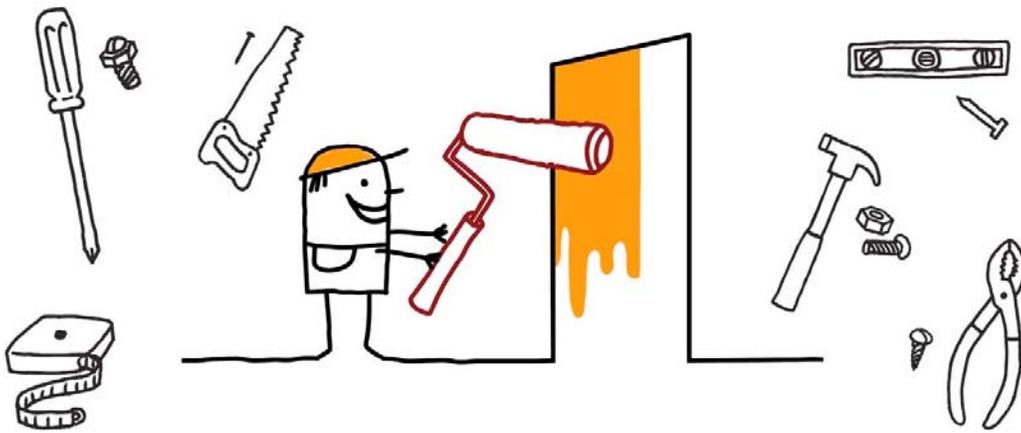


# DEAR HOME DEPOT:

And other great moments in the lives of customers.



by Alan Gregerman

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# DEAR HOME DEPOT

## AND OTHER GREAT MOMENTS IN THE LIVES OF CUSTOMERS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Preface	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	3
Dear Home Depot	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	4
The Ideal Customer Experience	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	6
Where Everybody Knows Your Name	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	7
The Wonder of Burritos	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	9
Making Customers More Capable	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	10
Nobody Wants a Rebate	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	12
BOGO	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	13
Perfect Form	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	14
Word of Mouth	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	17
Understanding Your Market	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	19
Keeping Customers Thirsty	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	21
Sticking to the Customer	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	23
The Sincerest Form of Flattery	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	25
Black Friday	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	27
Just a Little Better	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	28
Bordering on Extinction	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	30
Go Ahead – Waste My Time!	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	32
The Rise and Decline of Twinkies	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	33
Remaining Relevant	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	34
The Magic of Fiber	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	35

# Preface

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**W**hether your company or organization provides products, services or solutions the very nature of your interactions with customers is likely to determine your ongoing success and growth. Yet too few businesses appreciate the real value of creating remarkable experiences for those they have the privilege to serve. And even fewer see their customer relationships as a vital element of efforts to innovate.

In this collection of twenty of my most popular blog posts about customers—written over the last three years—I attempt to share insights on innovative and practical ways to build a stronger connection with your customers in order to help them achieve greater success. And I also attempt to share insights on how some of the most well-known corporations have figured out how to systematically abuse their customers. All intended to enable you to raise the bar and be different in ways that really matter.

All beginning with a shocking story about a visit to Home Depot...

If you've read my two previous books—*Lessons from the Sandbox* and *Surrounded by Geniuses*—you know that I'm passionate about helping organizations, leaders and people at all levels to innovate by exploring the world around them in order to gain new ideas, insights and perspectives that can be used to transform business as usual. And this e-book continues that tradition. The real challenge in business and in life is not to rack our brains until a brilliant thought appears. The real challenge is to find the right wisdom in other industries, cultures and walks of life and combine it with what we understand already to produce fresh and powerful ways of doing things.

I hope you enjoy this collection and use it as a spark in efforts to delight your customers.

Cheers!

- Alan

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*August 2012*

# Dear Home Depot

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Published initially on May 2, 2010

This is going to sound strange, but I actually had a great customer experience at [Home Depot](#) this week. And because it was such a unique event in my long relationship with this gigantic (or is it "*ginormous*") home improvement company, it caused me to send a letter to the CEO. You see I've come to expect a lot of frustration whenever I shop at Home Depot. Sure I appreciate their low prices and large inventory, but I wouldn't mind a bit more help on occasion. Or a bit more knowledge, guidance, interest, and engagement. After all, isn't that what their slogan-- "***You can do it. We can help.***"-- is all about? But instead, I'm often hard-pressed to find anyone wearing a bright orange apron adorned with customer service pins who can answer any of my semi-technical questions. That's assuming I can find anyone who is willing to help me. I know that's probably a slight exaggeration. But it's the image that countless visits to Home Depot has etched into my mind.

And that brings us to a young man named Roberto (*name changed to protect the innocent*) who had the audacity, when I seemed a bit confused, to walk over and ask if he could help. "I'm trying to build a simple, elegant, solid, and relatively inexpensive place for our new grill," I replied, as images of beautiful flagstone danced in my head. "Let me show you what we have," he said, "and how you might put it together." '*Really?*' I thought to myself, wondering if I was dreaming. Then, when we got to the racks with stone he had the nerve to pull out a pad of paper and a pen and help me to think about the best size stones, possible configurations, and the type of base I would need to provide level and reliable support. Then, he had the gall to climb under the rack to help me find the smoothest ones, carefully moving at least twenty 50-pound stones until we found just the right ones. But he didn't stop there. He also helped me place them on a cart, pick out the gravel I would need for the base, get through checkout, and put them in my car. Then wished me well and told me he looked forward to my return to the store and to hearing how the project went.

For a few days I pondered whether or not to write this down in a letter of thanks. Maybe the company didn't want associates to be this helpful and I would only be getting him in trouble. Maybe the other employees--i.e., the ones who always ignore me--were following specific company policy, and he had somehow veered inappropriately from the finely-tuned customer service guidelines.

But that couldn't be. *Or could it?* Wouldn't Home Depot want all of its associates to help the customers and, in the process, pave the way for their enthusiastic return?



**We win in business by going above and beyond the call of duty, and by offering answers and a helping hand. Maybe it's time for you to anticipate your customers' needs. And possibly shock them in the process.**

# The Ideal Customer Experience

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Published initially on September 21, 2009

It's the start of a new workweek--unless you've been working all weekend--and a great time to think about what it really takes to be a genius. Maybe not in the sense of Albert Einstein, Madame Curie, George Washington Carver, Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi, Akio Morita or Leonardi da Vinci. After all, these were exceedingly clever people and it might not be fair to go head-to-head with them without an extra bit of stretching, conditioning, coaching and practice. Just like you probably wouldn't want to race against Usain Bolt without eating a high energy breakfast. But let's be serious, what would these people actually know about your business and what it takes to deliver compelling value? Very little.

In fact, you and your colleagues are in the absolute best position to make a real difference in the lives of the customers, citizens, members and associates you serve. But in order to do this you will need to take a fresh look at their world and what really matters to them. Then you'll need to commit to taking a fresh look at how you and your organization could meet their needs in more remarkable ways. Not by making some tiny piddling little insignificantly incremental change (*now that's being super-redundant for effect*). After all, who needs that? But by doing something big, bold, noticeable and possibly dramatic (*also super-redundant for effect*) that really matters!

And one of the best ways to get started is by challenging yourself and the geniuses you work with to think about a straightforward and powerful idea. **What if you could create the "ideal customer experience?"** In other words, what if you could deliver compelling value at each meaningful step in the process of being a customer? By making things easier. By providing true peace of mind. By making customers smarter and more capable. By being faster when it really mattered, or available at a moment's notice. By making the customer smile whenever they used your product, service or solution. By anticipating their needs and helping them to create new opportunities or avoid danger.

So grab a blank sheet of paper and an open mind, and begin to paint a new and awesome picture of the life of your customer from start to finish. And if you don't know how to get started, you can always wander around--wearing, of course, your most comfortable shoes (*see the post below*)--in search of other companies and organizations that have figured it out for those they serve. There are plenty that I'll write about in the weeks ahead, but if you'd like a couple now try [Zappos](#) and [Whole Foods](#).

**We win in business by providing the most ideal customer experience. What are you waiting for?**

# Where Everybody Knows Your Name

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Published initially on April 19, 2012

Many of you will recall the theme song for the very popular TV show "Cheers"--a classic comedy from the 1980's about a group of friends who hang out at a Boston tavern. The title of the song (and the essential theme of the show) was the simple and important notion that we all want to be "Where Everybody Knows Your (or 'Our') Name." It's a really powerful idea that speaks to the very nature of belonging, being part of something and of connecting with others in our various "communities" in some meaningful way.

So it should come as no surprise that all the companies and organizations we deal with would like to know our names. And not just our first names but also our last names. In fact, they'd like a lot more information about us than simply our names but that's a topic worthy of another blog post.

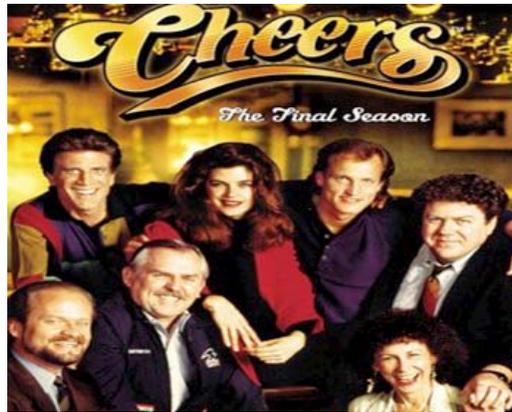
Which means that a typical interaction with Verizon, Apple, Johnson & Johnson or most other businesses will begin with their representative asking us what our name is "so we can better assist you." But shouldn't we also know their names in case we need to follow up, sing their praises or refer back to a service experience that has gone less than perfectly? Seems reasonable enough, unless you happen to be part of the customer service team at Wells Fargo. Now I know that I wrote about them recently, but they continue to provide amazing insight on how not to provide great service. Insight that should be beneficial to all of us. And my latest request for help was another case in point on how some companies don't actually give a \_ \_ \_ \_ or a Flying Walenda about their customers.

It turns out that I needed a simple document--i.e., a copy of the modification for my home equity credit line--and called Wells Fargo to get their assistance. After dutifully following two minutes and forty-six seconds (but whose counting) worth of prompts I was excited when an actual human picked up the phone. "Hi, this is Rachel," she began, followed by "Can I start with your first and last name?" Then after a few essential security questions talk turned to the required document. It was a *legal* document that I was told could not be faxed or emailed directly to me because "it had to go to a *secure* fax machine." And when I told Rachel that our office fax machine was "pretty darn secure," she disagreed and indicated that I would have to have it sent to the fax machine at our local branch--something she would do the following day. "Okay," I said realizing that I didn't have the time or blood pressure to change her opinion of the security of our fax machine. And then I asked if I could have her full name and contact information just in case I needed to call back. "We're not allowed to give out our last names," she replied, "and we don't have direct phone numbers or our own email addresses." Wow! I thought. No last names and no way to be contacted directly. Is that a tragic predicament for a customer service representative or what?

The next day I headed to our local Wells Fargo branch to pick up the fax. A fax that, had it actually been sent, would have arrived at an exceedingly unsecure fax machine located right in the middle of the branch--just a few feet from the queue where everyone waits for a teller. And when no one at the branch offered to call Rachel to find out what had happened to my document, I headed back to call myself. But there was no way to get Rachel on the phone. Instead, I got David who asked for my first and last name, along with a set of security questions, so he could pull up my record. A record that included no mention of my conversation with Rachel. And given that it included no notes stating that Rachel had found the desired document and was planning to send it to the secure fax machine at my branch, David quickly told me that he would be unable to help. His reason was the belief that it would simply take too long to search on-line for this document and that I would have to talk with someone in the Line Management Department of the bank. "Can you connect me to them directly?" I asked. "No," he replied, "I'll give you the phone number" (so you can be put on hold by their office). "Before we get off, can I have your last name and contact information," I inquired, "just in case I need to follow up?" "We're not allow to give out our last names," he noted, "and there is no way to contact us directly." "But you do have a last name," I continued. "Yes I do." "That's a relief," I concluded, hoping that there weren't an entire subculture of people in America without last names who were condemned to work at Wells Fargo.

Then after three minutes and thirty-seven seconds of being on hold at the new number I got through to LuAnn. And while she also had only a first name, she was kind, thoughtful and somehow figured out how to find the document and fax it directly to me.

If only I knew her last name, I'd be delighted to send a letter to the CEO singing her praises as the one person at Wells Fargo who actually cares about customers. And if only she knew her last name, she'd be able to take her skills to another company that might share her commitment to customers.



**We win in business and in life when we are eager to know the names of people we have the privilege to serve. And when we are eager to let them know our names too.**

# The Wonder of Burritos

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Published initially on July 14, 2011

There's always a line at [Chipotle](#) when I take our son Noah and his soccer buddies to any one of this fast food chain's locations. No matter what time of the day. No matter which one of the company's hundreds of locations. A line that often stretches out the door. But no one seems to mind. In part it's because the line moves rather quickly. In part it's because there is a sense that the burritos are relatively healthy. And in part it's because Chipotle's food is fresh, appealing, tasty and gives the customer a sense of engagement in its preparation. But it's also because of the company's commitment to serving "**food with integrity**"--a commitment defined as "finding the very best ingredients raised with respect for the animals, the environment and the farmers."

And this combination has enabled Chipotle to literally reinvent the notion of "fast food" in an industry that has been synonymous with unhealthy, highly-processed and not particularly engaging.

So if you're looking for a new formula for success in your tired, saturated, highly-commoditized and established industry, you might want to spend an hour having lunch at Chipotle--and figuring out through your eyes, ears, noses, hands and taste buds the secrets to their success. Then try to imagine how you might inject new energy, engagement and a greater sense of integrity in the work that you do and the products, services and/or solutions that you offer.

How you might help customers to make a stronger connection with your belief in the right way to do the things that matter most.



**We win in business and in life when we combine our most creative offerings with the highest values. And when we wrap our most compelling value proposition inside the comfort of a warm burrito.**

# Making Customers More Capable

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Published initially on July 14, 2011

If you enjoy hiking, climbing, backpacking, kayaking, bicycling and camping you're probably familiar with [REI](#)--the largest consumer cooperative in the U.S. and a business that is passionate about its customers and employees. It's been picked as one of Fortune magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" every year since 1998 when the rankings began, and it consistently wins the admiration of members for its products, education and commitment to conservation. And as a regular customer and member since 1973, I'm always struck by the company's real desire to make me smarter and more capable with the things I love to do.

A case-in-point are the number of classes and training opportunities REI provides to members through my local store. In the next two weeks I can learn:

- [Bike Maintenance Basics](#)
- [Backpacking Basics](#)
- [Wilderness First Aid](#)
- [Rock Climbing](#)
- [Kayaking Basics](#)--including a three-hour paddle tour
- [How to Ride a Bike--for Kids](#)
- [How to Ride a Bike--for Adults](#)
- [Bike Commuting Basics](#)--which is a real challenge here in D.C.
- [Introduction to Outdoor Rock Climbing](#)
- [Anchor Concepts in Rock Climbing](#)
- [Essential Camping Skills](#)
- [Introduction to Mountain Biking](#)
- [Outdoor Photo Composition](#)
- [How to Use a Map & Compass in Actual Terrain](#)
- [Travel Insight from Brazil and Patagonia](#)

If only I had enough free time, I could become the next [John Muir](#). And quite possibly a future REI instructor.

While most companies have departments designed to train and develop their own people, only a few are keenly focused on training and developing their customers. Is it because they don't understand the powerful link between customer learning, loyalty and sales? Or is it because they really don't want their customers to know too much? At REI they'll teach you to do practically anything outdoors that strikes your interest or passion. And they'll teach you how to improve your mastery of the things you already know how to do.

Which begs the question...

**"How smart and capable are you willing to make your customers?"**

It's a question that could be critical to your future success.

And here's a picture of my latest REI purchase--an Advanced Elements inflatable kayak that I'll be trying in the North Sea off the coast of Sweden this summer.



**We win in business and in life when we try to make those we serve as capable as possible. And when our passion inspires customers to achieve even greater success.**

# Nobody Wants a Rebate

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Published initially on September 8, 2010

School is now back in session and the ever-longer holiday shopping season is just around the corner. So be prepared for an avalanche of mail, email and slick newspaper inserts touting the greatest bargains in the history of civilization. It's just a fact of life this time of year, and an even bigger imperative in our not-so-perfect economy. And don't be surprised if many of these bargains come with a "rebate."

But let's be perfectly honest. Nobody in their right mind actually wants a rebate. Absolutely nobody. Not on a new car, or a TV, or a cell phone, or office supplies, or energy-efficient windows, or anything. *Well maybe on their taxes.* Yet we're often enticed to buy a product simply because it comes with a rebate, believing that we're getting a much better deal. But we're not. And any company that thinks it is being perfectly honest and respectful to its customers by offering them a rebate that isn't *instant* is crazy. The real deal would be to get the best price immediately and without having to fill out some special forms and attach some special receipts that we are likely to lose before we ever get home. Or without having to miss the magic deadline. Or without having to wait 4 - 6 million weeks for our refund check, gift card, or other sub-optimal form our refund comes in. It's simply a bad idea for the customer and a good idea for the company offering the rebate. The same company that knows that a large percentage of us will never end up following all of the steps required to make the elusive dream of our rebate come true.

Having said this, our friends at [Staples](#) are at least trying to improve the rebate process by making it easy to "apply" for our rebate on-line and even providing an email reminder with a direct link to their rebate center. Which would be pretty darn helpful of them if any of us actually wanted to receive a rebate. But the only kind we should ever want is an instant rebate where the price of the product goes down magically at the cash register. Now that's a stroke of genius and honesty.



**We win in business and in life by giving those we serve the best deal possible at the time we make the sale. Not by giving them a promise to be fulfilled later.**

# BOGO

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Published initially on July 18, 2012

**"B**uy One Get One Free" or **"BOGO"** is a popular marketing idea for many products and services. Buy one box of cereal and get a second free. Buy one can of tennis balls and get another at no additional cost. Buy one air conditioner unit tune-up and get a second one thrown in to the deal. In fact, BOGO offers are everywhere. In newspapers and internet ads, on infomercials and prominently displayed in the windows of dozens of our favorite stores. And if you listen to the right radio stations here in the Washington, DC area and many other cities you're likely to hear commercials for Jos. A Bank's clothing stores that make their almost unbelievable "BOGT" offers..."Buy one of our fabulous men's designer suits and get two more suits absolutely free." It's an ad so amusing that our son Noah and I can often be heard making our own even more remarkable version..."Buy one fabulous designer suit and get a hundred more suits absolutely free." So much for a bit of exaggeration.

But the idea of a BOGO offer took a new twist today on a drive from Bloomington, Indiana, to Indianapolis International Airport. Passing St. Francis Hospital Center in Mooresville, Indiana, I was struck by their large electronic sign and interesting offer:

BUY ONE HEART SCAN AND GET A SECOND ONE FREE.

Now that's quite a deal. Especially for people who have two hearts. Though it quickly dawned on me that that's a relatively small market and that it was an even better deal for someone with one heart who is concerned about a spouse, partner, parent, sibling or friend. After all, wouldn't a heart scan be an awesome gift for that special and unsuspecting person in your life.

**Which got me thinking that maybe BOGO's weren't such a lame idea after all.** And maybe they had even more compelling value in inspiring sound consumer behavior tied to services and solutions that really matter.



**We win in business, healthcare and in life when we offer life-saving value. And when we are willing to test the power of ideas in new settings.**

# Perfect Form

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Published initially on December 16, 2010

**E**ven if you happen to be a relatively healthy person, you'll probably win the opportunity each year to visit some new doctors. Medical professionals in specialties you can barely pronounce with the unique ability to help you sort out some of the simple and complex maladies that come with age. There are helpful gastroenterologists who focus on the efficient performance of your digestive system, dermatologists who determine if that one colorful birthmark is morphing into a sign of possible skin cancer, cardiologists who will passionately search for the truth behind changes in your cholesterol counts and lipids, neurologists who might help you decide if your recent addiction to sudoku puzzles is slowing the pace of memory loss, orthopedic specialists who will explain in positive terms the sad details behind your gradual shrinking in height, and oral and maxillofacial surgeons who will describe and then extract a small but peculiar growth on your jaw.

And each of these experts will no doubt ask you to complete their version of a set of very similar forms. Forms that, sadly, are unable to communicate with each other. Forms that ask who and what you are, where you live and work, and how you can be located when you're not at their office. Forms that pose very personal questions about your health, history, and the behaviors you have that might influence their care and the longevity of your body. Forms that assure the doctor that they will be paid by your insurance or by you personally in the odd event that your insurance company decides that you are seeking unnecessary, uncovered, or overly expensive treatment. Forms that give them permission to share your information with other health professionals on your healthcare "team" who might also possess a keen interest in your well-being. Forms that enable them to send stuff they take from your body to an appropriate lab for analysis. Forms that demand consent to act on your behalf if, like Columbus, they discover some unforeseen or uncharted land while examining you. Forms that require you to attest to your general competence to read and sign forms. Forms with essentially the same information that you will have the privilege of filling out--in person or on-line--for every different doctor you visit. You lucky duck!

So it was when I had the privilege recently of filling out the latest set of forms for the latest specialist that I started thinking again about the awesomely inefficient system we have for collecting essential information needed to protect the health of each of us and all of the geniuses that surround us. A system that has no ability to share information, ask the right questions only once, and speed better health or healthcare to us in the most organized matter. A system that has no real clue who we are and yet continues to ask us to pay ever higher premiums for the chance to not even be a number--but rather a set of disparate numbers attached to disparate medical records all bearing a similar piece of the same puzzle. A system for which **there actually is a simple and innovative solution if we would all stand up from our clipboards long enough to demand it.**

So I faithfully completed this latest set of forms but with a sense of curiosity and humor. After all, I'd done this before and wanted to stand out from the pack. To somehow differentiate my answers from everyone else who had gone before me, especially given the fact that I was answering on-line with no chance to have anyone see my beautiful handwriting. And given that all of you must regularly complete the same forms, I thought it might be a good idea--in keeping with the spirit of the holidays--to share some of my answers which you can feel free to use as needed.

**Question #1:** *"Pick one of the following -- Mr., Miss, Mrs., Ms."*

Answer: *"Mr."*

**Question #2:** *"Pick one of the following -- Male or Female"*

Answer: *"Is this question really necessary after I completed the first question?"*

**Question #10:** *"Who is responsible for paying your bill?"*

Answer: *"I might be making an unreasonable assumption here, but I thought that my insurance company would be willing to in exchange for the gigantic premiums I've been paying since Grover Cleveland was President."*

**Question #11:** *"And who is the person responsible for paying the portion that they don't?"*

Answer: *"That would be the healthcare payment elf or the tooth fairy, unless you guys are willing to cover it as a professional courtesy. Or possibly me as a last resort."*

**Question #57:** *"How is your sex life?"*

Answer: *"Now that's a bit personal, though I can say that I would have a lot more time for this if I didn't have to complete so many forms."*

**Question #93:** *"Are you in good health?"*

Answer: *"I think so, and I'm delighted that you finally asked this question. In fact, other than the need to visit a medical specialist for an unexplained ailment, I feel absolutely remarkable."*

**Question #119:** *"Do you snore?"*

Answer: *"No. I'm actually the only person in the world who doesn't snore and don't let my wife and kids convince you otherwise."*

**Question #144:** *"Do you have any contagious diseases?"*

Answer: *"Not according to my surviving family and friends."*

**Question #147: "Do you have any known allergies?"**

Answer: "As a child I was allergic to 94% of the plants, animals, and pollens native to Northern California. But since I no longer live there it is unclear if I still have these allergies. Though I am definitely allergic to woodchucks and rabbits with dandruff."

**Question #305: "Do you wish to speak to the doctor privately about anything that is covered or not covered on this form?"**

Answer: "I think so. But if all twenty-five of your staff members and the other patients in the waiting room would like to hear the most intimate details of my condition please ask them to pull up a chair."

**Question #372: "Is there anything else you would like us to know?"**

Answer: "I really love filling out forms over and over again!"

Universal Medical Form	
Name of the Patient (Last Name)	(First Name)
Date of Birth	Gender
Address	City/State/Zip
Home Phone	Work Phone
Health Insurance carrier	POLICY Number
Patient/Guardian's Name	Phone
I refer my consent to the Health Care Provider/Physician/Doctor to discuss the medication information provided on this form.	
Signature	Date
TO BE COMPLETED BY HEALTH CARE PROVIDER	
Date of physical examination	Result of physical examination
Abnormalities (if any)	Weight (should be taken within 15 days)
Height (should be taken within 15 days)	Head Circumference (if under 2 Years of age)
Blood Pressure (if over 3 Years of age)	Stool Guage (if over 3 Years of age)
IMMUNIZATIONS	Immunization Record Attached (next immunization due on)
Medical Conditions	
1	Chronic Medical Conditions and Related Surgeries (List All)
2	Continuing Medication or Treatments
3	Physical Access/ Limitations
4	Allergies (List All)
5	Special Diets (List dietary specifications)
6	Behavioral Issues
7	Personality Disorders
8	Cardiac Issues (List past heart attacks if any)
9	Genetic and Respiratory System (List if any issues observed)
10	Renal Issues (List if any issues observed)
11	Nervous System (List if any issues observed)
12	Sexual and Appendages (List if any issues observed)
I certify that the above information is true and correct to the best of my knowledge.	
Signature of the Applicant	Date
http://www.sampleform.org	

**We win in healthcare, business and in life when we make it easy for those we serve to share the information that matters most. And when we pay attention the first time.**

# Word of Mouth

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Published initially on November 10, 2010

There are three types of people in the world. Those who absolutely adore breakfast and think it's the most important meal of the day, those who don't like breakfast, and those who aren't sure if they like breakfast or not. I'm probably somewhere in the middle. Sure I'd like a perfect bowl of oatmeal and some fresh fruit to start the day, but some days seem to have a mind of their own and the only recourse is a bar of some sort--grabbed and eaten on the run. The challenge is to find a bar that's actually healthy and tastes great because some of the offerings found at our favorite stores are loaded with junk or taste like sawdust.

So in my never-ending quest to scan the globe in search of new ideas, inspiration, genius, and now 190 nutritious and portable calories, I happened to stumble upon [Carman's](#) "Classic Fruit Muesli Bar." It's a product made in Australia by a young entrepreneur named Carolyn Creswell who's turned her passion for muesli into a growing international business. And I have to tell you that these bars--along with their equally delicious "Apricot and Almond" siblings--are fantastic! In fact, I've already told over a dozen friends, relatives, colleagues, customers, and partial (as opposed to total) strangers about them. Now I don't typically promote products on this blog, but I decided to do this to make an even bigger point about **the power of word of mouth**. The power of creating something so unique, healthful, and "delicious" that it stands out from the crowd and inspires people to tell everyone they know (and don't know) about it.

Which begs the vital question: **"Do your products, services, and solutions inspire customers to spread the word?"**

And, if not, **"Why not?"**

Because the value of word of mouth is key to the success of any business.

As a side note, many of you are probably asking: "What in the world is 'muesli' anyway and how did it ever find its way onto anyone's breakfast table?" The short answer is that muesli is an uncooked breakfast cereal combining rolled oats or another whole grain, fruit, nuts, seeds, and spices. It is exceedingly popular in Europe, parts of the U.S., I'm assuming Australia and with everyone working at your local health food store. It was invented around 1900 by a Swiss physician named Maximilian Bircher-Benner who used muesli as part of the treatment for his hospitalized patients. And it's not that hard to make your own special blend by following one of the many recipes found on the web or in healthy living and eating magazines. Though making a fantastic muesli bar is another story.



We win in business and in life when we create a meaningful buzz about the things we have to offer. And when we incite those around us to sing our praises. Maybe it's time to take a different look at the potential of your products, services, and experiences.

# Understanding Your Market

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Published initially on August 7, 2011

**B**usiness success comes in all shapes and sizes. The key is to really matter to the market you choose to serve. This point was made **loud** and clear to us earlier in the week when we attended the 10th anniversary concert of a rock and roll band called the [Haaks](#) that comes from our corner of Sweden. More precisely they come from the town of Hamburgsund--a delightful hamlet along the coast that is the permanent home to about 900 people. It is also the summer home of a few thousand more people who delight in its beautiful location and landscape, perfect stone beaches (except when the water is too cold or the brännmaneter appear), not-so-touristy feel (though that's changing with time) and history as a fishing village that dates back to the Bronze Age.

But back to the Haaks whose concert in a Viking-inspired amphitheater called "Scen På Bönn" drew a standing room only crowd of more than 2,000 people who all seemed enthralled by their raucous versions of English and Swedish hits and technicolor light and fireworks show (enhanced slightly by more alcohol than one typically finds at a concert at home). Every summer the Haaks perform all along the west coast of Sweden and each one of their concerts is as much a party and happening as it is a musical event--complete with ample opportunities for the audience to sing along. A feature that adds to their charm and popularity. In fact, an old Swedish tradition of sing-along concerts--known here as *Allsång*--is making a comeback in part due to the popularity of Sweden's most famous *Allsång* televised from Stockholm's Skansen Park each summer as thousands of people join well-known musicians in singing popular songs. And the Haaks anniversary concert also included guest performances and sing alongs by some of Sweden's top rockers and an opening act called Pepperland that warmed up the audience with two spirited sets of Beatles' songs which, by their nature, invite singing along. And in this clearly defined market, the Haaks are a very popular and cherished commodity. A fact they understand well in planning their schedule and putting together each performance. And a fact that should be very insightful for you.

All of us in business have important decisions to make about the nature and size of the market we go after and too often we think that it should be bigger than actually makes sense. "Why can't we be national or even global?" is a common refrain in strategic planning sessions...even when our notoriety and resources suggest that earning a bigger share of a local or regional market would make much more sense and enable us to more clearly build our brand, deliver consistent value and improve our bottom-line performance. So next time you sit down to think about your market with the geniuses you're surrounded by, take the time to ask this fundamental question: **"What is the most appropriate market for our company or organization?"**

The answer might be an empowering surprise.



**We win in business and in life when we find the right market for the things we have to offer. And when we give our customers a chance to join in and sing along. It's a simple lesson from a summer concert.**

# Keeping Customers Thirsty

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Published initially on June 2, 2011

It's almost summer and that can only mean one thing...BEER.

Cold beer.

Cool.

Refreshing.

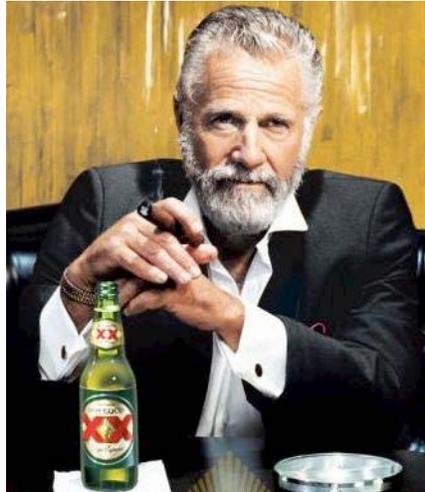
And the perfect accompaniment to your favorite cookout. And with all of today's choices, drinking beer has never been more interesting and rewarding. But how do a world of customers decide which beer to buy? And, how do a world of beer makers figure out how to get their products to stand out from the crowd. Well, if you read this blog regularly you know that there are a lot of ways to be different. From the very nature of your product, its unique attributes, the results it delivers, the knowledge inherent in using the product or doing business with the company, the status it confides, the value it offers, its history, the options it comes in, the extra perks of ownership, how it is marketed--including who else uses it, and so on.

And beer is no different. There are domestics, imports, dark beers, light (or is that "lite") beers, full-bodied beers, hand-crafted brews, wheat beers, bitter beers, fruity beers, beers made in ancient styles, organic beers, winter beers, summer beers and so on. There are beers designed for partying, others for savoring, beers that won't fill you up, and beers that will enhance your self-esteem. Beers in bottles, beers in cans, and beers in metal bottles that can control their own temperature. There are even beers that you can write your name on--just in case you've had so many beers that you can't remember which one is yours. Though they won't work if you can't remember your name. And there's even a beer that has gained growing popularity because of the remarkable fellow who promotes it...and his over-the-top lifestyle and persona that (presumably) makes us want to be just like him. After all, "he is the most interesting man in the world." The suave gentleman who is at the heart of the [Dos Equis](#) brand and its commercials. The one person who "once had an awkward experience just to see what it felt like." It's an edgy marketing campaign based on research suggesting that beer drinkers often see themselves as dull and lacking confidence. And it has increased sales by more than 20 percent even as customers have a growing number of choices.

Which begs the question: **"How will you keep your customers thirsty this summer?"** What new ideas, insight and innovation will you provide that make you more valuable and help your business to stand out from the crowd? And will you inspire them to think about your products, services or solutions in new ways? To smile at the mention of your name. To gain confidence at the thought of being associated with you. To join in a conversation that is upbeat and engaging. To be less dull and more confident. And commit to buying your offerings whenever they have the need or desire.

So take a look at any of the Dos Equis' ads from a new perspective. Because while they might be amusing, they might also shed some light on how to be different in ways that really matter. And how to connect with customers in a way that is refreshing. So that your customers will say:

**"I don't always drink beer, but when I do I prefer Dos Equis."**



**We win in business and in life when we try to push the limits of what it means to be remarkable. And when we figure out the best way to have fun with those we have the privilege to serve.**

# Sticking to the Customer

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Published initially on May 11, 2010

Here you are in the middle of a large chain supermarket and unsure where to find a particular item. Let's say you're looking for prune juice. It's not exactly Coke, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Gatorade, or one of those trendy new waters filled with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and possibly even antibacterials and anticoagulants. So you won't find it hanging out in the popular beverage aisle. Though it should be part of your "regular" diet (*pun intended*), because prunes keep you running young (*whoops, another pun intended*). But where the heck is it? So you scout out the closest associate and ask them for a bit of guidance. And they reply that "it's either on aisle 22 or 23," pointing toward the other end of the store or a galaxy far away. Then, as you head off in that direction, they add: "Try one of the top shelves or maybe one of the bottom shelves."

"Thanks," you respond with equal measures of hope and doubt.

But what if you ask the same question in [Whole Foods Market](#)...one of my very favorite high-priced grocery stores? There you're likely to get a very different response. Because their associates, who are always easy to find, will actually *take you* to the item in question. And, once you arrive, ask if you have *any questions*. Then, if you have a question or concern about prune juice that they can't answer, they will try to find a colleague who can. It doesn't work perfectly all the time, but it happens enough to make you feel that they really care about customers and delivering knowledge.

And so should you no matter what type of company or organization you work in. **Because sticking with our customers until their real needs are met is fundamental to business success.**

I always smile when someone mentions prune juice. Maybe it's because I've had the pleasure of retrieving large bottles of this magic nectar from the top shelf of aisle 17 at our local Giant grocery store four times in the past year. Not for me mind you. Though I firmly believe that prune juice is a remarkable beverage. But for four different and equally adorable 80 plus year-old women. And I always ask them if prune juice is one of the secret reasons why women live longer on average than men. I'm also curious why a product that is used with greater regularity by older people (i.e., folks who aren't quite as tall and flexible as they use to be) is almost always found on the top shelf. Is it to give them the opportunity to stretch a bit? Or maybe to help them meet people who are just a bit taller?



**We win in business by sticking to the customer until their needs are met. It's a simple skill that pays big benefits in building lasting relationships and making new friends.**

# The Sincerest Form of Flattery

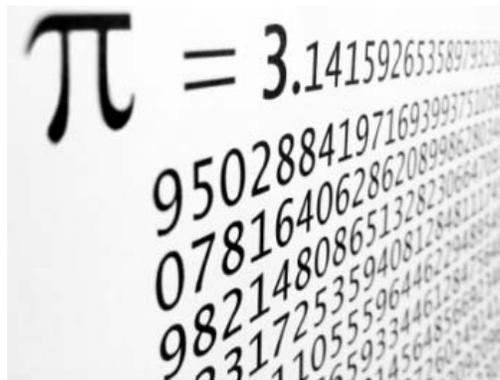
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Published initially on March 15, 2012

Charles Caleb Colton, a more than slightly obscure English writer and cleric from the early 1800's is credited with saying that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." And it is a remarkably powerful idea for companies and organizations --unless, of course, they are compelled to sue a competitor for trademark or patent infringement. But let's stick to a more basic and honest variation of this idea...

The notion that we often win in business by taking an idea from a different type of company or a different walk of life and adapting it to our particular enterprise. In fact, I spend a lot of time teaching our customers how to find great ideas in other industries that can create real excitement and greater value for those they have the privilege to serve. And here's a fun example that comes to mind as we wrap up our celebration of [Pi Day](#).

Wait, did I just say Pi Day? Yes indeed! March 14th. The day "invented" to honor the adorable Greek letter  $\pi$  that stands for the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. Which just so happens to equal 3.141592653589793238... It's an unofficial holiday revered by mathematicians everywhere and celebrated by a wide range of activities including the eating of pies.



But how does this relate to business success and standing out from the crowd?

To understand this, you'll have to take a quick visit the Blue Bonnet Cafe in Marble Falls, Texas, at 3:00 p.m. on any weekday afternoon. And you'll probably have to wait in line for a table with a lot of the locals, truck drivers and tourists who come to enjoy a delightful and non-intoxicating form of flattery. The copying of the revered idea of "Happy Hour" applied to pies. Because while the Blue Bonnet Cafe didn't invent the "Happy Hour"--that innovation was created by a clever tavern owner--they did invent the idea of a "Pie Happy Hour." A special and, to some, sacred time when customers can enjoy a slice of their favorite pie and a drink for only \$3.50.

And at a time when the restaurant would typically be relatively empty.



**We win in business and in life when we refresh our offerings with the ideas and insights of others. And when our imitation is not only legal but makes customers' lives as sweet as possible.**

# Black Friday

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Published initially on November 26, 2010

It's the Friday after Thanksgiving Day here in the U.S. and a chance to "shop until you drop" if you're so inclined. This day has even become its own holiday of sorts--dubbed "Black Friday"--when stores and consumers conspire to get a jump on the Christmas shopping season by offering and buying an amazing array of bargains. Bargains that are so enticing that people will literally interrupt a good night's sleep to race to the nearest mall with the hope that they will snag a coveted game system, popular toy, LED TV, new computer, clothing, jewelry, the latest double, triple, or quadruple espresso maker, or some revolutionary kitchen appliance. All at stores that opened conveniently at 12:01 a.m., 3:00 a.m., 4:00 a.m. and any other odd hour that might lure enthusiastic shoppers and spark the resurgence of our challenged economy. I get goosebumps just thinking about it.

Not exactly.

Because real value is something we should offer every hour of every day. Not for "a limited time only" or "in limited quantities" or "while supplies last." Sure the folks at [Walmart](#), with all their giant stores and even more gigantic buying power, can choose to outdo themselves on Black Friday. But you and I simply can't afford to. Because the success of our businesses is tied directly to our ongoing commitment to innovate and build deep and meaningful customer relationships. Relationships that don't require our customers to wake up at all hours of the night in the hope of getting a better deal.



**We win in business and in life when we always provide the most value for those we have the privilege to serve. And when we're willing to stay up to make sure our customers get a good night's sleep.**

# Just a Little Better?

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Published initially on December 12, 2009

I spend a lot of time crawling along in traffic. It's just a fact of life in places like Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Washington where there are too many people driving by themselves, finite road capacity, and an imperfect fit between public transportation and all the locations where people live and work. But solving this big challenge is a topic for another post. So let me suggest a real plus of being stuck in traffic, and that's the chance to unlock genius in the world around us. Because hidden in this mass of cars, trucks, and distracted drivers are plenty of interesting ideas and even great insights that can be found and used to enhance business success.

In the last week, I've had the good fortune to drive past several trucks operated by [Metropolitan Meat, Seafood and Poultry](#), a company which must be doing pretty well given the number of vehicles it seems to have on the road. Or maybe it only has a few trucks on the road and I'm lucky enough to spot them all the time. Or maybe, having heard of the growing popularity of my blog, they were trying to catch my attention. But in any event, they really peaked my curiosity by displaying a "tag line" that is not, on the face of it, a powerful formula for winning in most markets. Though it is an important idea that should spark thinking about your world in the week ahead.

In case you're not familiar with this company, which prides itself on being "the Mid-Atlantic's leading family-owned and operated center-of-the-plate and specialty food distributor," their tag line is "**JUST A LITTLE BETTER.**" A very modest idea for a "leading" company. But what does it actually mean? Do they sell slightly fresher fish? Or slightly tastier meat? Or slightly bigger "jumbo" shrimp? Or a slightly less "foul" turkey? Or maybe they offer slightly faster delivery? Or slightly more responsive customer service? Or slightly better prices? Or slightly better hours? Or slightly more convenient billing? Or some other difference that is just a bit better. You get the picture. **Because being "just a little better" isn't very compelling at all.** And it's certainly not an incredible motivator to get me off my "just a little more likely to change vendors" bottom.

But if a company in this particular business was a "**whole lot better**" it might be a different story. Imagine a company offering:

- *The freshest fish on the planet.*
- *Beef worthy of a king or queen.*
- *Shrimp as large and tasty as lobster.*
- *The healthiest and most flavorful turkey money could buy.*
- *24/7 delivery.*
- *A meat, seafood and poultry "hot-line" staffed by experts in food handling, preparation, masterful dining, event planning, and safety.*
- *World-class training for the new employees of customers.*

- *Great prices tied to the value provided.*
- *Hours of operation chosen by their customers.*
- *Flexible billing options to suit the special requirements of key customers.*
- *Or, something unusual that makes customers say "Wow!"*

Tied to a tag line that said "**AMAZINGLY BETTER.**" After all, don't we deserve products and services that are the best, or at least a whole lot better than what we currently have? And, wouldn't it be a lot easier to find and retain great employees by making a commitment to be amazing rather than just a little better? Surely they deserve the chance to work someplace remarkable--especially after crawling along in traffic. Not that we don't have to be a bit better on the way to being awesome. But that's just a starting point.

For all I know, Metropolitan Meat, Seafood and Poultry is much better than it's competition. Maybe they just don't want to brag about it.



**We win in business by committing to being remarkable at whatever we choose to do. Are you and your company or organization "just a little better"? Maybe it's time for a gut check, and an opportunity to tap your collective genius!**

# Bordering on Extinction

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Published initially on February 16, 2011

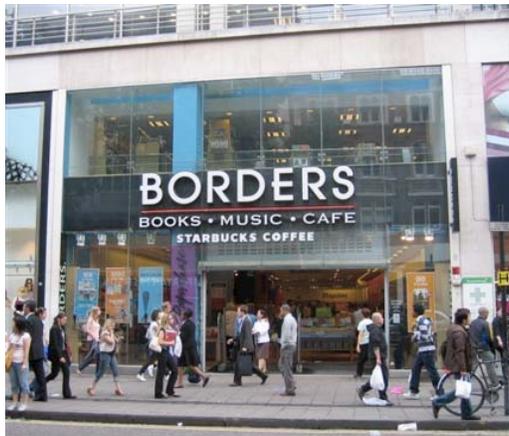
Like most people I know who spent time in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the 1970's, I have a close personal connection with [Borders](#)—the company that once reinvented the world of bookstores. Started as a used book shop in 1971 by a pair of brothers, the original store would quickly become one of the most successful and cherished independent bookstores in America operating out of a convenient two-story building on State Street. Filled with the latest titles, the coolest posters, abundant sale tables, and lots of quiet corners and comfortable chairs to get lost in, it was one of my very favorite hang outs during my years as a graduate student. This was a place that made the joy of books and reading come alive.

Several years later this original store would move to a larger vacated department store a block away and, from my perspective at least, begin to lose the very heart and soul that had made Borders such a special place. But this new formula would become the start of the current company and its chain of several hundred big-box stores filled with books and a lot of other stuff. And even though they lacked the special feel I'd come to love, these new stores would become an important part of the cultural landscape of the cities, towns, and strip malls where they sprouted up.

Just as a powerful transformation was taking place...

So the announcement that Borders was filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection came as no real surprise to me. I'd seen the signs, read the tea leaves, noticed the obvious change in the world of book buying—both as an author and as a regular customer. The rapid growth of on-line book selling—which the company failed to embrace, the emergence of electronic books—which Borders never made a serious investment in, and the presence of new competitors like Walmart offering the most popular books at even steeper discounts had all conspired to change the game that this remarkable business had invented. And it now lacked a brilliant response or sufficient resources to reinvent itself again. And it's unclear whether Chapter 11, in the absence of a more compelling strategy, will enable the company to survive. In fact, it's unclear whether a better positioned Barnes & Noble has a long-term future in the bricks and mortar book business.

It's always possible that Borders will find its way. Maybe in a new and smaller form with a clearer and more meaningful value proposition. Because there's still room for real bookstores that capture our hearts and imaginations in ways that no on-line retailer ever will. The power of the written word and the tangibility of a real book are too important. But bookstores of the future will likely require a new business model. And that new model might be well beyond the resources and the imagination of the folks who control what's left of Borders.



**We win in business and in life when we pay greater attention to the world around us and figure out how to remain relevant in a time of great change. And when we embrace the full potential of written and unwritten words.**

# Go Ahead, Waste My Time!

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Published initially on September 30, 2009

**O**n a recent call to our bank's customer service department I was excited to have the opportunity to talk with their automated representative. She began by saying a very business-like "Welcome" and then proceeded to ask me a set of questions designed to get at the heart of my problem. She had a calm and reassuring voice and sounded very focused as she worked her way through each scripted phrase. To her credit, she kept trying to make clear her desire to stay on task--continually rebuffing any errant response. And once I finally got with the program, I dutifully responded with clearer and more concise answers. Answers intended to help her and the bank zoom in on the problem they had created for me. And I quickly realized that confusing this poor electronic soul would only frustrate both of us, thus delaying my ability to speak with a real human being who might actually solve my problem. So I hung in there for about five minutes, as this slick piece of software posing as customer service agent tried to train me. Eventually I pushed enough of the right buttons and offered enough of the correct responses to be transferred to a real person who was less clear than her robotic co-worker but slightly more empowered to resolve my concern.

Then, having weathered the initial hurdle, I received a wonderful surprise. None of the information I provided had found its way to the agent. Not the nature of my call. Not my specific problem or a single digit of my 16-digit account number. Not my secret answers to their not-so-security questions. Not even the slightest sense of my hopes and dreams for resolving the issue. Nada. Zippo. Ingenting (*which is Swedish for nothing*). So when she began to ask the very same questions in the very same order, I started feeling very sad and more than a bit frustrated. It seems that in their efforts to reduce costs, my bank and too many other businesses have decided to use systems that waste the customer's time and often abuse us. Keeping us on hold or talking to robots so they can manage their queue or get us to give up.

**Whose time do you think is more valuable--yours or the customer's?  
If your customer isn't absolutely at the center of your service and support equation, then it's time to rethink why you deserve to be in business.**

# The Rise and Decline of Twinkies

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Published initially on January 12, 2012

**A**s a child growing up in Northern California I recall having a severe case of "Twinkie-envy." While my parents would try to fill my lunchbox with fruit, carrot sticks and other healthy treats, classmates would come to school with packs of Twinkies, Ding Dongs, HoHos, Sno Balls and Hostess cupcakes--the veritable mother lode of childhood cuisine. Each perfectly formed, perfectly baked, perfectly preserved and magically wrapped in its own perfect little package. This was "food" for the ages--depending, of course, on your definition of food and view of the ages. Moist, creamy, sweeter than the very sweetest moments in life--truly a gift from the gods (or at least the god of snack food). One imagined a Twinkie would stay fresh forever thanks to major innovations in the science of food preservation. A far cry from the components of my totally unappealing lunch wrapped in totally boring wax bags that kept them somewhat fresh until lunch time.

One also imagined the *wonderful* company that created these remarkable taste sensations--and also created Wonder Bread--would itself remain fresh forever...bringing new creations to an adoring nation. So news that Hostess Brands is once again filing for bankruptcy protection comes as a shock to anyone who believes in the power of sugar, corn syrup, enriched and bleached flour and preservatives. **And to anyone who believes that some companies, just like their products, should last forever even when they decide not to change very much.** Not that the products seem to be the problem according to the company's latest statements. No, the real villain is rising health care and pension costs rather than the changing tastes and health concerns of the earth's inhabitants. From their perspective Twinkies and their delicious siblings remain popular and have even achieved cult-like status in the vending machines, snack bars and meeting rooms of some of today's leading technology companies.

Though it should be noted that sales have declined.



**We win in business and in life when we realize that eventually all of us need to change. And when we plan accordingly.**

# Remaining Relevant

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Published initially on December 6, 2010

In a world that often seems dominated by digital media, "traditional" media is beginning to fight back. And one interesting example is the "[Power of Print](#)" ad campaign that was launched recently by the magazine industry. It's an attempt to cast magazines in a new, old, and comfortable light compared to their internet competitors. Here's an excerpt:

**This is not the Internet. Feel free to curl up and settle in.**

*Magazines don't blink on and off. They don't show video or deliver ads that pop up out of nowhere. You can't DVR magazines and you can't play games on them. But you can take a magazine to the beach, or to bed or just about anywhere else and, chances are, it will engage, entertain and enlighten you in ways no other medium can.*

Maybe so. Though more and more people are taking laptops, iPads, and a host of other web-enabled devices to the beach, to bed, and just about anywhere else. Not that there isn't lots to be said for the experience of getting lost in a good magazine. But is it enough to keep magazines relevant and essential in our fast-paced multi-media world? A world in which most of the leading magazines are also hedging their bets by making significant investments in on-line versions. A world filled with more choices.

**Which leads to the simple question of whether or not your company or organization can remain relevant in your world.** A world that is also filled with more choices than ever before. Choices empowered by new technologies or simply by newer and more innovative competitors offering even greater value to the customers you choose to serve. One of the most exciting challenges in business is the reality that the needs of customers, and the customers themselves, are always changing. Not always at the same pace in every industry, but at a pace that should consistently warrant our attention and creativity. Which suggests that magazines (and the rest of us) can survive and prosper if they (we) are willing to change too. Not by simply stating what has always made us wonderful, but by adapting to the new realities of the beach, the bed, or just about anywhere else.



**We win in business and life when we stay relevant--by making more innovative connections with the changing needs of old and new friends.**

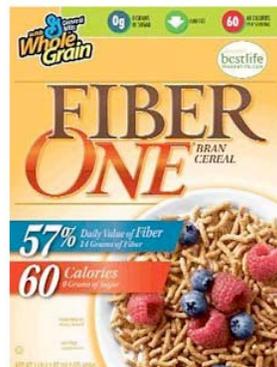
# The Magic of Fiber

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Published initially on October 23, 2009

I've been thinking about fiber a lot lately, and how it can help us to lead longer, healthier, and more productive lives. Not that it is a silver bullet, or that it can single-handedly atone for a lifetime of less than healthy eating. But it is certainly part of the equation--by slowing the rate that sugar is absorbed into the bloodstream, making our intestines and colons work better, and keeping us regular. Pretty cool stuff, I guess, especially if you are a gastroenterologist. And, I admit, it's a funny topic to bring up in a conversation or write about in a business blog. Now if this were a blog about diet, nutrition, or healthful cooking it would be another story. Yet I would be remiss if I didn't encourage each and every one of you to eat plenty of whole grain breads, high-fiber cereals, beans, legumes, fruits, vegetables, and even brown rice. After all, I'd like my readers to be as healthy as possible. And I'd be really happy if all of you were more regular (readers that is).

But why talk about fiber here? **Is it because we often succeed in business by keeping our customers "healthier" and by doing things that aren't very exciting to talk about or promote?** We write manuals that explain how our products really work and how to get the greatest value out of them. We provide regular service "check-ups" that take time now in order to prevent greater down time or expense later. We train their new employees so they can hit the ground running. We answer questions and provide the latest updates. We stock and ship replacement parts. All in the name of keeping them and their "systems" running smoothly. But what if we could do these things even more brilliantly and with even greater value? What if these "daily vitamin requirements" could be provided in a way that strengthened our bond with the customer and gave us a real competitive advantage? And what if we could engage our employees in the relentless pursuit of being geniuses at the very fiber of our businesses?



**We win in business by ensuring the health and viability of those we serve. How will you make that happen in the months ahead when it seems everyone is catching a cold or the flu?**