

# THE ULTIMATE ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE GUIDE

How to Connect With Your Customers to  
**SELL MORE!**

MARSHA COLLIER

Bestselling Author of *Starting an eBay Business for Dummies*



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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:**

Collier, Marsha.

The ultimate online customer service guide : how to connect with your customers to sell more! / by Marsha Collier.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-470-63770-8 (cloth); ISBN 978-1-118-00763-1 (ebk);

ISBN 978-1-118-00764-8 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-00765-5 (ebk)

1. Customer services. 2. Internet marketing. 3. Social media. I. Title.

HF5415.5.C6225 2011

658.8'12—dc22

2010036020

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Introduction

Though I've run a small business for much of my life, I'm a consumer, as well.

It's human nature to desire choice. We want to be able to choose one item over another or one vendor over another, based on a variety of reasons. When we exchange our hard-earned money for an item or a service, we ask for something else in return: to be treated with respect and honesty. We prefer to do business with people "like us," because we want to believe that those we trust to have our best interests at heart. Think about it: Have you ever asked a sales clerk in a clothing store how a particular outfit looked on you? How handsome you looked in that flashy sports car?

I've been writing about eBay for e-commerce vendors for over 12 years, and in that time I've seen thousands of homespun businesses fail in their attempts to become work-from-home moguls. Why? Because many felt—due to the fact that they were selling online—they could omit the personal touch. It made selling so much easier (or so they thought) to never have to actually *deal* with their customers. They thought they could ignore the small

niceties that made customers happy to be doing business with them. Time—and a lot of unsuccessful companies—have shown that these assumptions were wrong.

If merchants or service providers put their bottom line before the customer, they will doom their businesses to ultimate failure. They may flourish for a while, maybe even long enough to sell their business to another company and walk away with a healthy profit. But to create a long-term, stable business, you need to have long-term, loyal customers. The best companies grow as a result of positive word of mouth—both in the real world and on the Internet.

Online customer service is an important part of marketing your business. Brilliant, spot-on marketing not only generates revenue for your bottom line; it's also a way to make your customer's life easier. When you give someone quality service, you're a step ahead of your competition.

Most customer service experts fill the books they write and their conference presentations with instructions for growing larger businesses. Though they can charge thousands of dollars for their advice, it's often not completely translatable to a small-staffed enterprise.

I enjoy working with small businesses; they're the bread and butter of our economy. There are a lot more mom-and-pops out there than there are big businesses. As you'll learn in *The Ultimate Online Customer Service Guide*, mom-and-pop businesses can employ more than a hundred people, and without losing their personal attachment to their business. Whether we choose to work in a large or small business environment differs from one person to another, of course; some people are more geared to the detachment inherent in running a big business. However, there are plenty of us who enjoy being part of the daily excitement of running our own companies.

Small businesspeople have the benefit of putting their hearts into what they do, every single day. They truly care about whether their customers enjoy the food, clothing, or the service they provide. It's personal to them; it should be personal to their customers.

I've been working with small and medium businesses for most of my career. I've aided companies that work out of garages, spare rooms, and even barns. I've helped these individuals figure out where they should spend their money to grow, and spoken with them on even the deepest, most personal levels. I've heard from students, newlyweds, career changers, and retirees, and I've found that pretty much everyone has the same goal: They want to make more money. Sadly, however, I've also learned that only a small percentage really wants to work for it.

Those who understand that nothing comes easy, and that the traditional work ethic pays off, become thriving entrepreneurs. Such people become the heart and soul of small business; and it is these small companies that often can reach their customers online much more adeptly than large corporations.

Just how important is small business to our overall economy? As defined by the Small Business Administration (SBA), "small businesses" are those with fewer than 500 employees—a risk-taking, "crazy" group of entrepreneurs who create more than half of the nonfarm, private gross domestic product (GDP) in the United States—yes, more than half. Need more proof as to how important small businesses are to the economic health of our country? These organizations:

- Represent 99.7 percent of all employer firms.
- Employ just over half of all private-sector employees.
- Pay 44 percent of total U.S. private payroll.
- Have generated 64 percent of net new jobs over the past 15 years.

- Hire 40 percent of high-tech workers—like scientists, engineers, and computer programmers.
- Are 52 percent home-based and 2 percent franchises.
- Comprised 97.3 percent of all identified exporters, and produced 30.2 percent of the known export value in 2007.
- Produce 13 times more patents per employee than large patenting firms—patents that are twice as likely as large-firm patents to be among the 1 percent most cited.<sup>1</sup>

An earlier study found that of the 5,369,068 employer firms in the United States, 99.7 percent had fewer than 500 employees, and 78.8 percent had fewer than 10 employees in 1997. More recent data also suggests that very small firms—those with fewer than 10 employees—hire part-time employees at a rate almost twice that of very large firms (1,000 or more employees). If small firms did not hire these part-time employees, they might otherwise be unemployed.

I worked with brick-and-mortar retailers for over a decade, managing advertising and marketing for several super-regional malls (shopping centers with more than 800,000 square feet of leasable area) during their heyday in the 1990s. But just because they were big didn't mean that they always took their customers' needs into consideration.

One Los Angeles center I handled was part of a national chain. The corporate office expected the mall to run the standard advertising program (designed for suburban white neighborhoods) in this center's highly Hispanic market. My proposed idea of running a bilingual campaign, which featured models in

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census and International Trade Administration; SBA Advocacy-funded research by Kathryn Kobe and CHI Research, Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007.

the ads that reflected members of the community, was seen as heresy—initially. But since sales were falling, they were ready to try my “wacky idea,” to respect the predominant customer culture. In retrospect, it seems shocking that my theory was once considered ground-breaking.

Perhaps that’s why I felt I *had* to write this book. Much that I see and hear nowadays—including the advice of well-intentioned experts—ignores the human element of business. A good product is paramount, yes, but if there’s no personal connection in the way you relate to your customers, you will not succeed. It may take time to fail, but the fall will come. Marketing with the goal of making your customer feel included and part of your community is in your—and your customers’—best interest. It places your business within their trusted circle. Communication is the best way to strengthen your customer’s loyalty.

Another of my clients, an e-commerce company, needed me to help them expedite their product photography by automating their storage and shipping. After we implemented changes, the company was running like a Swiss clock. Its profits went from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands . . . and then I got a call. The company was about to be thrown off of eBay (its largest market at the time). *Why*, I asked incredulously. Its business model was near-perfect.

Upon arriving at headquarters, I interviewed the people in the customer service department. I learned that their computers were clogged with complaint e-mails, and reps were sending out automated responses without following up with customers. Eventually, the staff began deleting e-mails en masse due to their frustration. I told them they had to make customer service a top priority, that *they* had to make things right. They had to learn how to “take it in the shorts” when they were at fault.

Unfortunately, they didn’t take me seriously, and this company ended up spending thousands of dollars on highly

billing consultants, to no avail. Customers filed Federal Trade Commission (FTC) complaints, and you can probably guess the outcome. A brilliant business model was ruined due to one organization's lack of concern for its customers. Though it had spent thousands on consultants and fancy marketing tools, without the primary ingredient—respect for the customer—it was doomed.

Perhaps it was the advent of technology that has caused us to stray from the personalization of our businesses. Technology has enabled more people to run successful businesses for a lot less money, a lot of them remotely. Sadly, there's no humanity involved in the kind of technologies that have been sold to businesses.

Since the beginning of civilization, wealth and businesses were built on a simple tenet: Someone sold something to someone else. This is nothing new; it's been this way since biblical times. Whether we're trading, interacting, or selling, we are all customers and vendors in one form or another. Most would argue that this "oldest profession" relies on the exchange of favors for money; but, indeed, the oldest profession is merely a form of entrepreneurship.

At the turn of the century, my great-grandmother supported her three sons by standing on the docks at Ellis Island and buying the long tresses of immigrant women as they came off the ships. (There was an entire community of settlers who made a living from one another. Money for an immigrant in a new country was a huge factor in starting out right, and they all helped each other.) My great-grandmother would then sell the hair to wig makers, whose creations festooned the heads of New York's elite. Though I suppose it was considered a cottage industry back then, my great-grandmother would likely be called an entrepreneur today. Whatever the label, it was a win-win situation for all involved. She worked on trust and reputation. Those weren't easy days for anyone.

Consider *any* job or occupation nowadays. Everything involves selling—taking the risk, developing a business—all for the sake of profit in the end.

But what about employees? Yes, there are ranks of workers who perhaps do not even come in contact with your clients. However, their effort is reflected in your company's bottom line. Your goal for your business is to turn a profit, but you can't do this without customers, and your employees are your conduit to gaining more customers.

*Customer service, community, and trust* aren't just terms for the big guys like the phone company, your credit card provider, or your Internet service provider. It's something we all come to expect from everyone with whom we do business, in one form or another. As a businessperson, you've got to make *customer service* more than a buzzword or phrase. It cannot simply be lip service; rather, it has to be the underlying tenet, the foundation for your business.

In my attempt to become a retail marketing “expert” (though I really don't like that term), I attended seminar after seminar, designed to teach merchants how to “manage” their customers—because customers are the lifeblood of commerce. I sat in big rooms with groups of small businesspeople like myself. I listened to the speakers (because I was told they were experts) and absorbed as much as I could. I admit that I sat there like the rest of the audience, nodding my head in agreement with the presenters, even when I really wasn't sure what they were talking about. In fact, we looked like a sea of bobble-head dolls. Looking back, I wonder if anyone else besides me felt that only a small percentage of what the speakers were saying really applied to my business situation.

When we attend such conferences, we often get wrapped up in the plethora of acronyms: VRM, CRM, ACES . . . (they *do* go on). We learn; we listen to the experts; we nod our heads in agreement and vow to follow the latest and greatest customer acquisition and satisfaction methods.

A note here on the use of acronyms: I will not use acronyms in this book; instead, I will use the actual words, and define the more popular ones. Too many of us often fall into the habit of using this kind of techno-jargon because the terms fly off the tongue so easily, making our conversation seem so much more efficient. But using acronyms can make communication less meaningful and more unintelligible for those who do not use or hear them regularly. It's too easy to forget, for example, that the "C" in CRM stands for *customer*. Our customers are not just a "C," and we must never lose sight of that.

We read blogs and books, attend these conferences, and listen to the experts, all the while trying to make a complicated science out of a basic human need: the desire to be treated with respect. We are all clients, customers, patients, consumers, shoppers; we all exchange money for services and merchandise. As consumers with choices, we can go anywhere we want to spend our money. The one thing we all have in common is that we are human beings. As human beings, we hope to maintain a little dignity in our everyday lives—including when we make buying decisions. We hope that manufacturers and providers will have a little respect for us and our family.

*Respect* for your customer—and the hard-earned money they pay for your service or merchandise—is the key to giving superior customer service.

Our society used to care whether we got value for our dollars. But lately, we just seem to be looking for the cheapest, quickest, easiest way to acquire products and services. In this process, we don't always respect the seller or supplier, do we? Yet when we get lousy, disrespectful treatment, it makes us angry and annoyed.

You might say that, in many instances, human respect—both toward and from our vendors—has diminished significantly in recent years. We need to turn this around and begin to provide a good customer experience for *all* customers, without charging ridiculously high prices.

Where do *you* go to complain when you feel that you've been wronged by a business? What happens when something goes awry? Who do you turn to? That's when we pay the high cost for our low expectations.

We have lots of new tools on the Internet—specifically, within social media—that are meant to help us engage and interact with our customers. And, again, there are a lot of experts out there who are making fortunes showing us how to use these tools. Blogs and Web sites like Facebook and Twitter are the shiny new things. In fact, many claim to be the panacea that will make all our customer service woes disappear—and bring millions to our doors.

I've always put my e-mail address in the introduction of all my books, and tried to make myself accessible to anyone who writes to me. Considering the number of books I've sold over the past few years—well, you can just imagine how many people have contacted me. And though it's taken a lot of my time, I want to hear stories of businesses that thrive, and I enjoy seeing people overcome their problems on the way to success—because I really do care when someone reads my words and acts on them. I want to know what worked—and what didn't—in order to better serve my future readers.

I also get e-mails every day from readers of my Google profile, blog, or the feedback on my Web site, [www.coolebaytools.com](http://www.coolebaytools.com). While there is a disclaimer on my Web site that states that I can't always respond to every e-mail I get, I guarantee that I read them all—and I *do*. I receive questions that run the gamut from basic to advanced, and it can be overwhelming at times. I often

find myself resisting the urge to say, “You can find that information on page 126 of *Title XYZ*.” I answer as often as I can, and try to be helpful—because I know that in order to keep an online community alive, both my supporters and I must remain active within it.

Social media can do all that and more. In *The Ultimate Online Customer Service Guide*, I will use everyday examples to show you how businesses are doing it right, as well as discuss those that are doing it wrong.

You can build a *community* with your customers. That’s another term we hear a lot of these days. But community has always been the backbone of trust. Great-grandma had her community of immigrants, who supported each other and kept in contact. In the early days of our country, communities were formed to help people develop a feeling of worth. In the 1950s, they met at Floyd’s barber shop and shared their daily news and gossip. In the 1990s, our communities took the form of malls, where everyone shopped, met for lunch, and attended events.

We have always embraced communities for introducing us to people with whom we have things in common. Nowadays, these communities are centered not only around schools and churches, sports and hobbies, but we can also find them on the Internet.

Community has likewise become part of corporate culture—and when it’s done right, it becomes the basis of how we do business. Remember: Your customer is a human being. *You* are a human being. We thrive on respect and being part of a community. I hate to throw out a cliché like, “Do unto others . . .” but it’s appropriate here.

Years ago, when someone had a lousy experience with a business, he or she passed on those negative feelings to perhaps 20 of his or her friends. Today, via the use of social media, a single one

of your customers can broadcast a message to a million of his or her “closest acquaintances.”

Whether you have a retail location or a business practice—whether you even ever physically interact with your customer—you *can* ensure that you have happy customers. Your customers should always walk away from an interaction with you with a feeling of wonder—the feeling of “wow.”

Joseph Jaffe, a noted thought leader on new marketing and president of crayon, described as “a strategic consultancy that helps its clients achieve positive change and impact by joining the conversation,” has always been a fan of following the customer’s humanity. I met him several years ago and have continually enjoyed his vocal, honest perspectives. In his recent “Customer Service Manifesto” he echoed the philosophy of this book when he wrote, “Loving thy neighbor has always made good sense. Having a customer who loves you back in return makes for good business sense.”

So hang in there with me and read on. I promise, no jargon or absolutes; just real-world examples and truths—that you *already* know. All you have to do is follow your instincts, while you pick up some additional tips on how to connect with your customers online.



# 1

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## The Art of Customer Service

Why, you might wonder, would one use the word *art* to describe a business practice like customer service? After all, most of business is pretty cut-and-dried, whereas we often think of those who have artistic talent as touchy-feely types—as being less logical and more right-brained than successful, professional types—right?

Not necessarily. American neurobiologist Roger W. Sperry first introduced the concept of right-brain and left-brain thinking in the late 1960s. Sperry's research showed that the human brain has two very different ways of thinking. The right brain is visually oriented and processes information in an intuitive and synchronized way, while the left brain processes information in an analytical and sequential way. In 1981, Sperry won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his work in split-brain research.

We all have two ways of processing information, and as vendors of products or services, we need to appeal to both. Overly

creative right-brainers tend to get a bad rap these days. They are thought of as dreamers, visionaries, or idealistic enthusiasts; rarely as sharp, savvy businesspeople. This doesn't make a lot of sense when you look at it through the lens of today's forward-thinking CEOs—many of whom, by the way, say that the way they make decisions is based largely on intuition, because all the data they need is not always available and they must be able to react quickly to the market.

Take Kip Tindell, CEO of the Container Store. He was quoted in the *New York Times* (March 13, 2010) as saying, “We just beg and plead and try to get employees to believe that intuition does have a place in the workforce. After all, intuition is only the sum total of your life experience. So why would you want to leave it at home when you come to work in the morning?”

Columbia University Business School offers a course for executives that teaches them to make better use of their intuition. The course is based on William Duggan's publicly acclaimed series of books, *Strategic Intuition: The Key to Innovation*, and introduces breakthrough ideas, methods, and tools for generating creative ideas that are also strategic.

“The only real valuable thing is intuition.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

If you look, you'll find plenty of examples of leaders using their intuition. Leading by intuition does not mean making uninformed or sporadic decisions. To the contrary: You as a leader need to make sure that your instincts are fully supported by information from your customer and employees. This means that by being involved in online outreach you receive constant feeds from your target market and your employees. By tapping into what your customers need and want, and how those demands are or are not

being met by those who regularly interact with them, you will be in a stronger position to use your intuition more effectively.

Therein lies the opportunity for your customer service engagement. With your online presence, you are in the position to regularly interact with customers. You have the opportunity to see what works and what doesn't. Knowledge gleaned from outside your inner sanctum will enable you to address key questions, such as whether your product or service offering is right for the market and up to date with current trends. This helps you motivate employees to deliver the level of service required and to identify what, if any, are opportunities for your company's growth.

Interestingly, that has been the main focus of former Forrester analyst, Dr. Natalie Petouhoff (@DrNatalie on Twitter). At Forrester, she covered not only customer service and customer relationship management (CRM), but by observing the new juncture of social media and those disciplines, she wrote the world's first social media return on investment (ROI) model.

Natalie, now the chief social media and digital communication strategist at Weber Shandwick, is one of the truly brilliant folks in her field; her work is legendary at businesses whose budgets we can only imagine.

Her groundbreaking ideas in this arena can help to center our thoughts on exactly how this is all going to work for our own businesses. When I asked Dr. Natalie about my theory about customer service becoming the new marketing, and about how small business has an innate advantage today, here's what she shared with me:

People asked me why I went from addressing customer service and its professionals to a public relations and marketing firm. What I found was that companies are fracturing their brands. This started to happen even before social media.

PR and marketing departments were crafting amazing brand promises. But because the way those departments have been organized, they don't interact with customers after the brand promise has been delivered. So who does have to deliver on the brand promise? Customer service. And because customer service has been largely trapped into the category of a cost center, it rarely is able, during those customer interactions, to deliver on the brand promise, or even have enough respect within the organization to have others accept the idea [that] they have to change products or services to better meet customers' wants and needs.

This dynamic—the lack of interdepartmental interaction—has been happening since companies left the mom-and-pop model. Along comes social media, and what are consumers using it for? Among the many uses—to keep in touch with friends and family, find a lost love, shop—they are realizing they can broadcast to millions their disdain about how companies are *not* meeting their brand promise.

As a management consultant back in the days of the top management consulting companies, (the “Big 6,” including Accenture, Price Waterhouse, Coopers & Lybrand, EY & Young), as a PricewaterhouseCoopers consultant, we were taught that more than anything, managing customer expectations was the key to success. And that lesson learned can be applied here today in business.

That is the reason I joined a PR and marketing firm. I wanted to help companies manage their customers' expectations. After many years in the corporate world, I realized the chasm in corporations needed to be healed. That chasm? Interdepartmental disconnect and dysfunction. If I were to really help the business world make this huge change, I myself had to be the change. I had to partner with professionals in

departments that I might not have ordinarily interfaced with. So I joined a PR and marketing firm.

I saw that PR and marketing had mastery over delivering a brand's promise. And that their worth was based on the ability to help customers become aware, and to consider purchasing products and services from their company. Once sales "closed the deal," customer service's role was to help, answer questions, and solve problems.

The disconnect was that PR and marketing professionals were not always delivering a brand promise that customer service could consistently provide. And, note, none of this was the fault of PR, marketers, or customer service. It was an artifact of how companies organize themselves into groups of specialties; and rarely do they have leadership that has the intuition that continuing to interact as disparate silos not only is *not* in the best interest of any of those departments, [but that] it will actually be the downfall of companies, which will go out of business if they don't "get it." Of the companies that do sense some of this, many of them may not know how to break down the silos in the politically charged situations they work in. And even in the best situations, they certainly would not be compensated for interdepartmental collaboration.

What social media is doing for companies is essentially this: It is a source of real-time feedback. That feedback is filled with information, if you are listening, that can be used to change your products and service to meet your customers' needs. Imagine how much easier it would be to market and sell a product [that] your customers said they wanted. Imagine if you are listening to your customers and you are using [what they're saying] for product innovation. Imagine if your competitor is not. Imagine the market advantage you'd have. And

imagine if you used customer service as your differentiator. Why would your customers go anywhere else?

While companies are either blindly hobbling along, doing things the way they always have done, or perhaps noticing something probably needs to change, the customer has taken things into [his or her] own hands.

Customers have realized that posting on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and other places got the attention of millions. Customers are avoiding calling the call center, and instead are going to social media to announce their disappointment and disdain. The power of social media has put the power into the hands of the customer.

If companies had gotten ahead of these issues and made the changes they needed to make so that the PR and marketing brand messaging could be delivered by the products and service, as well as by customer service, many companies would not be doing the social media scramble. But they didn't.

Some of these ideas are not really new, but the intuitive leader will respond to issues arising from this information more quickly and effectively, and ensure the structures are in place to achieve it.

PR has now become customer service. Customer service is now PR. The question you have to ask yourself is, "How are you going to be managing the expectations of your customers, and how will all your departments deliver on your brand's promise?" No customers, no business. Period.

Natalie's words on silos (departments or people who do not share information) are the last you will read in this book. As a small businessperson, you have too much on the line. Rather than forming silos in your organization, you can encourage collaboration with your employees and develop engagement with your customers. You can work as a *team*.

My experience tells me that customer service is not only an art, but a “soft science.” By *soft science*, I don’t mean that there are no concrete numbers to run the business. There are specific rules that must be followed and will always work for all situations. But there are also numerous ways to perform quality customer service, depending on the customer and the situation.

Of course, those who manage customer service will say it’s easier to manage people working in customer service when there are clear rules that govern how they treat customers. But it’s following those rules to a tee (even when you and your employees know doing so doesn’t make sense) is what incenses customers and will probably lead to employee attrition at your company.

Instead, consider this: Art is a means to an end; it is the deployment of words and actions to accomplish a task. Art can facilitate constructive interactions. To have mastery at one’s “art” requires practice and a certain amount of reverence. It may seem strange to think that something as basic as customer service has to become an art—or at the very least, a soft science with a range of approaches—but I think what you will find in this book is that if you can learn and apply this idea, not only will you be happier in your work, so will your employees. Your customers will also return and stay loyal. The point is, working from this starting point allows us to better understand the ongoing process of forming connections with our customers.

## Developing Your Customer Service Intuition Skills

The art of serving customers begins with creating real relationships with real people in the real world. For years, we didn’t connect the brick-and-mortar aspect of business to the online world. It’s important to make sure that no matter where we are dealing with customers—in a store, on the phone, or on a Web site—there are some basic tenets to keep in mind.

To perform quality customer service, you need to respect, trust, and be committed to the people you are dealing with. This is a core tenet. A culture and a lifestyle of treating others with the same respect you wish to be treated is key to reducing attrition and strengthening customer loyalty.

What's funny is that this is all you need to know. It's customer service, in a nutshell. It's everything your parents (and, hopefully, teachers) tried to instill in you as a child. We were brought up thinking that respect for others was the key to a good life. So exactly when did this change? Just because we're living in the dollars-and-cents business world?

At what point did we begin to think that it was acceptable to ask employees to work more hours than we pay them for? Or to make cuts in staff when it comes to customer service, when it's the task that is the most customer-oriented? When did we begin to think it was "good enough" to *not* treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves—even worse, to *not* treat customers the way *they* want to be treated?

When researching what the "big brains" (you know, the experts with all the answers) thought about customer service, I scoured scores of high-level books written by high-powered specialists. Some of them I bookmarked, and a very few are marked throughout with highlighter. These books are mostly about promoting loyalty in the old-school style. The others are treatises, full of data and charts; and most claimed to have some supernatural key to success. When it comes to customer service, working with people is not cut-and-dried. People are not numbers.

So why is this "magic bullet" so difficult for so many to recognize?

Top business experts spend a lot of time putting things into categories: customers, employees, situations. There are tons of charts, along with a multitude of acronyms, which reduce simple