 'make' another person outdo the performance carried out by the masseur. Actually, there is.

Stepping out of the spa, I was determined to prove that a better way is indeed possible. People do not need to be robotic in their approach. The phrase **“we are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen” should not only be a slogan limited to the Ritz Carlton.** I began my quest to recollect my past memories and experiences and dive into research on the organizations that have done well by doing good both locally and internationally.

This is how this book was born. I set out to explain the intrinsic aspects of a better customer service culture, not just rewards and punishments. To my surprise, I discovered that there are more like-minded people who uphold the same beliefs about customer service than I anticipated. Along the way, I also uncovered some customer service champions within Brunei, whose examples are no less impressive than major corporations overseas.

Like me, I hope you will be inspired.

What is Customer Service?

Customer service is a very subjective matter. As customers, we all have a say in what customer service is, or what it ought to be. Chances are, if you were to ask 10 random people on the street, their views on customer service would vary from one person to another.

My two cents on the subject matter is this simple mathematical matrix called expectation:

Outcome = Expectation : Satisfactory Service

Outcome > Expectation : Good Service

Outcome < Expectation : Bad Service

Two different people receiving the same level of service from the same waiter could offer two very different perception about the hospitality they receive, because everyone's expectation is different, which makes service more of an art than a science!

What Customer Service is Not?

My best attempt to help understand the notion of customer service can be illustrated through the story of our encounter with a pharmacist in Tokyo.

The pharmacist declined to sell us a painkiller that was perfectly legal for over-the-counter purchase, insisting that we seek proper medical attention for my wife's ear infection. In doing so, she not only helped us to pinpoint a specialist, but went the extra mile of booking an appointment for us. The majority of our conversation was translated through the help of the lady's iPhone, which took a good 15 minutes of the pharmacist's time and did not result in any sales.

This Japanese woman understood service. **It has nothing to do with being articulate or even anything to do with closing the sale.** Service is about the basic calling to help another human being.

You can coach your staff on the ability to execute the precise speech at the exact moment to impress customers. But without the intrinsic desire to serve, people will see through it no matter how smooth the performance.

Service is an attitude; it is a set of values rooted in a person, and a belief system. One's mindset has to be people centered; it is not even a skill. How do you even attempt teach that?

Applying CPR to your Customer Strategy

This book offers no quick fix to your customer service problem. If you are looking for skills and techniques, you will be disappointed. Skills are often limited only to certain environments, are largely non-transferable, and worse of all, they get out of date as circumstances changes.

We attempt to go one better by giving you a set of guiding principles that are universal across industries, that withstand the test of time, and more importantly, ones that **challenge you to think, emulate and apply to your unique business environment.**

We call this set of principles: CPR. While it is not exactly Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation, these tools could act as your company's CPR in times of trouble.

C Culture
P Passion
R Relationship

Culture

Culture

Culture is an accepted norm within a society reflecting people's attitude, behavior and lifestyle. In the context of a business, culture is a set of governing values on which decisions and actions are based.

Culture is paramount to the success of a company's customer service exercise because **it identifies a set of accepted attitudes towards customers that is ubiquitous throughout the whole organization.** The three companies in this chapter exemplify what we are trying to convey by this principle. Don't just take our words for it, but be blown away even more by looking into their practices for yourselves.

Zappos.com

Zappos.com is one of America's leading online shoe retailers which bases its whole company direction on providing the best customer service through delivering happiness to customers. Their company structure is committed to this belief, a discipline that forces Zappos to make tough decisions that result in detrimental short term consequences.

A few years ago, Zappos made a strategic decision to eliminate all marketing budgets, instead they invested their money in Customer Service.

Considering that 75% of their sales come from repeat customers, this move should not have come as a surprise to the business world, but it created headlines all over the press!

CEO Tony Hsieh, proclaimed that the secret weapons used by the company to lure customers are not fancy websites or creative gimmicks, but the old fashioned telephone! Unlike other websites, Zappos actually encourages its customers to call their call centers!

Some of the unusual practices by Zappos include:

>>> Next day delivery for repeat customers.

>>> No phone scripts for telemarketers. Reps are encouraged to speak for as long as they want, on any topic at all to their customers.

>>> 365 days return policy, which includes free shipping.

All the above are contrary to traditional business practices because they add huge expense on the company's overheads without guarantees.

Tony's famous saying is that **when you stick to your vision, revenues will follow**. By sticking their neck out in everything they do and holding true to their beliefs, Zappos have won multiple awards for customer service, hit Gross Merchandise Sales of \$1billion last year, and were voted Fortune's best company to work for in 2009.

Corporate culture is so important to Zappos that they are ready to hire or fire based upon a set of 10 core values they set out. This is the only company to my knowledge that pays new trainees \$2,000 to quit, as a test of their commitment to the company early in their career.

A favorite Zappos story of mine is the one when a Zappos' rep took the initiative to send flowers to a customer after she found out that the reason the customer had returned a pair of shoes was that her husband had died after he ordered them. It is the kind of empowerment and trust bestowed upon the staff at the grass root level that makes the brand great. Needless to say, this is the kind of human touch that personifies what a service industry is and should be all about. Compare this incident to the money Zappos would have spend on advertising. Which do you think would be more credible?

The truth is, we cannot control customer service, just like we cannot control what our kids are going to grow up to be. As a leader, we know all too well that staff often act one way when they are being supervised, but act another way in our absence. It often surprises me when business owners do not understand why their staff performs poorly towards their customers, when their staff is mistreated in the first place.

In a previous organisation I worked for, we were always reminded of the fact that **“your organisation is only as strong as your weakest link”**, citing the importance of consistency throughout the team and value of training in ensuring the very best of staff performance.

When you hire a group of people and treat them with due respect, training and empowerment, there is really no need to use any carrots or sticks, just like the employees at Zappos.com.

Tony recently published his book *Delivering Happiness* that went straight to the top of the non-fiction chart at Amazon.com. If you want an in depth understanding of building company culture, look no further!

The Zappos Core Value

1. Deliver Wow through Service
2. Embrace and Drive Change
3. Create Fun and A Little Weirdness
4. Be Adventurous, Creative, and Open-Minded
5. Pursue Growth and Learning
6. Build Open and Honest Relationships With Communication
7. Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit
8. Do More With Less
9. Be Passionate and Determined
10. Be Humble

The Starbucks Culture

If you have been to Starbucks, you would understand, when I describe about the kind of energy and positive spirits the baristas carry. It is like stepping into different zone where, as a customer you sometimes feel like a spectator or even a cheerleader wanting the company to do well. No matter which Starbucks you happen to be in the world, it gives you a sense of familiarity, a piece of home. Perhaps its just me, perhaps the enthusiasm will rub off, when you learn more about their culture because they represent the good guys, and we all want the good guys to win!

Excerpt from an interview with Howard Schultz, CEO Starbucks:

The only reason we are in business is because of the quality of people we are able to attract into our team, coupled with the quality of coffee we can find... If we do not do the two things well, we are finished. We are not in the coffee business serving people, we are in the people business serving coffee. If we believe that, we have to imprint a level of understanding and behavior about how we do things. It begins with attracting people with like-minded values, people who want to serve the customers, who want to be part of the environment.

Starbucks put their money where the mouth is by being one of the very few companies that provide healthcare benefits and stock options even to their part timers. Last year, the company spent \$300 million on insurance, more than they spend on coffee beans in a year. Schultz indicated that **he wanted to build a company where people would not be left behind, one that his father never had a chance to work for.**

In an autobiography written by Michael Gill, a barista at Starbucks, found more meaning, happiness and life purpose in Starbucks pouring coffee than in his well-paid, highly esteemed job as a creative director for JW Thomson. At Starbucks, staff are known as partners, and they take the word 'respect' very seriously, even to the extent of ensuring positive and polite phrases are carried out in the conversation between partners. There is a rule that staff use the phrase "can you do me a favor" when they need help, instead of demanding for a job to be done! Gill attributed his second chance in life to Starbucks' unwavering commitment to treating people as people.

The interview is obtained from the Market Place Podcast. There is also a similar interview on Howard Schultz from Harvard Business Review podcast, both of them are equally insightful. Simply go to itune and search for Starbucks, there is no shortages of resources on the company and on marketing and management.

As I went online to look for the corporate message conveyed by Starbucks from the horse's mouth; I was further convinced by everything they stand for:

The Starbucks mission statement is more than words on a piece of paper – it's the philosophy that guides how we do business every day.

The Starbucks Mission Statement

To inspire and nurture the human spirit— one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time.

Our Partners

We're called partners, because it's not just a job, it's our passion. Together, we embrace diversity to create a place where each of us can be ourselves. We always treat each other with respect and dignity. And we hold each other to that standard.

Our Customers

When we are fully engaged, we connect with, laugh with, and uplift the lives of our customers— even if just for a few moments. Sure, it starts with the promise of a perfectly made beverage, but our work goes far beyond that. It's really about human connection.

Engineering Company Culture

Nissan's Vision: Enriching People's Lives

While customer service is executed at the bottom level, it is really a top down discipline,

as we discovered from Zappos and Starbucks. First, the leaders need to identify the direction; then relentless dedication throughout the entire company has to follow. The model could never work had it been from the bottom up, simply because there is not enough influence at the grass root level to carry the whole vision through.

Carlos Ghosn, the CEO of Nissan faced a dire task of resurrecting the company's performance, when he was hired by the company to head the Japan operation in the early 2000s.

I was privileged to attend the Asia's Top CEO award presented to Ghosn by The International Herald Tribune in 2002, where he shared the secrets of turning Nissan around.

The Japanese are renowned for preserving their own culture, which is why it takes a very special outsider to exert his or her influences, let alone lead at the top.

Understanding the Japanese' value for commitment, Ghosn made a public announcement on the first day of his engagement that he would step down from his position one year on, if he did not achieve the objectives set out by him. The Japanese people hold high value on the virtue of commitment; this act won an early confidence vote from his followers.

Two, Ghosn outworked the Japanese people by being the first to be in the office, and last to leave. If you understand anything about the Japanese work ethic, you would know that the Japanese people are the hardest working people on the planet! Needless to say, Carlos Ghosn won over their support by not only talking the talk.

Three, Ghosn ensured that the vision and objectives set out are so clear, simple and short that people from the janitor to the vice president are able to understand and repeat them, no matter who is being asked.

One of the most admired brands in Asia demonstrated that getting a committed team and forming a company culture is about walking the walk, not just some feel good statements posted on the wall.

Mixing Fun with Culture!

At Asia-Inc Forum, we outsourced our artwork to one of Brunei's leading design firms, MixmediaWorx (MMW) who handle the top projects in the country and abroad, including the design of the APEC logo in Singapore for 2009 and the revamp of Brunei Economic Development Board's branding strategy.

As a marketing representative for Asia-Inc Forum, we churned out different newspaper advertisements each week for our conferences, and engaged MMW to produce e-books, brochures, banners and the whole nine yards.

Being situated just across the road from the Asia-Inc Forum office, MMW soon became my second office where I would "go to escape, and escaped to go."

The team does not have a rulebook on culture, yet the kind of bonding that gelled them together fell nothing short of the characters in the book Tribal Leadership; with the common purpose of always pushing the envelope for their clients in applying their own final touch to the storyboard.

What attracted me to this bunch of designers most was not only the fact that they are rock star looking, music savvy and Birkenstock wearing laid back artists, but the very contagious energy that they exuded. Not to mention, these are the only people who got my humor (hopefully not out of courtesy, as I was the client).

Since they are the top agency, you often see multiple projects on hand at any one time, which must have been immensely stressful. However, you get no hint of stress at all in the office, it was always calm, relaxed and above all, fun!

The guys often stayed back overnight to get the jobs done for clients without hesitation. To them, it was just like a college hangout hub, having fun except the kind of fun that people pay for!

The Tribal Leader, Azlan being a seasoned designer himself, explained that managing a bunch of creative people is a totally different ball game. **“It is about trust, empowerment and the discipline of not micromanaging”**. Sounds a lot like managing without doing anything, but on the contrary, it is the exact leadership style employed by Zen Master, Phil Jackson of the Lakers and the legendary Chicago Bulls, who has the discipline to let the players work things out in the final minutes of championship games without calling any time out!

I had an epiphany looking around the designers working on different clients' projects one day, it occurred to me what these guys are doing are essentially “Beautifying Brunei” with their magical touch! An important vocation in which these people have no idea they are taking part on.

Working today at MMW is another crazy designer who has volunteered his services for free for the whole of last month, in order to get his foot in the door. During the time, Kyll along with the gang stayed overnight to get projects done, tagged along to meetings and was treated as one of the tribe.

I have also become a permanent member of the eminent MixmediaWorx as a partner to the sister company, Catalyst, with the ambitious vision of making a difference with the never say die rock star attitude.

Passion

Passion

Before heading into the discussion on passion, we would like to clarify that time and reality have proved that the lack of passion can equally get a job done, and at times get things done well, too! Andre Agassi, one of the best tennis players to have ever graced the court, made a startling revelation in his autobiography that he hated tennis all his life. There is no shortage of examples of high achievers who hate what they are doing. Simply look around your company; you will be able to identify a few. The fact is, more than 90% of the work force hate the job they are doing.

What, then, is the point of adding passion to the equation of customer service?

The truth is, life is too short to be pursuing things you are not passionate about. The seemingly selfless act of suppressing one's passion to pursue a job often ends up being a selfish act in not presenting the best the product has to offer to the customer.

Smart companies hire passionate people as evangelists for their products, and through doing so, they achieve a win-win situation between the company and the staff.

Passion cannot be learned. The closest thing one can do is to infect people by those who share the love for the subject. How then, do you convert your existing staff into passionate people? There is really no easy answer. As a start, the leader needs to be the most passionate person in the entire company. We do not pretend to have a concrete answer on such a complex issue, but we attempt to share our view on this through zeal and vigor.

If you are just starting out, the solution can be somewhat easier; hire people who are passionate about your products and services.

Louis Vuitton

If you have been to any Louis Vuitton store, you would have noticed that there is no price tag anywhere to be found on the display of the bags. You can tell instantly an experienced attendant from a new one by their ability to provide information about the bags such as the price, the history, the designers, and so on.

Most Louis Vuitton staff would have no problem in sharing with you intimate details about each product because the chances are that if you were working for the company, you would already be a huge fan of the Louis Vuitton brand.

I was exposed to many inside stories of Louis Vuitton because my wife, Deon, used to work there as a part time Sales Associate in its Perth store for three years.

The income for retail associates is the lowest amongst all the professions regardless where they are in the world, and what company they work for. How, then, does this iconic brand expect its low-income staff to carry out the excellent Louis Vuitton service the company expects?

The answers lie in the caliber of the people working there! If you looked into the background of the people in the front line at a typical Louis Vuitton store, you would be astonished by the capability and diversity of their strength!

Take Deon's store, for example; there was Onkei, the reputable local fashion designer who forfeited her business to work there; Sarah, a previous supervisor from Four Season Hotel in Paris; Linda, a practicing medical doctor; Annabelle, an actress from Beijing; Yuka, the culinary expert cum the most detailed orientated leader; Deon, the professional musician. There was even a candidate who migrated from Perth to Sydney, just for the position of a front line opening in the Australian head quarters!

The common denominator between these people is that they all had an obsession for Louis Vuitton. **Imagine when you have people on the front line with such enthusiasm for your products; memorizing product information becomes easy for them, never mind the level of energy that the staff radiates when they talk about your products!**

Behind the Scenes

The back room of a Louis Vuitton store looks nothing like the chic atmosphere portrayed in the display area. If anything, it looks more like a war zone with military plots and numbers all over; a place that actually reminded me very much of the life insurance company I used to work for. It is not surprising that there is a prominent chart measuring each member of staff's sales to date per month. What is amazing are the names of the top customers highlighted on the wall. **The top customers are graded, and staffs are expected to not only know their name, but research their background.** Yes, you know you have made it if you receive a congratulatory call from Louis Vuitton citing a newspaper article about you or being invited for a morning breakfast meeting with the manager.

It is no accident that Louis Vuitton is one of the world's leading iconic luxury brands today; they plan everything to the smallest detail.

Insights:

- The staff at Louis Vuitton follow a strict process throughout their interaction with customers; a guideline referred to as GREATER, with steps from Greetings to Reinforcement after the close of a sale.
- The company organizes dry cleaning service for the staff, and has staff uniform nicely pressed, waiting for them at their locker when they turn up for work. Talk about attention to detail!
- Japanese customers love to be left alone in deep thinking prior to making any purchasing decision, while at the same time fully expect staff to have all products and information at their finger tips at their request.
- Did you know that all Louis Vuitton stores in Australia actually accept Japanese Yen, Euro and US Dollars?
- There is an unspoken expectation that a Louis Vuitton sales associate is able to speak your language, especially if you are Chinese or Japanese (who represents some of the largest groups of their customers globally).

The Biggest Sales Story

Early in Deon's career an extraordinarily ordinary looking Indian woman by the name of Radhika Oswal came into the store, who any stereotypical high end sales person would have walked past, mistaking her for another onlooker.

As a rookie, Deon did not fall into the trap of that stereotypical sales person as she followed the rulebook to treat everyone with due respect.

The simple interaction turned into a two hour-long sales transaction. No, Deon did not attempt convince Oswal to make the biggest single sales transaction ever recorded in the store's history. Anyone who walked out of a handbag store with the purchase worth equivalent to the price tag of a car would have come in with some form of agenda in mind.

You may call this beginner's luck. My idol, Guy Kawasaki once said, "given the choice between being smart or lucky, choose the latter", with which I completely agree. Imagine Oswal being met that day with the typical lukewarm reception of the high-end boutique that we have all been accustomed to receiving!

Incidentally, the Oswals recently built the most expensive real estate ever built in Western Australia worth A\$70 million. This story should serve as a reminder **never ever to underestimate the potential of any client walking in the door.**

Guy Kawasaki is a founding partner of Garage Technology, an ex-Apple's Chief Evangelist and an author of eight books. All of them are on the best seller list. I highly recommend all of his books. My personal favorite is a classic "how to drive your competition crazy". Follow his blog on www.guykawasaki.com.

Developing a Passionate Team

You may argue that Louis Vuitton is an extreme example; who wouldn't fall in love of a brand with such stature? Valid point. However, **passion transcends boundaries. It does not necessarily need to be narrowed down to certain products or brands.**

City Walker, my previous shoe shop in Perth sold shoes ranging from \$10 - \$50. None of the shoes I sold represent any brand. However, I managed to hire many passionate people who loved shoes, and therefore enjoyed talking to customers about what they love.

Two of the questions I often asked when I interviewed candidates for my shoe shops are:

1. How many pairs of shoes do you possess?
2. Can you guess the size of my shoes?

An experienced shoe sales person would be able to gauge the size of your shoe by simply looking at your feet. Bonus point if they get it right, but they do not get written off for getting the wrong answer. It was simply a test to see if the employee would get my dry sense of humor.

Question one, though, was a trick question. Regardless of how eloquent or proficient the interviewee may be, I hardly ever took on a candidate who possessed fewer than five pairs of shoes. The reason is obvious; shoe lovers would naturally own more than a five pairs of shoes at any one time!

Igniting Passion

As I began to talk to different companies on the subject of passion, one commonly asked question was: “How then do you ignite passion into my team? **We cannot fire all the mediocre staff members and instantly replace them with a passionate team.**” The heart of my thesis was being challenged in a very practical manner!

As I reached deeper into the subject, I found a light to the question from personal experiences, which I hope will be the beginning of a quest for more answers.

Fake It Until You Make it!

Ten years ago, I was the typical partner you find waiting outside the shoe store while their partner went in to do their shopping. I had no interest in shoes whatsoever prior to opening my shoe shops. During then, I had three pairs of shoes; one for work, one for basketball and a pair of thongs for the weekend. That was more than enough for me.

Everything changed after the opening my first shoe store. I went from being the guy outside the shoe shop to the guy on his knees helping customers to fit on their shoes for three years.

Truth be told, I had no choice but to fake my enthusiasm for the staffs and customers about my love for shoes. I simply could not lead a team without any knowledge, love and understanding about shoes.

I started researching in depth into the fashion, the style and the make of a good pair of shoes. Not only that, I went to the extent of understanding the basic about podiatry. I was at a stage where I could determine people's shoe size by looking at people's feet.

I do not exactly remember at what point of my life did I start walking with my head facing the floor, checking out on everyone's pair of shoes. But that was the whole turning point towards my passion for shoes.

I currently own more pairs of shoes than all the Levi's jeans add together in my closet (I have many, many pairs of Levi's). Not a number I wish to brag about, considering the fact that a good number of the human population in the third world countries still do not have any shoes on their feet.

My vocabulary of shoes went from Air Jordan to wedges, stilettos, pump, flat, loafer, Mary Jane to clogs and mules, from Jimmy Choo, Salvatore Ferragamo to Manolo Blahnik (to be pronounced Blakhnik, with the K) and many more. Beyond a shoe connoisseur, I am officially now, a shoe addict!

A break through lesson I learned from attending Anothony Robbins' seminar 10 years ago was that behavior dictates emotion. You cannot remain in a depressed zone, if your body posture is straight, and you do funny faces in front of the mirror.

I guess the same principle applies in this scenario. When you fake passion long enough, you will catch on the love. Ask any of your grand parents who have been through arranged marriage to explain this notion further for you.

Purpose

This is a real life story that happened to a colleague of mine from Cash & Carry who prefers to be remained anonymous. Let's just call him Tony.

Tony hated his job. It is the direct opposite of his personality, he is out going, creative and above all, he hates Microsoft Excel! His job is far from creative, it is routine and involves everything about the Excel sheet. He often joked about "how much fun can a person dealing with canned food have at work?" The only reason he remained doing what he did was because he needed the income and the potential opportunities this job has to offer.

Outside of work, Tony's passion was to do voluntary work at a Church that feeds the homeless every Saturday night. It was a place he could count on many of his personal blessings, and meet like-minded people who were there purely in the spirit to serve. The music apparently was legendary too!

One day, as Tony stumbled into a supplier and exchanged stories about his commitment outside of work, Tony discovered that the supplier was throwing away food that were close to expiry. Long story short, Tony organized for the food to be distributed to the Church that he volunteered for. This led to Tony's realization the power of influence of his position in furthering the cause. With the consent and knowledge of his company, Tony began receiving donations from other suppliers in supporting his personal passion.

That marked the beginning of what have been the turning point of Tony's career. **The whole dynamic of Tony's outlook for work changed completely as he found a deeper purpose behind his work.** He was much more enthusiastic, productive, happy and dare I say, passionate in everything he did!

Finding Purpose

What changed?

Tony was able to connect the dots between his work and making a difference in the bigger context. Along the way, he found the higher purpose to what he was doing.

A university canteen dish washer found a renewed purpose for his work, when a professor pointed out to him that his job was directly responsible for the health and well being of the future doctors, philanthropist and Prime Minister of the country, by ensuring the plates and utensils he wash are always spotless for the university students.

It is not difficult to find a correlation between what we do and the greater good of our work for the society, when we zoom out of the details and look at the big pictures. It is the duty of a leader to point out this vision to the followers.

Passionate People of Brunei

The Next Generation of Entrepreneurs

On the third floor of an old shop next to an alley in Kuala Belait, Brunei lies an art shop that represents more than it seems to be. To me it is a ray of hope for a country town like many others, where young people move away to the bigger city for growth and development.

Operating the gallery is a twenty something entrepreneur named Kristen who left her well paying, secure job with the government and poured all of her life savings into a dream that she believes in.

Kristen's business has been going for over a year and a half now, and is doing very well. Half of the premises are dedicated to both local and foreign artists to exhibit their art, for which she acts as the middleman. The other half has an extended long table that stretches beyond many arm's length. A place where many of the country's future Picassos are developed.

Kristen was proud to announce that most of the furniture is made of raw materials, which she and her colleagues spent hours assembling. They even made up their own black board with their own painting. If your mental picture gives you an impression of a decorated garage, I will have done her gallery little by way of justice. Jady's Art Gallery (the official name for her gallery) resembles the chic unfinished warehouse appearance of Melbourne's art galleries. It virtually transports you to another world, during the brief moments you are in there.

Ten minutes into conversation with this stranger, I almost get to know the cost of her shop's rental, the profit margin and the names of her suppliers. But she is not worried. Chances are, she is and will be the only person doing what she does in the entire town, may I add, with flair.

Welcome to a new generation of entrepreneurs in Brunei; confident, transparent and, more importantly, passionate. Kristen's energy is invigorating, her customer service superb. I ended buying some coloring sets from her not out of obligation, but as a vote of support. Kristen called me back before departing the store to hand me a discount which both of us had overlooked.

Kristen's example fits right into all of the three principles described in this book; Culture, Passion and Relationship. She did not attend any of my courses. She does not need to.

Need I say more; go check it out for yourself. Buy some art pieces from Kristen, to preserve the audacity to dream, the development of future artists and to preserve arts.

Tell Kristen I sent you.

Everybody is a VIP

Yumi Kamio loves Brunei. She explained that her favorite part of her job was taking Japanese tourists on the boat to see the proboscis monkeys tucked right behind the mangrove forest 30 minutes away from Kampong Ayer. She would plan the trip with precise timing so that when they returned back to civilization, it would be at sunset, when Brunei's skylight turns yellow, just as the flocks of birds in their thousands travel back from Kuala Belait, with the Royal Palace on the left and the endless settlements on Kampong Ayer on the right, perfected with the sunset as a backdrop. At the end of her description in the Japanese-Brunei-English accent (one that is unique only to Yumi), I wanted to go to Brunei!

If you take a walk with Yumi to the wet market, you will feel rather ashamed that a foreigner commands much more popularity amongst the local storekeepers than you do. Everybody knows Yumi!

Yumi's work is unique. She is the only person who does what she does. Of course, there are a few Japanese tour guides that she trains, but no one even comes close to her understanding of the tropical nature and mastery of the local culture.

Sometimes, she entertains the elite Japanese visitors who fly into the country in private jets and sometimes she entertains ordinary Japanese retirees who want to catch a glimpse of this magical kingdom. Yumi treats all her clients the same, with utmost dedication and professionalism.

A rule that Yumi refuses to break is, she has never enquired what the client does for a living. To Yumi, it doesn't really matter at all.

When you think about it, it makes perfect sense. **If you treat all your clients as VIPs, their background and status should never matter to you.**

Loyalty

If you ever wondered what Izan's laughter sounds like, tune in to Brunei's premier radio station, Pilihan FM most mornings between 6am and 9am. Alternatively try recalling Oprah's laughter. I call it a million-dollar chuckle, because it is so infectious that when she laughs, the whole of Brunei loosens together.

Izan brings you to never-land whenever she speaks on the radio. She is not without flaw, in fact she stumbles more often than you realize. The difference is that she is not afraid to make fun of herself and is able to shake it out and move on without any hindrance. Like all of us, Izan has good days and bad days on her show. It takes a loyal fan to pick up the difference. If you are a new listener, do not even attempt to dissect. You will be laughing so hard with her save the world, defend Lady Ga-Ga messages that you forget to be analytical about her.

Izan is a woman with a mission; to infect the country with her contagious spirit and positive attitude that even her biggest doubter would have to take their hats off to. She calls this mission: Izanism.

I am biased about Izan because beyond being a friend, I am also a big fan. Izan appreciates loyalty. As businesses we roll out endless numbers of customer loyalty programs, where we entice customers with rewards for obeying our commands.

The fact is, businesses have got the whole concept upside down. **Companies are supposed to be the ones showing loyalty to their customers, not the other way round.** Just like Izan's loyalty towards her listeners, in putting aside all personal issues whenever she is on air, and presenting her best to the country show after show, after show, after show.

Relationship

Relationship

On the retail level, you are not given much chance to leave an impression, let alone establish a relationship. **The short window of five seconds interaction will determine whether or not the customers like you, trust you and would want to do business with you.**

Aside from being sincere and having the purest intention of serving the customers, there is really no shortcut. Until now.

This chapter commences by providing you with a killer strategy to establish an instant relationship with any one, any time followed by an exploration of some built to last virtues that help to maintain a meaningful relationship with your customers.

Give

The Chupa Chups Strategy

Many years ago as I was shopping on Oxford Street in Sydney, I noticed a young man holding onto a big fish bowl filled with Chupa Chups giving them to passersby. Instinct drew me near to the guy and as my hand was reaching into the bowl of free lollies, the man casually invited me to enter the shop for a visit. Slightly obliged, I entered a very crowded store full of people with Chupa Chups in their mouths.

Years later when I opened my first shoe shop, the Chupa Chup Strategy resurfaced in my mind. I had a hard time trying to convince my partner to give away 40 cents for every customer coming into the store. Nevertheless, I persevered and bought a huge can of Chupa Chups with 1000 lollies.

The Chupa Chups gave me an access to customers I could never have imagined. It became an instant ice-breaker with customers and turned numerous customers into friends. Eventually, we had kids begging their mum to come into our store, giving us the most innocent clues that they wanted our lollies. Along the way, we got to introduce to the mum and dad our latest arrivals.

One day when I was on leave, I received a phone call from my partner who was in a panic because we ran out of Chupa Chups. I knew deep inside then that **the strategy had worked, when the person who had opposed the idea turned around to endorse it.**

As my business model changes, so does my Chupa Chup strategy. My Chupa Chup strategy now includes going around giving free speeches, sharing my experience on Customer Service. Incidentally, this free ebook too, is part of my Chupa Chup Strategy. By giving away all I know about customer service for free, our company will achieve two things:

1. Make the community a better place by giving them the tool of customer service.
2. Achieve word of mouth recommendation from my audiences, so that they will engage my services when needs arise.

These principles are in line with our vision to Spark the Economy by empowering business best practices!

What is your company's Chupa Chup Strategy?

Thoughtfulness

The Fitting Room Strategy from Levi's

If you are in the fashion retail industry, you know that the probability of a customer buying your product jumps from 0% to 50% if they take the clothes to the fitting room. This is especially true for male customers, simply because they are a lot less fashion conscious, and think of the whole trying on exercise as an extra effort. **The likelihood of a customer making a purchase increases even more, when the fitting room experience improves.** Experienced fashion retailers put in extra effort in furnishing the fitting room with temperature control, formidable ambience and even adjustable lighting to suit different scenarios to match the apparel's occasions.

Equipped with this information, when I was a Levi's store manager, I placed a major emphasis on the fitting room experience with my team. Often when customers stepped into the fitting room we made sure three things happened:

- >>> The customer would show us how they looked and allow our professional input on the fitting and style.
- >>> We would bring along three extra pairs of jeans or matching tops that we thought would look good on the customer and suggest they try them on.
- >>> We would be proactive in ensuring the sizes were correct and provide them with appropriate changes.

Thanks to paying attention on this conversion strategy, we achieved several important milestones in the four months that I worked for Levi's.

>>> Our store's Mystery Shopper Report scored high distinction for the three consecutive months, with 98.8% on a personal report card of my duty.

>>> Top 3 ranking in the mall's sales per square meter for three months. Prior to that the company ranked consistently in double digits.

>>> Double-digit growth in sales under my leadership.

Do you take any proactive steps to push customers over the edge with their decisions?

When I joined Levi's, my strategy was to work my way up into management by showing the tangible results of my undertakings. Sadly my tenure with the company was shorter than I anticipated. When the management of Levi's retail operation shifted to the care of the finance department, our retail culture crumbled.

The finance director was interested in one thing and one thing only; the bottom-line. I had a choice to work for a person who did not share the same values, or move to a job where the rewards were much more. The decision was obvious. That was the end of my short Levi's tenure.

To this day, I love the Levi's brand and consider it a distinct privilege to have worked with such legendary company.

Does your company culture change along with the change in management?

Commitment

Through my father's eyes

Growing up in my father's tailor shop, Hoon Chin, I had first hand training on how to deal with customers since I was young. Because of the labor intensive nature of our business it was not uncommon to be unable to meet deadline on the delivery of the clothes. I remember many incidences when mum and dad would take us in their car after they had closed to deliver trousers to customers.

I did not understand then why mum and dad had to work so hard even after business hour, the humble profit margin simply did not justify those extra effort. I often envied my cousins' position; they were able to spend the extra quality time with their parents after work.

Unlike big organizations, our shop had no procedures, guidelines or any notion of what excellence in customer service looked like. The word customer service was not even part of the shop's vocabulary. But mum and dad understood the virtue of keeping a promise.

This simple retail business has helped put all four of my siblings through further studies overseas, and produced a doctor in the family. Looking back, I now understand that **it is the relentless pursuit of commitment of our parents that made us who we are today!**

Trust

Advise from a genuine friend

I don't know about you, I do not enjoy shopping for electrical products. I find it too difficult, too confusing and too much like hard work. Take TVs for example; they now have 3D features, ultra flat screens with Bluetooth technology. Do not ask me to explain further. Then, you have to do research on pricing in different shops and compare them with different models available and different packages the retailers can offer. Even typing this stuff is, in itself, exhausting.

I had to go through this strenuous exercise half a year ago as we moved back to Brunei. We moved into an empty house with no furniture, no air-conditioning, nothing.

Along came Annie to the rescue. Annie is the sort of person that gives you confidence that you are in good hands the moment you strike up a conversation with her. Standing slightly more than five feet tall, with the soft-spoken demeanor, you would not expect Annie to be selling electronics, let alone being the best asset of her company.

The fact that Annie is a long lost childhood friend is irrelevant with her ability to establish trust, although it does carry a certain extra credit. The reason that Annie treated us as genuine friends with no financial agenda in helping to solve our household problems was the key to building trust.

Annie did not sell functionality, she sold solution. She was able to convince me from the spec of the washing machine I required, to the TV, to refrigerator, to air condition by simply recommending me to the items that she was already using. Like Annie, we have a small family, hence whatever we required was the exact duplicate of what she was already using.

Annie's husband, Kevin runs an air conditioning installation business. The compatibility in service gives this lovely couple extra edge in the whole service experience. Kevin did more than that when we first moved into our new place. He and his team went beyond the line of duty and assisted in installing our electrical appliances, to the extent of drilling holes for my hammocks!

The next time you want to learn a thing or two about customer service, give Annie's shop W.T Air Conditions and Electronics in Batu-Bersurat a try!

Care

Spaghetti with Extra Sauce

Sometimes we are able to identify a customer service champion the minute we meet them. We call that gut feeling.

Others take slightly longer; often it only happens when you get to discover their thoughtfulness and their character over time. I am contradicting myself here; customer service has everything to do with discovering what the customers want, not about you as a service provider. But I have a point to make.

Jo Jo, the veteran manager of Fratini Restaurant understands all these things, which is why he has a huge Rolodex of customers in his list. Chances are, over the years JoJo would have seen three of the girlfriends that you brought to Fratini before marrying your wife.

Jo Jo's job is not just turning over tables and smiling and asking customers to come again in the future. Jo Jo makes it a point to get to know you and your family, to remember that you like your spaghetti with extra sauce, and that you cannot take nuts. He also

knows when to pretend never to have met you when you bring your wife instead of your mistress. **Jo Jo is in the people business that happens to be delivering fantastic food.**

It had been more than a decade since I last saw Jo Jo but when I came in and ordered my bowl of chips, he intuitively brought along the Thousand Island, and asked if I still preferred Thousand Island mixed with the Maggi Chili Sauce!

Nice

The Best Strategy of All

I had the pleasure of working in the purchasing side of things for two years in my previous job at Cash & Carry, the biggest wholesale food distributor in Australia.

As a marketing person, I spend my whole life trying to sell and convince people of my ideas and products. Being on the other end of the spectrum was a refreshing change. I moved from no one wanting to answer my phone call to everyone wanting to get back to me. I would take the purchasing job over marketing anytime.

In purchasing, I was in a position to evaluate suppliers' offers and their service level. I have seen my share of savvy sales people pitching their products with shrewdness and excellence. I have come across some of the most masterful presentations that did not make the cut, and I have seen some not so sleek communicators that closed big deals, simply because of their good track records and in depth understanding of our needs. Amidst all that was Nick Manning.

Nick does not have any killer pitch. One thing that stands out about Nick is that he is always in a good mood. In the fast paced stressful environment we were in, we did not need a reminder that the day could get any worse when we dealt with our suppliers. Which is why I loved hearing from Nick. Without trying too hard, he often managed to put a smile on the face of everyone who did business with him.

He is always polite, pleasant, with an upbeat attitude. Did I mention, he is also funny?

Sometimes we put in way too much energy on perfecting the pitch or the value propositions and neglect **the fundamental reason that people decide to deal with us is because they like us. That often has to do with simply being nice to people.**

Whenever there is an opportunity for partnership or a request for new lines, guess who would be the first on my list to call?

Love

A tribute to Pete

Back in Perth, whenever I walked Maki (our dog) past Pete's store, she would rush right in looking for Pete with anticipation and excitement. Then Maki would sit patiently, on her best behavior waiting for Pete to reach into his tin full of dog treats and get her reward.

Pete knows the names of all the dogs in the neighborhood and where most of the dogs live because he delivers dog food to some of the dog owners who are too old or do not have their own transport to carry the 10kg bag home.

Sometimes Pete may forget the name of the owner, but all was forgiven for two reasons. One, we dog owners couldn't ask for a better compliment when our dog's name is remembered. Two, Pete knows the real customer he is supposed to please.

We love going to Pete's because he knows everything there is to know about dogs. The free advice on dog care, training and the latest pet related happenings are priceless comparing to the tiny purchases for Maki along the way.

Every four weeks, Maki would have her grooming session, to which Pete would always add the final touch of a snazzy stylist; a different color of ribbon on each occasion.

Pete's business closed early this year, as the property owner decided to increase rental to a ridiculous amount. There was a party thrown by dog owners surrounding Beaufort Street to farewell Pete. **They say the mark of a great business is whether or not the community will miss you when your company disappears.** It leaves a hole in the heart of Maki, Pepper, Louis, Muffin, Pippen, Lucky (the list goes on and on) and all their human companions, each time we go pass Pete's, which has now been turned into a trendy real estate company.

A Note about CRM

No description of Relationship and Customer Service can go without the mention on the subject of CRM; Customer Relationship Management. Innovative software producers make a fortune by manufacturing solutions that elicit repeat customers.

Customer Relationship Management is simply **understanding your customer's preference, remembering them, and delivering a better service with the information or clues that the customers left behind.**

For example: When you go to the market and purchase a banana, the storeowner found out from you that you bake a banana cake every Monday. The following Monday morning when you visit the same store, the owner has put aside the freshest bananas for you, and asked if you would be interested in purchasing flour and sugar along with your banana? When you reach home, and reach into the bag of groceries, you find a note with a strawberry cake recipe from the owner saying "... just in case you may want to try baking strawberry cake next Monday..."

When the transactions shift from 10 customers to 1000 customers per day, companies require a system to handle their particular situations, hence the investment in CRM softwares. However, the principle of CRM does not differ regardless you have 10 customers or 1000!

What kind of relationship do you have with your customers?

Departure

This commentary on service wouldn't be complete without mention of the immigration experience at the end of our trip from Tokyo airport when two customs officers stopped our airport shuttle for a routine passport check. What made it unforgettable was that instead of treating each of us as criminals (which we have grown accustomed to, since 9/11), the authorities bowed to all passengers as they stepped into the bus, apologized for the interruption, and courteously treated every passenger with due respect, as if we were their clients (rightfully so!). Upon completion, another 45 degree bow.

The Japanese custom officers would probably not have thought twice about their actions as good customer service. I doubt very much that they have high passion for checking passports. And they probably have no interest in building a relationship with any of us with whom they had a two second interaction, and who they will never meet again.

The fact is, the two custom officers delivered a performance that sealed a complete experience for the visitors to Japan!

My wife would say that it is simply rooted in their culture to **be courteous and respectful towards one another. And that, in essence, is all that customers could ever ask for!**

Conclusion

This book sets out to bring about a proposal for a better way through reaching to the core of the customer service issue; people. Through the illustration of the Japanese people, we learned that some abilities are rooted in a certain culture, which provides an unfair advantage to the group. Therefore instead of converting existing members to be passionate about your products, we propose that you start hiring passionate people, by following the proven examples of Starbucks, Zappos and Louis Vuitton.

However, the reality and challenge most organisations face is about converting employees into passionate people. We recommended the best way of igniting passion is by instilling a sense of mission in the staffs with whole hearted leadership, by helping them see the trees from the woods. Let the team know how they are making a difference in the society by doing what they do!

We also provided you with a lighthearted short cut solution to establishing relationship through Chupa Chups, an approach that is too familiar in the bag of tricks of any 6 year olds, who want to win friends.

Most of what we suggested is common sense, which is precisely the problem we face in the society today. Why are we surprised when businesses keep their promises? Why do we make such big deal, when waiters remember our preferences? Why do we admire people who turn up happy to work?

The answer is simple; commonsense has become a rarity in the midst of technological advancement and conveniences. We let Facebook replace the face of human relationship and we wonder why the service culture in general has gone upside down. The secret of this book has been revealed loud and clear on its cover. As obvious as it is, we flip through pages and pages only to reach here.

If only we had taken more time to ponder; *the heart of achieving excellent services is really from the people who are in love with serving!*

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Your Suggestions!

If you have come this far with my notes, it indicates that you too, are serious about the essence of Customer Service in making a larger societal difference.

The best rewards I can ask in return for this labour of love are:

- a. You send me a note to shaun@catalyst.com.bn to share with me how this book has changed your company.
- b. You send me your favourite customer service stories based on your personal experience.
- c. You send this to people whom you think would benefit from the stories of this book.

Let's Spark!

Along with giving away my experiences for free download, I also provide talks on this subject to share my passion. Whoever you may be, I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you to spark ideas, and make a difference together!