

# Revenge of the Customer:

Just Respond  
and Say “Yes”

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“The answer’s yes...now what’s the question?” Customer service doesn’t get any more basic than this, unless answering the phone (and responding) is a challenge!

It’s been a long time since I’ve ranted and raved about customer service. And just when I thought I should refrain, echo’s of management guru Tom Peters’ admonishments that it’s our patriotic duty to rant and rave kept ringing through my head. Name names, he would say. Demand that companies treat us better. Don’t accept shoddy service. Our companies can’t compete globally if we don’t beat on them locally!

I’ll get to my personal customer service story along with some concrete recommendations and resources in a minute. But first...

I had the pleasure of attending John DiJulius’s customer service workshop a few weeks ago, where I picked up the opening line of this column. DiJulius, author of *Secret Service: Hidden Systems That Deliver Unforgettable Customer Service*, also hates the word “no” and strongly suggests it be eliminated from the customer service vocabulary. I couldn’t agree more. And he’s seeing resurgence in interest in improving service now that companies have optimized about as much as they can. I’m seeing a similar trend among the 10,000 executives we communicate with on a regular basis.

Witness what’s going on with Dell. The good news is they saw it coming and were already responding by the time the mainstream business press picked up on the story. We were at Dell in May with a group of growth company executives where they outlined their plan to spend \$150 million to fix their customer service issues – issues as basic as letting a customer return a product or get a problem resolved in one phone call vs. several.

These basic initiatives have eliminated over two million calls per quarter and their ACSI scores jumped 5 points from 72 to 78 vs. Apples’ industry leading score of 83, second quarter of 2006. As we’ve witnessed Michael Dell admit himself, Dell had simply gone too far in pushing productivity vs. serving customers. And the solutions have been as simple as slowing down and helping customers resolve their problems.

Which brings me to my story. We moved to new offices this summer and figured we would bring along our phone service. It seems a certain major telco (hint – first three letters match my name) couldn’t master even the basics of answering their phone in a timely manner or scheduling an appointment they could keep. After six missed

appointments and hours each time on the phone trying to find out why they didn't show up, my team gave up and we called their wireless counterpart that goes by the same name.

Yes, we've gone completely wireless in the office. And the customer service experience couldn't have been more different. It still took quite a while to get lines transferred over, again, because the land line firm kept making the most basic mistakes. However, Steve Thompson, a front line supervisor for the wireless firm, gave us his personal cell phone number and actually followed-up with us proactively to let us know how our situation was getting resolved. Wow!! Just the basics of being polite and helpful with an attitude dedicated to finding the "yes."

To understand how powerful the basics can be in driving your company's success, track down the Harvard Business School case study on Commerce Bank, authored by Francis Frei, the new guru on service excellence ([www.hbsp.harvard.edu](http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu)). At the risk of oversimplifying the case, Commerce Bank is making a killing providing outstanding service using a simple interview technique to identify the right employees and a simpler paper an pencil exercise to get new employees to make eye contact with customers (they are to note the color of a customer's eyes – try it – you really have to look into someone's eyes more closely to catch the color!).

I love simplicity like this. And it comes back to paying attention to the customer. Another basic is having someone welcome people on your website. Otherwise, it's like having a store front with no people to welcome the customers. Go to Rackspace's website ([www.rackspace.com](http://www.rackspace.com)) and see how they handle this internally. Through their "Fanatical Support" promise (click on the link and study what they say and do), they've become the dominate player in the hosted server market in five short years. One key? No automated attendants and a policy to answer phones within three rings.

Smaller firms, like my company Gazelles, can offer a similar web-greeter service via firms like LiveAdmins.com. Our customers seem to love the personal attention and guidance provided by these web greeters.

And to make sure the basics of responding and finding ways to say "yes" are executed at Rackspace, they've instituted a Jim Collins-defined catalytic mechanism – a service guarantee that has real teeth and financial pain associated with failure. Travelocity has instituted a similar guarantee ([www.travelocity.com/guarantee](http://www.travelocity.com/guarantee)) and has seen booked travel revenues jump 59%, including non-air transactions jumping 90% over 2005. Spend \$6 and download a copy of Collins' HBR article entitled "Turning Goals into Results: The Power of Catalytic Mechanisms" from [www.hbr.com](http://www.hbr.com) and figure out how to institute this in your firm.

While you're out searching the web, stop in at [www.johndijulius.com](http://www.johndijulius.com) and take a look at several of DiJulius's concisely written articles, including the one that explains which 27 store restaurant chain adopted the "the answer's yes..." brand promise. And I've included a sidebar of his 10 Commandments to World Class Secret Service.

Answer your phones and website; get back to people with straight answers as quick as possible; find a way to say “yes” without giving the store away; and institute a catalytic mechanism to make it happen consistently – its time to review the basics inside your organization.

The following are the 10 Commandments that all World-Class Organizations excel at;

## **X Commandments to World Class Secret Service**

- I. Service Brand Promise**  
An inspiration service vision that instills the service passion in all your employees
- II. Servant's Culture**  
Attract, hire and retain only the people who have the Service DNA
- III. Non-Negotiable Secret Service Systems**  
Minimum service standards everyone must follow
- IV. Anticipate Service Defects & Above & Beyond Opportunities**  
Company wide awareness of what to avoid and when & how to be a hero
- V. Be Zero Risk**  
No hassle problem-solving
- VI. Train-Train-Train, On-going & Next Generation**  
Standardized, consistent training for new & existing employees
- VII. Master the Norm Factor**  
Profiling customers so all employees recognize and make each one feel like a VIP & the ability to constantly distinguish between New, Returning & VIP
- VIII. World Class in Team/Guest/Community/Home**  
Walk the talk in all areas of one's life
- IX. Daily Pre-shift Huddles**  
Mandatory 5-minute daily communication huddles to ensure common and clear vision & goals
- X. Daily Pre-shift Huddles**  
Constant awareness by recognizing & celebrating your success stories