

Take Their Breath Away

How Imaginative Service Creates
Devoted Customers

Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson



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Table of Contents

Praise

Also by Chip R. Bell

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Introduction

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

THE FINANCIAL PAYOFF OF IMAGINATIVE SERVICE IN A
TIGHT ECONOMY

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

PART ONE - Twelve Take-Their-Breath-Away Strategies

A HALF-DOZEN IMAGINATIVE SERVICE HORS d'OEUVRES
WALK ON THE INVENTIVE SIDE

CHAPTER 1 - Animation

THE SPIRIT OF ANIMATION

ATTITUDE

COMFORT

PERSONAL

RESPECT

SPARKLY

CHAPTER 2 - Reinvention

THE REQUIREMENT FOR CREATIVITY

JUICERS

SERVICE DONE SLOWER
SERVICE DONE REMOTELY
SERVICE DONE WITH A HELPER
SERVICE DONE BACKWARD
UNCONVENTIONAL PERSPECTIVE
WACKY

CHAPTER 3 - Decoration

DECORATION BASICS
THEME
THE SCOOP ON THEME
PUTTING THEME INTO ACTION
SENSE
SIMPLE SENSE
COMFORT
FUNCTION

CHAPTER 4 - Camouflage

BEHIND THE MAGIC
INVISIBILITY
PROCESS # 1: SHOPPING CARTS SHOULD APPEAR TO
ALWAYS BE AVAILABLE.
PROCESS # 2: PRODUCE IS ALWAYS IN STOCK.
PROCESS #3: IMPERFECTIONS ARE NEVER NOTICED.
PROCESS #4: PARKING IS A BREEZE.
PROCESS #5: WAIT TIME IN CHECKOUT LINE.
TRANSFERENCE
CLAIRVOYANCE
MYSTERY

CHAPTER 5 - Concierge

THE HEART OF CONCIERGE SERVICE

DETAILS
EXTRAS
MENTOR
KNOW ME
THANKS

CHAPTER 6 - Partnership

PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP
INCLUSION
GENEROSITY
TRUST
WIDE AWAKE
BONE HONESTY

CHAPTER 7 - Cult-Like

THE PRINCIPLES OF CULT-LIKE
NETWORK
IDENTITY
DARING
SECRET
CHARACTER

CHAPTER 8 - Luxury

UNDERSTANDING THE LUXURY-SEEKING CUSTOMER
THE PROTOCOLS OF LUXURY SERVICE
LUXURY SERVICE IS AUTHENTIC AND SYMMETRICAL
LUXURY SERVICE IS MAGICAL AND SUBTLE
LUXURY SERVICE EDUCATES TO INVITE
EXPERIMENTATION
LUXURY SERVICE ELEVATES AND ENRICHES
LUXURY SERVICE IS A UNIQUE SENSORY EXPERIENCE
LUXURY SERVICE IS THE PINNACLE OF COMFORT

ELEGANCE WITH ALL THE ARROGANCE REMOVED

CHAPTER 9 - Air

THE MANAGEMENT OF SERVICE AIR

AIR-PLAIN

AIR APPARENT

AIR SHOW

CHAPTER 10 - Air Defense

PROTECTING SERVICE AIR

ASSESSING AIR DEFENSE

MANAGING AIR DEFENSE

ANXIETY MONITOR

FEAR SCREEN

CUSTOMER SOUNDING BOARD

COMPLAINT FORENSICS

CHAPTER 11 - Scout's Honor

UNDERSTANDING THE CUSTOMER TRUST GAP

TAKING THE ANGST OUT OF CUSTOMER HOPES

CARING ACTIONS

COMPETENCE

CORE PROTECTION

CONSTRAINT-FREE EXECUTION

CONSISTENCY

PUTTING THE "US" BACK IN TRUST

CHAPTER 12 - Firefighter

HOW CUSTOMERS VIEW SERVICE RECOVERY

SERVICE RECOVERY PRINCIPLES

TACTICS OF A FIREFIGHTER STRATEGY

PARTNERING
CONNECTIVITY
PROBLEM-SOLVING PROWESS
RECOVERY LEGENDS
RECOVERY TRAINING
RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM
METRICS AND MAPPING

PART TWO - The Take-Their-Breath-Away Execution Plan

CHAPTER 13 - Insight Understanding Your Customer

CAPTURING INTELLIGENCE IN THE FIELD
SCOUT REPORTS
ESTABLISHING BOARDS OF CUSTOMERS
TOWN HALLS SQUARED
DEAR COMPANY
CUSTOMER INPUT CONTEST
BIG DEAL MEETINGS WITH A CUSTOMER AGENDA
CUSTOMER ADVISORY TEAMS
CUSTOMER WEATHERPERSON
MULTICHANNEL RESPONSE SYSTEMS

CHAPTER 14 - Oversight Assessing Your Launch Pad

STRENGTHS
WEAKNESSES
OPPORTUNITIES
THREATS
FORGOTTEN VOICES
AIR FILTER
IMPORTANT VOICES

BEYOND SETTING TARGET DATES

CHAPTER 15 - Spotlight Choosing a Take-Their-Breath-Away Strategy

CHOOSING A SERVICE LEVEL COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TAKE-THEIR-BREATH-AWAY STRATEGIES FROM SERVICE STRATEGY TO SERVICE VISION PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER: A CASE EXAMPLE

CHAPTER 16 - Foresight Unearthing Potential Customer Stressors

Treasure Fault #1: Competing Priorities Treasure Fault #2: Processes That Don't Play Well ... Together Treasure Fault #3: No Sustainability Plan Treasure Fault #4: "We've Always Done It That Way" Treasure Fault #5: Uncommitted People, Especially Leaders Treasure Fault #6: Out-of-Sync Performance Management Treasure Fault #7: Inadequate Competence

CHAPTER 17 - Green Light Launch Lessons for Leaders

TRUMPET EXHIBIT ENERGIZE HARMONIZE SPONSOR RAINBOWS EVERY DAY

Notes

[About the Authors](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[Bibliography](#)
[Index](#)

Praise for *Take Their Breath Away*

“Are you bored? We’re so spoiled that when something is merely good enough, we just walk away. Chip and John explain that the surefire method for growth and customer loyalty is simple: don’t be boring.”

—Seth Godin, author, *The Purple Cow* and *Tribes*

“*Take Their Breath Away* shows how legendary customer service delivery can win and keep devoted customers for life. I LUV this fantastic book.”

—Colleen Barrett, president emeritus, Southwest Airlines Company

“No one knows more about creating profit through service than Chip and John. If you want to know the best way to do it, read ‘Take Their Breath Away.’ The examples in this book will certainly start your creative juices flowing and help your organization take your customers’ breath away.

—Howard Behar, president, Starbucks Coffee International, retired

“*Take Their Breath Away* is a fun and inspiring book that provides a creative approach for achieving ‘out of the box’ customer devotion.”

—Mike Vance, former director of Idea Development for Walt Disney Productions and dean of Disney University

“Customer loyalty is at the heart of business success in the best of economic times and has even greater importance in the face of economic uncertainty. John and Chip have written the quintessential practical guide to securing profitability by serving your way to customer evangelism.”

—Joseph Michelli, author, *The New Gold Standard*

Also by Chip R. Bell

Customer Loyalty Guaranteed: Create, Lead, and Sustain, Remarkable Customer Service (with John R. Patterson)

Magnetic Service: Secrets for Creating Passionately Devoted Customers (with Billjack R. Bell)

Service Magic: The Art of Amazing Your Customers (with Ron Zemke)

Knock Your Socks Off Service Recovery (with Ron Zemke)

Customer Love: Attracting and Keeping Customers for Life
Beep Beep!:: Competing in the Age of the Road Runner (with Oren Harari)

Dance Lessons: Six Steps to Great Partnerships in Business and Life (with Heather Shea)

Managers as Mentors: Building Partnerships for Learning
Customers as Partners: Building Relationships that Last
Managing Knock Your Socks off Service (with Ron Zemke)

Service Wisdom: Creating and Maintaining the Customer Service Edge (with Ron Zemke)

The Trainer's Professional Development Handbook (with Ray Bard, Leslie Stephen, and Linda Webster)

Understanding Training: Perspectives and Practices (with Fredric Margolis)

Instructing for Results: Managing the Learning Process
(with Fredric Margolis)

Clients and Consultants (with Leonard Nadler)

Influencing: Marketing the Ideas That Matter

The Client-Consultant Handbook (with Leonard Nadler)

Also by John R. Patterson

Customer Loyalty Guaranteed: Create, Lead, and Sustain,

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*To Lisa, Bilijack, Kaylee, Annabeth, and Cassie Bell
To Jay, Molly, Carrie, Chad, and Sarah Patterson
"You take our breath away!"*

INTRODUCTION

A Call For Imaginative Service

Customers are bored! Service providers, chastised by the less-than-exciting results of their surveys, have put all their eggs in the improvement basket. Like the well-trodden story of attempts to free the 18-wheeler truck stuck in the overpass, too many units and organizations have sought the help of a jackhammer or a welding torch; too few have simply let the air out of the truck tires.

Getting better has meant improving efficiency—making the service experience faster, simpler, or more accurate. Service designers have typically asked, “How can we satisfy our customers?” rather than “How can we take their breath away?” “How can we make what we have better?” has taken precedence over “What if we made it completely different?” Enhancement has been about taking the next step rather than taking a completely new direction. We improve rather than invent.

The result? We hold up companies like Nordstrom, Starbucks, Ritz-Carlton Hotels, and the Container Store as exemplars. Not to say that they all don't deserve credit for elevating the standards from the mediocre levels of the '80s. But, take a closer look. These service greats focus on the customer (like remembering your preferences), design service processes around customer convenience, pay attention to service details, deliver consistency, and ensure you receive warm and friendly service. Most small-town merchants would probably say, “So what! Is that not what

service means in the first place? When did such stock-in-trade start getting held up as something special?”

While we are sipping our pricey lattes, returning a shirt to the super gracious clerk, or getting turndown service with a personal note on the pillow, something else has been happening. We are getting way over-stimulated. Television has become both high definition and multimedia. The nightly news shows the weather report, ball scores, stock market numbers, and a crawling headline simultaneously on the TV screen. Internet servers have become a haven for colorful ads with video streaming at you while you try to concentrate on reading your e-mails. Even the Little League ballpark is cloistered among giant billboards. Hitting a home run makes a bragging sponsor as noteworthy as a budding sports star. That steady stream of sensory arousal has made a simple hotel check-in, taking Spot to the vet, or grocery shopping seem humdrum and plain vanilla.

One could argue for a slower pace and a simpler lifestyle. Instead why not enrich the clutter and harmonize the noise by offering ways to make customers laugh, reflect, swoon, or swell with pride? We have titled this book *Take Their Breath Away* because that is exactly the customer reaction to which customer service needs to aspire. Customers long to take from a service experience the emotional reaction they have to a golden sunset, perfect rainbow, magic trick, or poignant story. They want to be lifted beyond service that is pretty good to service that is remarkable.

This refreshingly novel brand of service leaves customers more than cheaply entertained—it leaves them richly stirred. Customers instinctively appreciate such an expression as coming from a solid intent to make a difference, not just a superficial desire to make an impression. Customers who experience such hybrid service

want to return for more. They know it is rare and special; it is, in a word, imaginative.

This book does not attempt to “spamize” service but rather seeks to inspire and “nobilize” service. The path we have chosen is not the linear next step, but rather the quantum leap to a service expression that is fresh and novel. Get ready for a wild ride. The pages to follow will help you challenge conventional wisdom and upset the status quo. Want a quick taste?

As many chain hotels are struggling in the throes of “me too” competition and travel cutbacks, Hotel Monaco is thriving. Why? Because they deliver to the business traveler a funky, enchanting experience with goldfish in the room, leopard-skin bathrobes, foreign coins on the pillow instead of mints, and a psychic quietly reading palms in the lobby during the afternoon wine tasting. Not your cup of tea? Perhaps not. But for the market to whom the experience is targeted, it has been a winning recipe.

As Hotel Monaco and other imaginative service greets know so well, the desire to provide take-their-breath-away service spreads through memorable stories. Imagine the excitement that went through Walt Disney World theme park hotels when word spread that a housekeeper had cleverly moved Disney souvenir toys around in a guest’s room to make the youngsters staying there convinced the toys had come alive while they were away at the park. This book is aimed at spreading that same type of thinking. The manicurist who not only opened the car door for her patrons, but also started their ignition no doubt left her customers with a story to tell. This is a story-building manual.

Stories have a viral effect. They unfold and spread very differently than the daily news. They broadcast more like rumors than reports. The value of such virus-like

transmission is the way they swirl into the heart and thus lasso customers into their fold. The tale told by a friend is a far more powerful instrument for inviting customer devotion than the best ad or cleverest sales pitch.

The venue for take-their-breath-away service is not limited to those organizations whose names we can all drop. It is also the mailroom that dressed employees in costumes once a week, or the information technology department that built their service experience around the Road Runner cartoon character. It is the accounting firm that had partners wear Superman T-shirts under their business suits and to “think Superman” when meeting with clients. The tapestry of imaginative service spans the space from the wacky to the weird, from the silly to the sublime. The thread linking them all is an unmistakable quest for an experience that customers value, remember, and remark favorably about.

The need is clear—it is time for units and organizations to reignite the flame of customer experience. It is a conclusion heard from click-and-brick retailers, financial organizations, healthcare companies, restaurant companies, air carriers, and even non-profits coast to coast and, indeed, around the globe. Customer service is long overdue a wake-up call.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Customer service has been on a roller-coaster ride for the last 20 years. In the mid-1980s, the buzzword was “customer satisfaction.” Winners worked hard to understand and meet customer needs. Satisfaction was the brass ring of choice, and the corporate drumbeat began its roll. Banners, bands, and banter told employees to start focusing on satisfying the customer. After all, the customer was always right.

In the 1990s, the customer service bar got raised. As quality initiatives began to impact product quality, simply satisfying the customer was viewed as nothing more than the price of admission in the game to win the customer. The real winners focused on customer loyalty and retention. The first wave of change, punctuated by Disney and Nordstrom stories along with words like “wowing,” “outrageous,” and “raving fans,” characterized a new emphasis on loyalty and retention. It came replete with graphs and numbers that keyed off of the lifetime worth of a customer. The motto became “Keep the customer for life and your bottom line will be the envy of the industry.” Names like Carl Sewell, Frederick Reichheld, Ron Zemke, Leonard Berry, and Earl Sasser were the important prophets in the customer loyalty emphasis.

Toward the end of the 1990s, customer loyalty got a new wrinkle: customized service. The development of data-mining technology enabled organizations to gain and retain large amounts of information about the customer—not just demographics and financial information, but buying preferences and behavior. This enabled organizations to focus on customized (or as one popular business evangelist put it, “customerized”) service. One became the key number, as in one-to-one (à la Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, Joe Pine and James Gilmore) and one size fits one (à la Gary Heil, et al.). [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and Ritz-Carlton became the exemplars. Organizations acquired the tools and software to capture more information about the customer than you’d find in a crackerjack salesperson’s little black book. The thesis was this: Make customers perceive they are your only customer and you’ll win their loyalty.

Many customers benefited greatly from all three initiatives—satisfaction, loyalty, and customization. Each has raised service quality. While customers still get lousy service more often than they would like, most would agree that service

quality is not any better overall than it was 20 years ago. This is partly because customer expectations for service have gone up, often to the chagrin of service superstars that now have new customers walk in and think, “Okay, I’ve heard about you people—now blow my mind.”

Take-their-breath-away service is about bringing a new spirit to the service world. It is intended as a practical blueprint and a courage builder for business pioneers who are unwilling to be lulled into complacency by the same old, same old. This book is designed to be your periscope for envisioning the future and a guidebook to ready you for the trip from here to there. It is a workbook—one aimed at being more edgy than conventional, more vivacious than staid, more sensible than scholarly—and a book much more about practice than philosophy.

THE FINANCIAL PAYOFF OF IMAGINATIVE SERVICE IN A TIGHT ECONOMY

Delight your customer! Exceed your clients’ expectations! Provide value-added service! These phrases have been the mantras of customer-service gurus for a long time. Such a focus on delivering more has no doubt raised the quality of service for many organizations. But, what’s an organization to do when the budget-cutting ax is loosed and tight profit margins get even tighter? How does an organization avoid sending a very mixed message by telling the front line to wow their customers in the morning and announcing staff cutbacks and expense reductions in the afternoon? How do you add value when there are no more resources to fund the addition? In a phrase: imaginative service! The notion that exceptional customer service must cost more is pure myth.

Imaginative service is different from exceeding customer expectations. Ask customers what actions would be value

added and they will focus on taking the expected experience to a higher level: “They gave me more than I anticipated.” It’s the upgrade, the extra helping, the complimentary dessert, the baker’s dozen. But, imaginative service is not about addition, it’s about creation. When service people are asked to give more, they think to themselves, “I am already doing the best I can.” But, if they are asked to pleasantly surprise more customers, they feel less like worker bees and more like fireflies. If employees are asked to create a big customer smile instead of just working harder or faster, they suddenly feel a part of an adventure.

Ask employees to give better customer service and they will think of chores, tasks, and duty. But, make a request for imaginative service and you will find employees thinking about Ms. Jones or Mr. Smith—a shift from “all those customers” to “this customer.” When employees get to create, not just perform, they feel prized and respected. When they are a part of an organization pursuing devoted customers, not just satisfied customers, employees extract enthusiasm and excellence from a growing reservoir of pride. Just ask a Southwest, Disney, Zappos.com, or Lexus dealership employee what they think about their job and you will get a smiling “it’s awesome,” not a shrugging “it’s alright.”

Imaginative service is sourced in joy and fun. It comes from the same part of the soul that plans a prank, organizes a party, or does a favor for a friend. When that part is used regularly, it raises self-esteem, increases resilience, and improves morale. Take a look at *Fortune* magazine’s annual “100 Best Companies in America to Work For”—Nordstrom, Marriott, eBay, Zappos.com, Container Store, Wegman’s Markets, FedEx, and the like—and you will find they serve their customers a large plateful of imaginative service. They also boast the lowest turnover (a cost saver), the best recruits (an investment), the highest productivity (another

positive hit to the balance sheet), and the greatest profits. Companies in the top 20 percent of the highly revered American Customer Satisfaction Index outperformed the Dow Jones industrial average by 93 percent, the S&P 500 by 201 percent, and the NASDAQ by 355 percent. These companies yielded an average return of 40 percent.[1](#)

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

This book is divided into two sections. Part One outlines 12 strategies for creating take-their-breath-away service. Each is fundamentally different, with its own unique set of principles and tactics. The explanation of each strategy will contain several tactics plus a host of examples aimed at making the strategy more understandable and implementation more practical.

Part Two focuses on how to select and implement one of the 12 strategies. Knowing about a strategy is not adequate; it must be put into practice to yield the rewards it embodies. This section is aimed at providing a blueprint for implementation. The sequence used in implementing this blueprint is important; a comprehensive approach to implementing the blueprint is vital. Pick and choose pieces of the blueprint at your own peril.

Half-baked in the world of imaginative service comes out raw, not rare.

We believe all service providers—those serving external customers and those serving internal colleagues—have the capacity to deliver take-their-breath-away service. And, we believe inventive service can be a consistent offering, rather than just an inadvertent or intermittent incident. This book is dedicated to that belief. Scan the book in a hurry or read it word for word. Read it in any direction; start anywhere. What matters most is that you do something with what you learn. Make a vow to start with your very next customer. Ignore the “we’ve always done it that way” past, elevate your intention to a higher plane, and simply make it happen.

“Take their breath away” is about a quest for being remarkable. “Remarkable takes originality, passion, guts,

and daring,” wrote Seth Godin in his best-selling book *The Purple Cow*. “Not just because going through life with passion and guts beats the alternative (which it does), but because it’s the only way to be successful. Today, the one sure way to fail is to be boring. Your one chance for success is to be remarkable.”²

Take-their-breath-away service requires an obvious display of passion—a focused zeal that touches as it contributes. We all know that passion is contagious. People smile at you and what do you do? You smile back. A stranger waves and you acknowledge their greeting. Passion is a way of retaliating against a challenging, difficult, and often indifferent world. The late comedian George Carlin wrote, “Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but by the number of moments that take our breath away.” So go take your customers’ breath away.

Two requests before you do. First, please don’t save this book. This is not a reference work. You are not going back to pull it off the shelf to check a formula, a quote, or a reference. So, give the thing away. Pick out the soul you think most needs it and pass the book on. No fanfare, no cute or caustic note, just simply say, “I liked this book and I thought you might as well.”

Second, let us know what you think. You can find additional tools and support materials as well as our contact information on our Web site, www.taketheirbreathaway.com. It was our goal to create a quick read, a “single flight” tome that people could use immediately to start something with their customers. We hope that we have succeeded and that it will make a difference to you and your customer. The last page contains all the information you need to correspond with us. And we do need your feedback.

—Chip R. Bell, Lake Oconee, Georgia, and John R. Patterson,
Atlanta, Georgia

PART ONE

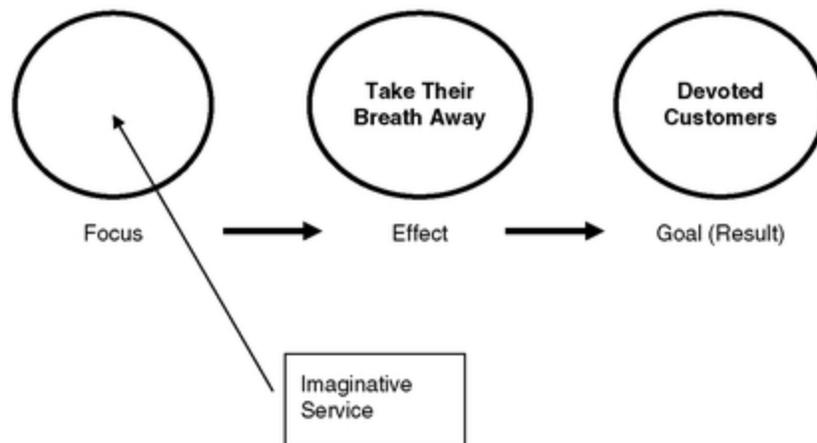


Twelve Take-Their-Breath-Away Strategies

What is it that makes people pay four bucks for a cup of coffee at Starbucks, hundreds of dollars to watch the Green Bay Packers play in subzero weather, or \$20,000 to be placed on a waiting list for a Harley-Davidson motorcycle? The answer lies way beyond customer loyalty. These brands generate a devotion in their customers. How? By giving them an experience that isn't limited to coffee, football, or motorcycles. To be sure, your unit or organization may not be selling a fragrant cup of steaming java, the legend of Vince Lombardi, or the freedom of the open road. But it is certainly possible to develop unique, customer-endearing practices that create a powerful experience and lead to a devoted customer base.

Customers who are devoted to your unit or organization act substantially different than the customers who are simply loyal. Devoted customers not only forgive you when you err, they help you correct what caused the mistake. They don't just recommend you; they assertively insist their friends do business with you. They vehemently defend you when others are critical. Even if the reason for the criticism is accurate, they quickly dismiss it as an aberration or an exception.

Figure I.1 The Link



But there is even more to devotion. Some devoted customers of Harley-Davidson tattoo the company logo on their bodies. Devoted guests of Ritz-Carlton Hotels wear their logo-ed clothes and have Ritz-Carlton cobalt blue accessories in their home. Those connections become a part of the customer's identity and life expression.

The title of this book *Take Their Breath Away: How Imaginative Service Creates Devoted Customers* provides the structure for achieving the all-important goal of customer devotion ([Figure I.1](#)). In Part One, we will explore 12 strategies that help you deliver the kind of imaginative service that causes customers to be moved, motivated, and deputized as advocates. In each case, the idea is to create such an experience that it allures or draws the customer back time and time again.

Focusing on the delivery of imaginative service leads customers to having an experience that takes their breath away. The more frequently they get this effect, the more likely they will become devoted customers. And the unit or organization that took their breath away now reaps the rewards of customers who are more than simply loyal.