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What's Love Got
to Do with It

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As I boarded the 737, I looked longingly at the folks who were comfortably ensconced in their large, leather, first-class seats, sipping on pre-flight drinks. I glanced again at the seat assignment on the boarding pass in my hand, reminding myself that I could do anything for two hours.

I routinely fly more than 100,000 miles a year. Because of the time I spend in airports, and in the air, most people would never guess that I am terribly claustrophobic. I want to sit in an aisle seat, preferably in an exit row or in first class, where there is plenty of room and I can get up easily. I'm so claustrophobic that in most circumstances if I cannot get an aisle seat I will cancel and rebook my flight—even if it means I get home a day or two later.

Today I had no choice. One of my clients, who was having issues with revenue growth, was preparing for an important board meeting and needed my help with developing a strategic plan to get him out of the hole. He'd called the day before to say that all of the company's executives would be at a meeting in the corporate office the next day, and he wanted me there in person.

I'd booked my flight at the last minute—grabbing the last available seat on the plane. But that meant that I would be spending the next two hours sitting in what I considered the seat from hell—the very last row on the plane, right next to the window. I just prayed that the two people sitting next to me would be small people so I wouldn't feel so trapped. I'd begged for another seat when I arrived at the airport but the flight was full. So, I decided to make the best of it. I put a grin on my face; I had a book, my iPod, a snack, and a bottle of water. I could do this.

When I reached the back of the plane, I smiled at the flight attendant who was standing between the two restroom doors, watching the plane slowly fill to capacity, and reminding customers to place only one bag in the overhead storage compartment. I said, "Hi, how are you doing?"

She looked back at me with a scowl on her face, and said nothing.

I responded with a more caring tone of voice, “Having a bad day?”

To that she responded, scowl and all, “Every day here is a bad day!”

I got the message loud and clear: Shut up and leave me alone. I hate my job. I hate this company. And I hate passengers.

So I squeezed into the small seat, stuffed into the back corner of an already cramped airplane, and prayed that I would make it through the ordeal without being dragged off the plane in a strait-jacket while news reporters explained to the cameras how a business man had gone nuts, forcing an emergency landing. As the two biggest people I’ve ever seen sat down next to me, my chest felt crushed with anxiety; the straitjacket seemed like an increasingly real possibility.

The conversation I’d had with the flight attendant continued to play in my head over and over again, like a recording on a loop (perhaps a good thing because it kept my mind off of my plight). The flight was pure misery. Not just because of my claustrophobia but because the entire flight crew seemed to be, well . . . *mean*. They barked orders at grown men and women. They did not smile. Overall, they were unpleasant.

On the cab ride to my client’s office, that same scene continued to play. All I could think about was how horrible the entire experience had been. But it was the words “*Every day here is a bad day!*” that kept ringing in my ears. The trip home was not as bad but I still couldn’t let my encounter with that flight attendant go. I paid \$1,200 to get on that flight. Twelve hundred dollars, to be treated like dirt! The more I thought about it, the more it disturbed me, and the more worked up I became. So I asked my company controller to pull a report of how much I’d spent with that particular airline over the previous six months.

Almost \$50,000! She also pointed out that we spent more with this airline than any of our other vendors, except one. It was a big

number and it felt personal. I'm a small business and that \$50k is my money. Unlike the typical corporate traveler with an expense account and a corporate travel department, this money came out of my back pocket. Right then and there I resolved that I would never do business with this airline again, even if it cost more to fly with other airlines, unless there was absolutely no other choice.

Breaking up was hard to do, though. This airline generally had lower fares and more flights from my city. I had preferred status with the airline, so on any new airline I would have to start all over—meaning waiting in lines and getting bad seats. But I was resolved to see my boycott through. It has been a year since that incident, and though in some cases it has been inconvenient on my end, they have not received another dime from me.

The Case for Managing Customer Experience

My illustration above, something to which most people who have the occasion to travel can relate, is an example of how influential *experience* is on buying decisions. It is a reality check. Every touch point, every time you or someone in your company engages a customer, it creates an experience, something they remember. When people have positive emotional experiences, it anchors them to your brand, your product or service, and to *you*. When they have a negative experience, they tend to vote with their feet and their wallets and head straight to your competitors.

The focus on delivering great customer experiences is not new. Walt Disney, for example, made experience the foundation of Disneyland. For him Disneyland was a stage and the employees its cast members. His drive was to deliver an experience so powerful the memory lasted a lifetime. I have those memories and it is likely you do, too. It is this focus on experience that has kept Disneyland and Disney World from looking the same as their

myriad competitors to consumers. While Disney's competitors have more thrilling, high-tech rides (trust me, I'm a theme park junkie), Disney creates an emotional connection with its patrons that is unparalleled.

In the late 1990s, a movement toward customer experience began in earnest. Dozens of books were written, studies were commissioned, and academics from Harvard and other well-known institutions began writing papers on the value of customer experience. They cited great business-to-consumer (B2C) companies like Disney, the Ritz Carlton, Rain Forest Café, and Nordstrom, among other well-known brands. Over the last decade, we have witnessed a new generation of companies including Amazon, Apple, Starbucks, and Zappos, all of whom embrace customer experience as a core business focus.

Today, the customer experience drum beats louder. The emergence and amalgamation of social media and technology that keeps us online and in touch 24 hours a day has created an environment unique in human experience. We live in the age of transparency. Customers have the ability to find anything about you, your product, service, company, and competitors in an instant, with minimal effort. Often they know more about your products and services than you do. Additionally, to the consternation of many business leaders, they have the ability to easily tell others how they feel about their experience with you through many social channels.

At the same time, people are quite literally overwhelmed with information. Smart phones, smart TVs, tablets, laptops, cars, and even smart refrigerators stream data from millions of sites and channels in an unending 24/7/365 flow of information. In this environment, people have become numb to advertising and traditional marketing. In the age of transparency, their trust in traditional advertising messages has waned while their trust in the opinions of friends, bloggers, and online comments and postings of those they consider reliable sources of influence has increased.

This has put advocacy, referrals, and personal recommendations on a new pedestal of importance. Gaining customers and growing your business through referrals is the least expensive marketing channel there is. Prospects and customers who come to you through referrals are more qualified, more likely to buy, and more likely to stick around for the long-term. This is not news to anyone. Referrals have always been an important source of leads. What is important to understand though, is that fewer leads will come to you and your business from traditional outbound marketing and advertising in the future, and more will come via recommendations from customers who become your advocates.

Customer experience is the marketing channel of the future. In fact, a 2009 study conducted by the Strativity Group, <http://www.strativity.com> indicated that companies that invested in customer experience management reported higher customer referral rates. Customers will and do expect more from their interactions with you and your company. However, they will readily advocate for you and recommend you to others when you deliver a memorable emotional experience.

How Customer Experience Management Applies to Business-to-Business Relationships

The vast majority of focus on customer experience, including studies, reports, books, and course work, is centered on business-to-consumer (B2C) environments. The authors, consultants, and scholars who produce these works do give cursory mention of the impact of customer experience in the business-to-business (B2B) environment, yet they rarely follow through with much detail. They seem uncomfortable addressing customer experience as it relates to business-to-business relationships. Likewise, most investment in customer experience management at the corporate level has come from B2C companies.

It makes sense. It is much easier to draw a straight line between, say, your experience staying at a Marriot Resort and your propensity to spend more money, become a repeat customer, and tell your friends, and the investment by Marriot to make that happen. That linkage is much harder to make if you are a company selling mundane industrial products to the oil and gas industry or providing document management services or uniform rental programs. When the phrase *customer experience* is mentioned to corporate executives running B2B companies, it is not uncommon to see eyes roll. This happens partly because the concept of customer experience and the process for managing customer experience is tied so directly to the B2C marketplace. B2B executives have a hard time seeing how the strategies used to deliver customer experience in the B2C environment relate to them and rightly so. There is a difference, and should B2B companies attempt to stage customer experience using the same methodology as Disney, they will fail and waste a lot of money doing so. For this reason customer experience as a concept is rightly met with skepticism in the B2B marketplace.

Business-to-business relationships are different and often far more complex than consumer-based relationships. For instance, most buyers in B2B relationships are not spending their own money, unless of course you are dealing with the business owner. B2B relationships may involve large sums of money, contractual agreements, strategic relationships, layers of influencers and end users. Relationships also tend to be long-term rather than transactional.

However, the one thing that skeptical B2B leaders ignore is that in B2B relationships, *customers are still people*: emotional, irrational humans who make buying decisions based on emotion, not companies, departments, org-charts or CSI scores. People. Penske understood this concept, for example, when they implemented *Ready Line Excellence* in response to the number one complaint of the people who use their rental trucks (businesses and consumers alike). “People don’t like dirty trucks. It is something they get very emotional about,” one executive told me. So Penske implemented

a system wide focus on ensuring that every truck was clean and crisp looking before the keys were handed to the driver. This simple focus on emotional experience cost little to implement, yet is paying dividends (reflected in improved CSI scores and repeat business) because the focus is on how people experience Penske at the emotional level.

Colin Shaw, author of *The DNA of Customer Experience: How Emotions Drive Value* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) and a world thought leader on customer experience, points out, “A Customer Experience is about a number of things. It is about a physical Customer Experience, such as price, product, locations, opening times, and the channel that is used—that is stores, online, telephone, the features of the product, so on. Critically it is also about emotions—how a customer feels.” Shaw’s research indicates “that over 50 percent of a Customer Experience is *about emotions*.” As humans emotions drive virtually all of our behavior and cause us to *act*. Yet, as Shaw aptly states, businesses have largely ignored human emotion in the buying equation.

The concept of delivering a great customer experience is simple and intuitively we all know it makes sense because, of course, we are all customers. As a customer, when you feel happy, important, cared for, and respected you have a tendency to buy more and tell other people about your experience. But for some reason, as soon as we put our B2B hat on, we abandon what we know to be true and ignore human emotion in our business relationships. This is one of the reasons companies continue to delude themselves with customer satisfaction indexes and drone on and on about customer loyalty rather than focus on improving the emotional experiences of their customers.

There Is No Loyalty When Everything Looks the Same

Was I satisfied with my flight to Chicago? Yes. I left on time, arrived on time with my bags, and did so in one piece. That is what the

airline promised when I purchased the ticket. Did I quit doing business with them? Yes.

My bet is you can easily recall similar experiences with companies you do business with, and you've either been tempted to never spend another dime with them again or actually done so. I'll also lay my book royalties on the line and bet that each of those businesses has a slogan, motto, saying, or written document that proclaims something along the lines of "your complete satisfaction" or that "exceeding your expectations" is their goal. Internally, these same organizations likely spew propaganda to their employees admonishing that the goal is to create loyal customers.

Loyalty is defined as being faithful, being true to vows or obligations, or having an allegiance to someone or something. Not long ago we received a call from one of our long-term customers. Barbara called to tell us she was quitting our service. She had been with us for three years. Because of this the alarm bells went off and after several people had attempted to get her to stay, I called.

"Barbara, tell me what's going on. I thought we were sending you tons of great sales candidates. I looked at the application numbers and they are solid."

"Yes, we are real satisfied with candidates you are sending to us," she replied.

"So why are you quitting? We are doing a good job for you, right?"

"We've been real satisfied, but we just want to try something else. To see what else is out there."

Dogs are loyal. Customers—not so much. This is why the customer loyalty movement is built on a foundation of manipulation and tricks. Take the airline loyalty programs. Are these programs really about creating loyalty or plying you with perks and traps that make it hard to make a switch? I'm not saying this doesn't work. I've definitely spent money on tickets designed to protect my platinum status. But was I really loyal? I want you to consider one more thing: if businesses really believe

that customers would show faithfulness, honor commitments and vows, pledge and show their undying allegiance, and honor their obligations, then why are there contracts? Why are lawyers employed to enforce those contracts? Why are there manipulative loyalty programs?

Why did Barbara leave my company to “see what else was out there?” To her, we looked the same as everyone else. There are almost 40,000 competitors in the online recruiting market segment. Yes, we delivered on our promise and she was satisfied with our results. What we failed to do was differentiate ourselves in a way that created an emotional connection with Barbara. After more research, I discovered that the account manager responsible for Barbara’s account had not contacted her in three months. He wrongly assumed that just because we were delivering good candidates and Barbara was not complaining, she was satisfied and loyal. She left us because she didn’t feel appreciated and respected. We neglected her emotions.

A focus on customer satisfaction and loyalty will no longer give you the competitive edge. In a hypercompetitive, global marketplace where virtually every product or service is the same when compared with competitors in the eyes of your customer, customer satisfaction is worthless and loyalty to your company is fleeting at best. Yes, that is what I said—everything looks the same—and I know that you have heard the words come out of your customer’s mouth or said them yourself: “Look, these products are all the same; just give me your best price.”

Perhaps, you say *no!* My product, service, or company is different. Let me tell you our features and benefits. Then you pitch: blah, blah, blah, blah. Well guess what? “I’m the customer and your competitor was just in here telling me the same thing and he said that *he* was different. So it still all looks the same to me.”

Perhaps you truly do have a unique product or service. The question is, how long will that last until someone matches what you have or convinces your customer that they have done so?

In the twenty-first century, competitive advantages derived from, unique products are short-lived because competitors are able to quickly and easily duplicate or match your offering. Because everything (products and services) is perceived to be the same to today's savvy buyers, delivering an extraordinary customer experience has emerged as the single most important competitive advantage for B2B companies across all industries. This is why real competitive advantage in the business-to-business marketplace is created through human relationships. Account managers, sales professionals, and customer service professionals—the people who are most connected to customers—are on the frontlines of customer experience. They build unique and enduring emotional connections with customers. This is where the rubber meets the road in business to business if you want to create long-term revenue and profit streams.

Unlike virtually every book that deals with customer experience or account management, this book is not page after page of *what your company should do to change*. It is not a business strategy tome designed for boardrooms or stuffy executive meetings. Not that it should be ignored by upper management, because as leaders you must focus on aligning business resources to make it easier for frontline account managers to serve and engage customers on the emotional level.

Instead, this book is designed for account management and customer service professionals, primarily in business-to-business roles and secondarily for those with high-end B2C relationship management responsibilities. For those new to account management, my goal is to provide you with a firm foundation on which to build deep, enduring relationships with your customers. For veterans, it is to remind you why you chose a career in account management and customer service and provide you with actionable techniques for reconnecting with your customers and delivering a legendary customer experience.

What's Love Got to Do with It

Love is an intense emotion—a feeling of warmth, trust, and affection. When you are in love with another person, you always want to be together, and when you're not, you're thinking about being together because without them you feel incomplete. Love is a visceral connection.

"I love this guy!" Pete reached over and wrapped his arm around Jesse. Todd Miller, president of Isaiah Industries, had just given Pete a Dealer of the Year Award. Jesse was Pete's account manager. Over the course of the Isaiah Industries' annual dealer appreciation banquet, the word *love* was used by virtually every dealer to describe their relationship with Todd and his staff of account managers. It was impressive.

Isaiah Industries manufactures metal roofing tiles. It sells its products through a network of high-end roofing companies. I'd met Todd through my friend Dennis Deuce, who'd referred me as a keynote speaker at the annual dealer conference. As I observed the interaction between the dealer principles and Todd and his team, I knew that Isaiah Industries was special. Even back at the hotel, in informal conversations, the dealers spoke in glowing terms about their account managers and Todd. What I thought was significant was that the conversations were about the relationships they had built with their account managers: "Always there for me." "Takes care of any issue fast." "So easy to deal with." "Jumps in and helps with problems." "Never takes me for granted." "I love Janet." "We love Bill."

I called Todd after the conference and told him about my observation. I explained that my experience with dealer and channel conferences was that the dealers spend much of time complaining about the supplier company. His response was emphatic: "We put our dealers and our dealers' customers first in everything we do. Without our dealers, we don't have a business. We

work to make their experience with Isaiah Industries personal and unique. We want that experience to be legendary throughout our industry. This is why each of our account managers takes a hands-on approach and builds personal relationships with our dealers. We want it to be easy and fun to do business with us and we never want any dealer to feel like we are not there for them or that we take them for granted. We love our dealers and we want them to love us back.”

Love is not a term that is often associated with business relationships. Yet, I heard the word *love* used to describe how customers felt about their account managers and customer service reps many times over during my research for this book. Over and over again, buyers told me how much they *loved* their account managers. At one company that granted me permission to observe and interview their inside sales group, the team leader’s first words on my arrival were, “Before we get started I want you to meet our best account manager, Kimberly. Our customers *love* her!”

My interviews with account managers, corporate executives, and buyers revealed an important commonality. The best account managers, the ones who built and maintained long-term relationships, grew their account base, and earned the enduring respect of their customers, were successful at creating deep emotional connections with their customers. Connections that were so visceral the only word that buyers and others could find to describe them was *love*.

Love. That was it. The real secret to delivering legendary customer experiences for B2B customers was through emotional attachment: deep visceral connections like Todd and his account managers had developed with their dealers. I observed that the very best account managers and customer service professionals had leveraged human relationship techniques to influence the behavior of their customers. They had learned how to make customers love them.

A Paradigm Shift—From Information to Empathy

Technology and communication have forever altered the speed of business. Companies have used technology to wring more productivity out of fewer people, and modern communication, though it has made it easier to reach anyone at any time, has actually pushed us further apart. The irony is that even as huge investments have been made in technology, communication, and systems for the express purpose of giving account managers more time with customers, there has been less focus on the interpersonal skills that are so important in human relationships.

A big part of my mission with this book series—*People Buy You*, *People Follow You*, and *People Love You*—is teaching the next generation of business people how to leverage relationship skills. I believe at the granular day-to-day level, account management and, for that matter, all business is just one person solving another person's problems. Those one-on-one interactions are the basis for customer experience and getting customers to love you.

In the twenty-first century, interpersonal relationships are more important than at any other time in our history. The real irony of our incredible advances in technology and the emergence of the social web is that it has removed barriers that for so long made communication slow, cumbersome, and expensive. At the same time, however, new barriers have been erected that inhibit interpersonal interaction. Technology has removed the need to actually speak to other people or even meet with others face to face. These changes in the way we communicate have made it necessary for business professionals to learn and adopt new skills for building relationships, and they have placed more value on traditional relationship-building strategies.

From the moment we entered the Information Age in the 1980s, process has been valued over people. The Internet and its accompanying technology wrung productivity out of every

business process and system. As productivity per worker increased, so did our prosperity. As barriers to communication improved, we were then able to move the repetitive tasks that could be systematized overseas, where low wages helped boost profits even more. In less than two decades, we removed human interaction from many of our day-to-day activities. Just consider how online banking and stock trading have changed the way we interact with our financial institutions. Along the way, customer service deteriorated as many shortsighted companies shifted service functions overseas. You only need to reach a customer-service representative in another country who reads preapproved copy, like a robot, from her computer screen instead of actually showing empathy and helping you to know what I mean. Thankfully, many of these same companies, realizing that these interactions create negative customer experiences, are reversing those decisions.

This is why your role as an account management or customer service professional has become so important and critical. In the B2B environment, for many companies, the loss of even a single customer can create layoffs, close plants, and potentially threaten the future of the company. Account managers are very often the glue that holds these relationships together.

As an account manager or customer service professional, *protecting your company's customer base, the lifeblood of your business, must become your priority*. If you are not in there with your customers as a trusted resource giving them reasons to continue buying your company's products or services, then you are playing Russian Roulette with your revenue, bonus, and career.

In his bestselling book, *A Brand New Mind*, Daniel Pink makes the case that workers who have the ability to be empathetic and interact with others will have the competitive and economic edge in the coming decades. Pink makes us aware of the value of human interaction to our own success in both business and life. It is this understanding of human behavior, empathy, and the ability to leverage interpersonal skills that make people love you that will be

your competitive edge and what makes you truly special and valuable in the experience economy

The objective of this book is simple. I want you to understand how important your ability to get others to like you, trust you, buy you, and *love* you is to your future and the future of your company. I will teach you how helping your customers get what they want (solving their problems) will reward you with what you want. While I will focus on how to influence human behavior, I will not indulge in long diatribes on human psychology and personality traits, or lessons on understanding the intricacies of body language and facial expressions. I won't be quoting from textbooks about the studies of famous scientists. I will not provide tricks for manipulating customers.

People Love You is a practical guide. It exists in the real world. My goal is to teach you techniques for interacting with customers in a way that creates deep, enduring relationships. I want your customers to love you. However, to create a legendary customer experience you must learn how to step into your customers' shoes and to feel and see things from their point of view.

Before moving on to the next chapter, take a moment to answer these questions honestly: "What is it really like to be *my* customer? How does it *feel*?"

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