



TRANSACTIONS

DELIVERING AN
UNFORGETTABLE
CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

CARRIE PERRIEN SMITH

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A Publisher Driven
by Vision and Purpose

Transactions: Delivering an Unforgettable Customer Experience

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Introduction

We can all benefit from stronger business relationships. When we run a company or serve as a sales professional, we invest time and money to bring customers into our life the first time. Not everyone's business consists of repeat customers but at the very least, their client base should include referrals for new clients. Promotion is expensive and time consuming. What if you could reduce the amount of advertising and marketing expense that is focused on getting new customers? What would that be worth to you in time and money?

Maybe you don't own a company and your life is devoted to serving a company or non-profit organization. You should still be in the business of marketing YOU. Regardless of where you are in life, everyone can benefit from marketing themselves personally and professionally. Would it make your job easier if everything you needed was a phone call away? What if someone called you the minute your next step in your career opened up and you were the first person they thought of because of your character, commitment to customer service, and work ethic?

Those are just some of the benefits of building a network

of strong business relationships through extraordinary and unexpected acts of customer service. That's why this book is important to your future.

Transactions: Delivering an Unforgettable Customer Experience is just a section from my latest book on business relationships called *Currency: Striking Networking Gold In a Relationship Economy*. The book is devoted to building lifelong business relationships that turns the people in life into raving fans of you.

Go get 'em Tiger!
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CHAPTER 1

Understanding Who Your Customer Is

A U.S. Small Business Administration study found that customers stayed with companies where they felt valued. Another study found that a 5 percent reduction in customer attrition can result in a 25 percent to 125 percent increase in sales. Quality business relationships increase your profit through happier customers and employees.

The relationship is the currency in today's rapidly changing and competitive business climate. By building a series of meaningful transactions, you can create long-term business relationships that turn your clients into your marketing and sales force. It's nice to have friends but it's priceless to have fans who rave about your company to their friends.

This chapter kicks off the topic of delivering an unforgettable customer experience so we forge a lifelong business relationship with our customers. We spend a lot of time and money getting customers in the door for the first time. That investment comes in the form of

advertising, sales commissions, and marketing support. It costs five times as much to get a new customer as to keep an existing customer. Successful businesses that create customers for life can reduce the amount of focus on their marketing effort if they invest in customer retention.

The American Management Association says that only 65 percent of customers buy again where they bought before. Further, Ronald C. Goldstein, a professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business says that 40 percent of customers leave firms because of poor service. Goldstein says that is why people switch brands and most never tell the company.

Creating loyal customers is a great way to market your business. A *Fortune* magazine survey revealed that a satisfied customer tells 9 people. On the other hand, 85 percent of dissatisfied customers tell 9 people but 13 percent of dissatisfied customers tell 20 people.

Companies lose an average of 10 percent of their customers each year. Customers switch businesses for many reasons. A Small Business Administration survey revealed why customers leave. Get this – only 9 percent of customers left a business because of price. Only 14 percent who left were dissatisfied with the product. Over 68 percent of customers left because they perceived that the business' staff didn't care. Ouch!

Paying attention to your customers is more than courtesy and common sense. It contributes to keeping customers from leaving and taking their business to your competitors.

Internal/External Customers

We're in the business of serving customers. When you think of customers, you probably think of people who buy a product or service. That's true but we serve many more customers than that. We have two types of customers:

- **External customers** may include people who benefit from our product or service, whether or not they buy it. They are people who are outside our organization. If you work in a company, they may be the people you serve outside your department. For a non-profit, they are the needy served by the organization. For a human resources manager, the customer could be a person interviewing for a job in the company.
- **Internal customers** are sometimes the forgotten customers. They include the people inside our department, family, or non-profit organizations like:

People we support

Supervisors

Peers and coworkers

People who support us

Donors

Volunteers

Our spouse, children, or even pets

Get to know your customers better. You probably support people within your company who aren't in your department – schedule a meeting with them to find out what needs they have and see if you are serving them adequately. Find out what changes they see in the

business so you can be a partner in their success. When we look at the people we support inside our companies as customers instead just people in other departments, it changes the anatomy of the relationship. If your paycheck truly depended on how well *they think* you're supporting them, you bet you'd make sure you exceeded their expectations. I run a company and my customers vote with future business on how well I'm taking care of their needs. When I lose a client, it's because I didn't assess and serve their needs properly.

Complete the customer identification exercise on pages 6 and 7. A customer service transaction is an important component of a relationship. As you can see in the exercise, every customer transaction is a give-and-take relationship. For example, if your customer buys a product or service from you, you need repeat business and payment. If you serve your employees, you also need their loyalty and dedication.

Customer Service Versus an Extraordinary Customer Experience

The key to a great customer experience is knowing what our customers – internal or external – expect. If you really want to know what your customers want, ask them. The biggest mistake in customer service program design is using criteria that we measure ourselves by based on how *WE* define great customer service. If you really want to deliver a great customer experience, focus on what *YOUR CUSTOMERS* want and need.

You've heard of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. To deliver a great customer experience, you should follow the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as they want to be done unto! It's a humorous approach with a very serious undertone.

Customer service is what our customers think it is.

Customers have wants and needs. Meet those and you have provided good customer service. However, customers have something else too – desires. They don't always speak the desires of their heart. If you can discover and deliver service that addresses the desires of their heart, you are on your way to creating an exceptional customer experience. Anyone is capable of delivering good customer service. Only a few can deliver an extraordinary customer experience.

Once we know what our customers expect from us, we can redefine how we deliver and measure our results. Once we align what we deliver with what our customers want, we all benefit. Customers reward exceptional customer service many ways and they often vote with their dollars in the form of budget increases, future sales, and raises. There are different types of rewards as well. An employee who strives to understand his customers' desires and serve them well may receive additional responsibility or promotions. Non-profits who understand what their donors really desire benefit too. They retain the donors they have but could get more donors because their existing donors told their friends how happy they were.

Identifying Your Customers

We all have customers. If you own a company, you have people who buy your products and services. If you work in a company, your customers may be your boss, peers you support in your job, or your employees who report to you. If you run a non-profit organization, your customers may be your donors, volunteers, or the people you help through your organization. If you are a parent or spouse, your customers are your family members and – silly as it sounds – pets if you have them.

Part A. Name three people you serve in your profession.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now think about your personal life. Name three people you serve.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Part B. For each person, write down one need that you fill for him or her.

Professional

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Personal

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Part C. For each of those people you named in Part A, think of one thing you need from them.

Professional

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Personal

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Part D. Of all of those customers, which is your most important customer? Why is that person your most important customer?

Part E. Name some things for each person that they need that you aren't currently providing.

Professional

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Personal

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Customer service expectations for an administrative assistant might include arriving on time for work, producing timely reports, maintaining a pleasant attitude, and keeping a neat workspace. If that administrative assistant also made sure his supervisor remembered important family birthdays and suggested gift ideas, he would be on his way to creating an extraordinary customer experience.

Focusing on the customer experience is about serving your customer's unspoken desires of their heart, but it also means addressing their needs and wants even before they have them. If the assistant built a solid business referral network for everything that he needed in his job (like office supply stores, copier companies, shipping operations, etc.), he would make his job easier. However, if his business referral network served the needs of his supervisor as well (insurance agents, investment professionals, home repair professionals, etc.) where his supervisor never had to spend time searching for those needed services, he would be on his way to an extraordinary customer experience.

CHAPTER 2

Creating Meaningful Customer Dialogue

Meaningful conversations are crucial when you meet someone new or just want to get to know them better. In this chapter, we take the meaningful conversation a step further to build a deeper relationship with our prospective or existing clients. Relationships take time and frequent contact. That requires us to concentrate on learning about the other person and being engaged and interested. They aren't just business contacts — our goal should be to treat them as friends and business partners.

One afternoon, my phone rang. It's a sales representative for a health insurance company. He obviously took the time to visit my website because he thought I employed a lot of people. Based on that criteria, he determined that I'm his target client. His company provides group insurance and two or more people in an organization make a group. Without ever talking with me, he opened up his phone conversation based on the assumptions that I employ a bunch of people. I run a professional speaker

bureau where I help organizations search out, negotiate with, and hire speakers for conferences and company meetings. The speaker is the product I carry and I sell their services and programs to my clients. Even though speaker bureaus show all these speakers on their websites, the speakers aren't employees. In fact, I outsource everything and don't currently employ anyone. I thought I was never going to convince him that I didn't employ anyone. He acted like I was lying to him. If he had opened up his cold call with some meaningful conversation, I could have saved him some time.

Interviewing your customers is a crucial investment in building an unforgettable customer experience. It literally can define your business relationships. By asking a series of meaningful questions, you gather and understand customer wants, needs, expectations, and desires of their heart. People don't always know what they want when they hire you. If you ask the right questions, you can explore the possibilities of how your relationship could unfold.

The beauty of creating meaningful customer dialogue is that you become a consultant instead of a service or product provider. Asking the right questions reduces the time you spend completing their job. It shows the customer how interested you are in them and identifies *other needs* they have beside their *perceived need*. It's really about getting the information you need to lead the relationship forward to something that is mutually beneficial.

When I worked for international retailer Wal-Mart, I worked on a video-based training program that chronicled the 23 leadership principles that Sam Walton used to build and lead the Wal-Mart organization before his death in 1992. We interviewed 50 company leaders who had worked with him. They most commonly spoke of his ability to create meaningful conversations to get ideas to correct problems and implement new ideas.

There was one fascinating phenomenon that we experienced with many of the people who had spent significant time with Sam Walton. The bulk of them were busy running the daily operations of a major retailer. We wanted to be excellent stewards of the time they'd given us, so we got right down to business. With most of them, they started out by creating rapport and asking us questions – what we did, how long we had been with the company, did we have kids? Even Rob Walton, Wal-Mart Chairman of the Board and oldest son of Sam Walton, wouldn't go any farther into the conversation until he got to know us better.

The most valuable lesson in that experience was that modeled behavior is easy to teach. Sam Walton probably didn't spend time telling all of those leaders that they should ask a series of questions. Instead, he modeled it himself, and it was such an impactful lesson that they adopted the practice.

Face Time and Revealing Questions

The first step in delivering an unforgettable customer experience is to get some face time with your customer.

Remember, customers can be internal or external and can include people we interact with in other departments or even family members. Don't attempt to create meaningful conversation over e-mail. You can try it but it loses its flexibility and impact.

With this approach, think of yourself as a consultant. My favorite question to ask my clients is, "What keeps you up at night?" That question can turn a 10-minute appointment into an hour's worth of information that can reveal how you need to proceed next with your client. You don't have to be a consultant to conduct your meaningful customer conversations with a researcher/interviewer approach.

Here is a list of questions that can reveal what the client really desires.

- **"Tell me about your company."** Learn about the history and the products or services they provide.
- **"What are your mission, vision, values, and goals?"** This reveals what they hold in high regard and what lies in their future.
- **"What qualities do you hold dear?"** This gives you an idea of what is in their heart.
- **"What is most important to you?"** What someone values tells you a lot about where they spend their money – quality, product, or service?
- **"What do you enjoy doing for fun?"** This question can be the gateway to discovering their passion. Do they love family time? Are they adventurous risk-takers?

- **“What is your budget?”** This helps me determine realistic solutions. If they have a tiny budget that I couldn’t possibly work within, it might be a short conversation. However, I could help them understand what a realistic budget might be and point them to a viable solution.
- **“What will you use the product, service, or information for?”** They may have a use in mind but you can provide them related solutions and benefits that you could provide for a bit more money.
- **“Is there anything I can do for you?”** When you are engaged in meaningful customer dialogue, you have to show that you aren’t just there to sell them something or benefit yourself. The nature of the interview will reveal many of the customer’s needs. However, vocalizing your willingness to help them reveals your genuine interest.
- **“What colors do you like?”** This isn’t always appropriate but when it comes to purchases such as cars, clothing, and company branding materials such as logos and stationary, it points you in the direction you should go.

Here is an example of how this works. Say I’m a graphic designer meeting with a home improvement company owner for the first time who wants a new logo and some letterhead. Using this dialogue, I get ideas for images that his customer would be attracted to while embodying what he holds dear. By asking how the logo will be used, I find

out that he'll want to put the logo on tape measures, yardsticks, and mugs soon. Right now, he just wants some stationary. The logo must be designed in such a way that it will look good in all those uses. He's a new business without a big budget. That tells me how many hours I have to deliver artwork to him. He could get a more elaborate solution with a bigger budget but my goal is to get him a suitable solution within the budget he has. A small budget means that he won't need fancy full-color printing. Something that he can produce in one or two colors is more suitable. When I know what his favorite colors are, I learn what colors would be suitable to suggest for the logo and stationary.

Here is where I really add value. With my supplier contacts, I can place an order for those tape measures and mugs so he can be ready for the upcoming home builders show (I win too because I'll make an additional commission on that sale). In the process of learning about his company, I learn that he could benefit from some networking groups so I pass that information on to him. I also discover that he has a heart for serving needy families and I connect him with a volunteer opportunity with Rebuilding Together which holds Rebuilding Days – annual events focused on repairing homes for people who own their home but can't afford necessary repairs. While he can't afford to be a cash sponsor yet, he finds that he can volunteer his time and meet other people with the same passion.

See how that works? I get the information I need so that I can

serve him better. In the process, I've demonstrated that I value his relationship and can be a valuable resource to him as well. That is the value of meaningful customer dialogue to delivering the unforgettable customer experience.

Raise the Bar on Customer Service

Properly executed, phenomenal customer service will help you provide a memorable, pleasant purchasing experience to your customer. One of the best things about visiting Texas is the consistently high level of customer service. I didn't notice it or really appreciate it when I lived in the Dallas area, but I notice it now on my visits there.

Part of the contrast that I notice in Northwest Arkansas, my home since 1993, is largely due to our explosive growth and low unemployment rate. Our local companies can barely keep their companies staffed, let alone hire the ideal employees.

"To me, there are different levels of customer service. Being great at customer service is about choosing to deliver great at customer service AND being willing to serve others. Being intuitive at customer service requires listening to and engaging in another person's interests," says my friend and fellow businessperson, Theresa Thompson.

Here are five methods to raise the bar on your customer service and differentiate your business from your competitors.

- **Measure and track customer service.** You can't improve anything if you don't measure your processes. These measurements can become benchmarks for taking your customer service to the next level. Before and during the sale or project, you can track processes like length of time to complete a customer's order; length of time a customer waits on hold; or number of return customers. However, customer satisfaction after the sale is difficult to track if you don't follow up. Call your customers within

seven days of the sale or project completion to rate their level of customer satisfaction and thank them for their business. Ask them if they were happy with their purchase. Assure them you'd like to be their first choice next time. Find out if there is a service or product that you don't offer now that you should. Ask them to refer you the next time someone they know needs to same product or service. If you have a referral bonus program, this is an excellent time to mention it.

- **Understand what your customers consider phenomenal customer service.** Customers learn quickly what kind of customer service to expect. If they receive amazing customer service from you the first time, they will expect that same customer service experience every time they do business with you. "What you do is not nearly as important as doing what you do the same way, each and every time," comments Michael Gerber in *The E Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It*. Remember, customer service is what *your customer* thinks it is, not what *you* think it is. Here is the customer service philosophy of Kerry Jensen of the Bentonville/Bella Vista Chamber of Commerce in Bentonville, Arkansas: "The answer is yes. How may I help you?" What would your customers think if you adopted that same philosophy?
- **Make doing business with you convenient for them.** Can you offer personalized services or take your product or service to your customer instead of having them come to your office? Mary Kay consultants have been doing this for years but many other businesses can do it as well. Jan Lancaster, a mortgage loan originator had a busy customer whose only available opportunity to do her loan paperwork was while she was getting a manicure. Jan met her at the beauty salon and filled out the necessary paperwork. What is more inconvenient than packing up your computer to take it in for repair? Matt Worley of Matt

the Computer Guy designed his business to make service calls at his customer's homes so they don't have to take their computer into a shop for repair. Can you provide such a personalized convenience with any of the components of your business?

- **Understand that creating customers for life is critical to your promotional strategy.** “When you strip away all the executional detail, marketing serves two fundamental, critical business purposes: getting customers and keeping them,” comment Kristin and Steven Ferguson, of KS Ferguson and Company, Inc. “Companies employ the basic marketing tools of advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, and public relations to help get customers. But in the everyday hubbub of focusing on customer acquisition, it is easy to lose sight of the business need to actively retain customers. Here is the basic business truth: it's usually cheaper to keep the current customers we have than to find new customers. The promise of service, as in ‘products and services,’ is a big part of what companies offer as their business proposition. They employ marketing tools in various combinations to communicate that point — as a promise — when acquiring customers. The delivery of service, though, is what we need to do to keep them.”
- **Power up your knowledge and problem-solving ability.** Kristen and Steven Ferguson add, “Companies keep customers by providing quality products, of course, coupled with impeccable service — by serving customers' needs and wants. But there's more to it! Service isn't just courtesy and helpfulness — it's also solving a problem. If there isn't a problem (no matter how small or trivial), there is no customer at the door. If we solve their problem, we've served them and they will show their appreciation.” It is as crucial for the entire staff to be knowledgeable and efficient as it is to be polite and prompt. It doesn't matter how nice they were, if they didn't provide what we needed in the manner we expected, they failed at customer service.

CHAPTER 3

The Value of the F Word

It was the morning of the June fund-raiser our team had prepared for all year – the Cancer Road Challenge Poker Run and Motorcycle Show. It was the fifth year I had chaired the charity motorcycle event and the unthinkable happened – it rained. It wasn't just a little rain either. It came down in buckets from 7:45 a.m. and continued until 2:00 p.m. No lightening or wind – just the most rain I'd seen in years.

We had prepared for 500 bikes. It would be our biggest crowd ever and we were ready. However, rain is the kiss of death for a motorcycle event regardless of how much bikers love the cause. Even though we had always heavily marketed to the true biker because they still show up when it rains, a huge number of motorcycle enthusiasts stay home on a rainy day.

We still had 125 bikes show up early for registration even though heavy rain was predicted. In a poker run, participants ride the route and draw cards for points at stops along the route. We had a specified window of time

for bikes to depart: they could leave any time between 7:30 and 10:00 a.m. A number of them got out before the rain started. The rest just hung around, bid on silent auction items, and ate breakfast waiting for the rain to stop. Some bikers are more experienced than others are and have logged many hours riding in the rain. Many bikers don't want to take the risk that wet pavement and reduced visibility poses, and I'm glad they chose to wait out the rain. Our participants' safety was important to us. As it neared 10:00 with radar still showing more rain coming our way, it looked like I had to make some unprecedented decisions.

Even though the Cancer Road Challenge was a fundraiser, we always treated it like a business. Likewise, we measured value as one of our competitive advantages. We weren't the only poker run that month or even that day. All the other poker runs raise money for great causes too. Bikers are incredibly generous but they can only be in one place at a time. Bikers vote with their presence based on the cause but also based on the value for their activity dollar.

We delivered seven things in exchange for their poker run fee: breakfast, lunch, an event T-shirt, live music, free photographs of the participants and their motorcycles, a great route in Northwest Arkansas (an area known for some of the best motorcycle routes in the country), and the chance to draw five cards for points towards a cash prize.

If the bikers couldn't get out on the route, how would they draw their cards for their points? A chance at the prize money was part of the value. How would they get that value? They could take the map and their T-shirt and ride the route some other day. They could still eat with us and enjoy the music and the vendors. They could even have their bikes photographed in the rain. They could do everything but participate in the chance at the money, and I felt that was a huge part of the value.

I had an idea. I discussed options with the key planning committee members — most of us had built this event together. I even discussed it with bikers who had been with us every year. We decided that we would allow the remaining bikers to draw their cards at the event site without going out on the route. We announced it and the crowd went wild. We were heroes.

Okay, we weren't exactly heroes in everyone's eyes. As the participants who braved the rain cruised back in with rain gear and wet poker run scoring sheets, they compared stories and talked about the number of hours they had logged on rainy rides. It was almost like they'd earned a badge of honor.

Some people were a little upset. Why weren't they given the option of not going out on the route? They considered that part of the poker run. It wasn't fair that some people didn't have to go out in the rain to compete for the same prize money. Bikers hang out in groups and they talk about all the places and events they've been to. If they

love your event, they bring back all the friends they ride with the next year. The last thing you want is one angry biker telling all his biker buddies to boycott your event.

Fundamentally, we had made a good decision. However, bikers – like every other human being – often follow their heart and not fundamentals. Also, like typical customers, they don't always tell you they are dissatisfied because they don't really like confrontation. They tell their friends and then just don't come back again.

The Inevitable Confrontation

One angry biker decided he was going to give us a piece of his mind. He started out with the guy who was collecting the score cards – one of our founding committee members. Another planning committee member gave me a heads up that there was some commotion with one of the participants. One thing about this event was that we had participants who were willing to voice their opinions and we've always valued that – even when it was uncomfortable.

Over the years, I had logged a few of those difficult confrontational conversations. I handled them because I was in charge and felt that was part of my role as a servant-leader. I thought it was also a great chance to use a conflict resolution model that I taught in my communication programs – just to make sure it worked in all situations.

This time, my angry biker was Mike and he was dripping

wet. He towered over me at 6'5" and outweighed me by 100 pounds. This was not going to be fun. I introduced myself and I opened up our dialogue with, "Hey, I hear you're upset and I wanted to visit with you." Then, I stood there and listened as did his wife who stood by as well.

As you can imagine, I was getting some harsh words. I was also getting the F Word. However, it wasn't the F Word you might imagine, but we tend to treat this F Word with equal disdain. The F Word I was getting was FEEDBACK. Yes, he was angry but he was willing to step out and tell me what was on his mind. If I was willing to engage in that difficult conversation, I had a chance to get his ideas about how he thought we should have handled it. Angry people generally have ideas on how they expect something to go. After sincerely listening to him, I had a chance to share the reasons for our decision.

Just giving him someone in charge to vent to diffused some of his anger. Once he had a chance to calm down, I explained our logic (something you can't do with an angry person). We were a committee of volunteers who had given hundreds of hours of our time planning this event and no one was more disappointed than we were. We hadn't made a perfect decision, but we made the best one we could make given the circumstances.

I then did something I don't think he was expecting: I asked him what he would have done if he were me. A bit flustered, hungry, and still damp from the ride, he didn't have any ideas but he was calmer.

Mike and his wife went home, changed into some dry clothes, and returned to eat lunch with us. Afterwards, he came up to me and he had some great feedback — IDEAS on how to handle that situation in the future. Beautiful! I wrote them down and I know we'll be implementing some of those in the future. He went from angry biker who could have killed our event by personally delivering bad press word-of-mouth — the fastest communication medium before the Internet — to someone who could be our biggest fan.

Feedback Isn't the Enemy. It's the Answer!

Why do we fear feedback? We fear it so much that we don't even want good feedback. Whenever we hear that someone has *feedback*, the hairs on the back of our neck stand up and the pit of our stomach fills with dread. Business people are constantly seeking information. We devour business magazines and surf the Internet for information. We read the latest business books from the New York Times Best Seller List. We go to trade shows and conventions. We get personal coaches. We hire consultants — a practice that I appreciate because I am a consultant that helps organizations improve their strategy and business relationships. We are constantly searching everywhere for information on how to improve our personal and professional lives. We search everywhere except the most logical place of all — our customer database.

Let's pause for just a moment and remember that you have customers regardless of where you are right now in your life. If you operate in a sales role or run a company, your customers are people who buy from you. If you work for someone, your manager is your customer. If you manage someone, that person is your customer. If you are a parent, your kids, spouse, pets, and other family members are your customers. If you work in nonprofit, the people that you serve as well as your volunteers and donors are your customers. We all serve someone, and those people will stay in our lives if we do a good job of providing a great customer experience.

Your customer database contains people who know your company in a way that no one else does. In fact, they probably know a good bit about buying your product or service because they evaluated your competitors before they decided to do business with you. They probably even know what you do best – your competitive advantage.

Our current customer database contains much of the information we need to take our companies to the next level – all we have to do is ask. Their ideas, opinions, and information hold the key to your future. You could read, experiment, and wonder for years, or you could just reach out to people who have already voted for you with their presence in your life. I guarantee they have feedback that could help you achieve your goals.

Here are some questions that you can ask, no matter what role you fill. I guarantee these will open the dialogue.

- **How well am I serving your needs now?** This is probably the hardest question to ask because it gets to the core of the good, bad, and ugly. All feedback is important. If I'm doing a good job, great. I want to know why the customer considers it great. If I'm not doing so great, I need to find out why. It might be something I can change or I might just not be the right fit to ever meet their needs. We don't always know *what we don't know*. Customer service is what *the customer* thinks it is – not what *we* think it is. If we don't ask, we don't know what their expectations are.
- **Do you have any needs that I'm not currently addressing?** If this is a business client, this could reveal a need that your company could also fill or give you ideas about a service that your company isn't currently even offering. Ask your spouse this question and you'll learn what is on his or her heart. If you are asking the donors to your non-profit organization, they might give you an idea for a donor benefit that is free for you to offer but would ensure they would continue to support you.
- **How often do you have that need?** This question will help you assess the potential for adding a new service that fills an unmet need. Maybe it's not a service you'll ever provide, but you can recommend where they can go to fill that need. Being a resource for trusted suppliers makes you invaluable to your existing customers. Your network of contacts is a highly regarded value-added service.

- **What would you say my strengths are?** This can open your eyes. We tend to overlook the things people value most about us. Marcus Buckingham in his book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, says we need to focus our attention on what we do well instead of spending all our energy trying to improve what we don't do well. The feedback that you get could reveal your competitive advantage. No matter who you are, you are competing against someone or something. You need to make sure that you know your competitive advantages in all areas of your life – even your marriage. In this day of high divorce rates, if you aren't focused on being the best spouse you can be, you risk being replaced. Gosh, that's harsh but in this day and time, too many people seem to regard all relationships as disposable whether they are customers, employees, or spouses. Every relationship is sacred and most are worth saving. Knowing your strengths and developing those into powerhouse competitive advantages will make you a hot commodity.

This will get you started. Once you ask one of those questions to break the ice, you can dig deeper and focus on asking related questions that draw more information out of your customer. The purpose is to create meaningful conversation that creates an environment for gathering feedback. Face-to-face feedback isn't easy to take but it's even harder to give so work hard to create a safe environment for your customer to provide it.

CHAPTER 4

Be a Sales Consultant

Every time I spend my money, I want the same thing — value. For many of the buying transactions I make, that means that I expect the company I'm buying from to provide advice and product knowledge as well as the right product, responsive service, and a fair price. Truly though, if a company is providing me information that I don't have to research on my own, I'm not as price-sensitive. However, I still expect the right product and responsive service. When I get all those things, I experience buyers' euphoria! Maybe if I got all those needs met with every purchase transaction, buyer's euphoria would get a little old. I think I'd still like to try it just to see. Who knows? I might turn into a great customer experience junkie. How bad could that be?

Here is my biggest pet peeve in the whole world when I make a purchase: sales people who simply fill out a sales order based on what I think I want. It infuriates me to figure out later that I was making a bad purchasing decision when the salesperson could have helped me explore different products that better suited my needs.

Let's face it; the customer isn't always right when they are making a purchase. If the customer is faced later with buyer's regret — the sinking feeling that they should have bought something different and it's too late — do you think they will purchase from the same loser salesperson who let them make a wrong decision the last time?

Here is my second biggest pet peeve: salespeople who try to sell me products I don't need or won't use. Frankly, if they asked the right questions, they would know if I actually need additional bells and whistles — at least they would know WHICH bells and whistles I could use. It becomes obvious when salespeople are more motivated by the additional sales commission instead of doing what is right for their customer.

We're All in Sales

Our everyday lives are full of sales transactions. Not all of them require selling a product or service to an official customer. In our careers, most of us had to convince an employer to hire us and later promote us. When you propose an improvement to a company process, you have to sell the idea to someone.

However, we don't just sell in our professional lives. Perhaps you had to encourage your grandma to give you just one more cookie when you were six years old. What about when a mom has to talk her baby into eating the spinach goop in a glass jar? Think about the young man who has to convince his one perfect love that she should spend the rest of her life with him. Whether you operate

in a sales role where you bear the official title of salesperson, operate your own business, or simply live life — *you are in sales*.

The shocker is that people who end up in business ownership often discover they don't want to be a salesperson. They simply throw open their doors for business and expect customers — lots of them — to flock to their doorstep. For that to happen, prospects who have a need must be educated about the business' offering and then convinced to buy.

If entrepreneurs discovered that they didn't want to be salespeople before they invested their life savings in a business, someone could stop them. Life is too short to spend it doing something you loathe. If you hate sales, don't ever go into business for yourself. You'll be miserable or you'll starve.

I'm not so naïve to assume that you love sales or you hate it. You can really, really dislike it but learn to tolerate it and succeed. Generally, this involves incorporating a process that includes knowing and believing in your product or service. To be successful in sales, the first person you have to sell on the product is yourself.

Buyers Don't Want a Salesperson. They Want a Consultant!

The Internet has become a major shopping mall. I'm convinced that it's popular because we can get all the information we need to compare products without ever

dealing with a salesperson. If salespeople looked at their role as a consultant, more people would choose a human transaction.

Shopping on the Internet isn't that easy or fast, and you don't know if you'll be ripped off. Just ask me about my miserable transaction with online camera retailer Fotoconnection.com. They pulled a "bait and switch" and then didn't send me the same products they promised (and some of what they sent didn't work). They refused to take my order back without a restocking fee and then they made it really difficult to get any of my money back after I returned the merchandise. For months, I dealt with my credit card company and the Better Business Bureau of New York. According to the multitude of stories on the feedback websites, Fotoconnection.com has cheated hundreds of other unsuspecting people too, but somehow they still get to operate. We trust people to operate fairly but when we can't touch what we're buying, there is risk involved. I would much rather purchase something I can hold in my hands before I plunk down my hard-earned cash.

Buyers want a salesperson who gets to know them and their needs. When you get into premium products, that interaction becomes even more important because the prospect likely has a million other important decisions to make. They seek out sales consultants who will advise them on the right product for their needs. Provide them with an excellent buying experience and they will tell others — and shoppers of premium products tend to hang out with other people like themselves.

Does this mean that the budget shopper doesn't expect a consultant too? If you read *The Millionaire Next Door* by Thomas Stanley, you learned that most people don't become millionaires from overspending and living lavish lifestyles. Never assume that someone who is looking for a bargain does not have great purchasing power or influence. Even if they are truly a budget shopper because they don't have a lot of money, the chances are good that they will have more purchasing power someday. Treat them like they were spending a million dollars now and they will remember you when they are ready to purchase again.

Three Simple Steps to Being a Great Sales Consultant

Even the most novice of salespeople can follow these three steps to sales consulting success.

- 1. Know your product and who best benefits from it.**
Salespeople make a living based on completed sales transactions. Ability to identify prospects and convert them into customers is how sales consultants earn their money. Product knowledge provides a salesperson a competitive edge. By knowing their product intimately, they can research what type of buyer it benefits most. Proactive sales consultants seek out leads for future customers by telling others what kind of buyer they are looking for. Let's face it, lots of people need the products we sell, but not everyone is willing or able to buy. Educate yourself on your target buyer. Most important, be willing to tell a customer

when your product isn't right for him. Buyer's regret makes for a terrible reputation for both the salesperson and the company.

- 2. Ask questions and listen for meaning and understanding.** Ask me, "Can I help you?" and I'll say, "No, thanks. I'm just looking." Ask me, "What are you shopping for today?" and I have to respond with an explanation. The first option was a close-ended question where I can respond with "yes" or "no." Ordinary salespeople use the first type of question because they are happy to lurk in the merchandise shadows waiting to pounce on a customer seeking a place to pay for their purchase. Sales consultants use the second type – the open-ended question – because it generates conversation. That conversation gives the sales consultant the information she needs to help the customer make a buying decision that best fits his needs. It also tells her which related products the customer needs to know about.
- 3. Follow up after the sale.** Smart salespeople know that happy customers are the most inexpensive source of marketing. They also know that it is easier to create a return customer than to find a new customer. Sales consultants stay in touch after the transaction so they maintain top-of-mind awareness. If you don't make contact with customers at least once each quarter, they aren't your customers anymore. Make contact periodically even if you just send them a postcard. eBay, the online auction company, sends my husband

a customer anniversary card. He has no idea what date he first became an eBay customer (or eBay junkie) but the card helps eBay maintain top-of-mind awareness with him.

Choose to Be a Sales Consultant

Whether you choose to be in a sales role for a company or you discover you have no choice but to sell because you run your own company — you can choose to be a sales consultant. Look at the sales process as a consulting opportunity, and you will view sales differently. Some of the tasks will still be less pleasant, but you will truly begin to see your role as one of helping others as you build your customer base. Here is the beautiful thing — your customers will see you as someone who can help people like them and refer them to you.

What If All Employees Learned to Sell?

Tim Cornelius is a Texas attorney and college professor. He's also an entrepreneur and life-long learner in a big way. He reads a book a day and he spends the time he's not working coming up with new ideas — at least that's how it seems to me when I visit with him. On top of that, he's an engaging, curious person. If we could bottle those characteristics and sell them, we'd make America the number entrepreneurial force in the world. For now, we just have settle for him inspiring one classroom of students at a time.

Recently, we sat down to discuss a potential collaboration and started talking about the lost art of suggestive selling.

In the online world, we might call it “up selling.” You’ve seen it if you shopped an online bookstore. “Readers who bought this book also bought this book.” One click on a hyperlink and you’re launched to the description of the suggested book. It’s impulse marketing at its best.

In the last few years, we’ve witnessed the disappearance of the sales clerk from the big box retailers. In the retail world, it’s about making a store easy to shop with all the merchandise replenished at just the perfect time and pushing huge amounts of merchandise out the front door – hopefully through the checkout lines. Shoppers like the self-service format and about all a human being is needed for is to unload the trucks, put the merchandise on the shelf, and ring up the purchases. Some of that is even automated these days. There are only a handful of people in the store that are taught real product knowledge. Department managers only communicate with the people who work in their department. The rest of their time is spent walking around gazing at their handheld inventory devices and making sure the department is stocked.

Tim posed the question, “What if we taught big-box retail employees simple sales techniques?” At first, it seemed alien. On most of my shopping trips, if I need an employee’s help, I have to hunt them down like small woodlands creatures and trap them in a corner. The last encounter I had with a sales clerk who actually engaged with me was when I was picking out a new laptop computer. He asked me if I had the typical additional accessories – jump drive, laptop bag, etc. When it came

time to offer me the obligatory sales pitch about extended warranties, he didn't just ask me and move on after I quickly answered "no." He told me about how he had benefited from his when he dropped his laptop recently. I think extended warranties are the biggest rip-off ever but he almost had me convinced to buy one. When we were done, he mentioned that he sold more warranties than anyone else did in his store. While he wasn't paid a commission for the extended warranty sales, his sales numbers were tracked and he was recognized for his accomplishments.

So back to Tim's question, "What if we taught big-box retail employees simple sales techniques?" Tim told me about watching his uncle sell when he owned a grocery store. His uncle would spend hours out on the sales floor engaging with customers and calling their attention to merchandise like the fresh produce. He remembered his uncle stopping a woman and telling her about how wonderful those fresh peas were at dinner last night. He thought her family would enjoy them. Sure enough, she took some home that day.

What if every sales floor employee was taught sales techniques? They are just taught to fill orders. What if they were encouraged to give advice or talk about complementary products? What if they knew the features and benefits of every product in their department? I'd be happy sometimes if they just knew what the products were used for. If every employee spoke to customers during their shift and could convince just 10 customers to

buy a \$10 companion product for things they were already buying, what kind of difference would that make to the company's bottom line? \$10 is nothing if you work in the electronics department. I thought Tim's question was a compelling one.

CHAPTER 5

Pit Bull Follow-up

Keeping a personal touch in an electronic, number-driven world is no easy feat. A key part of creating a great customer experience lies in the ability to implement a consistent strategy for keeping in touch with the people in our lives. Our society has created opportunities where we don't have to leave the house for our jobs and social interaction. I have more technology in my home office today than I did at my first job out of college and I worked for a technology company. The Internet allows us to work anytime with anyone around the globe. We can space on social networking sites so we can reveal the details of our lives without ever making personal contact with anyone. Our lives are busy and we are bombarded with hundreds of marketing messages each day and more information than we can possibly comprehend.

This chapter is devoted to ways to keep in touch so you don't waste the new acquaintances that come your way. Follow-up is really the art of making contact in frequent and meaningful ways so you can build lifelong relationships. These deeper relationships enable us to

build trust and familiarity by modeling values and character. People are more likely to refer people they know and trust.

Keep in Touch with Customers

If you don't contact your customers at least once a quarter, they aren't really your customers anymore. The old saying that "absence makes the heart grow fonder" doesn't apply to your customer base. Many things can happen over the months — mostly new relationships. We live in a relationship-driven economy. You can get suitable products, customer service, and prices anywhere in most cases. However, the folks you most want to do business with don't have time to sort through all the choices. Furthermore, they want someone who is going to make them feel valued and special. Nothing does that like a well-maintained relationship.

This doesn't apply just to customers. Imagine if you only contacted your friends when you needed something. How popular and genuine would you be? Would you have those friends long? All relationships need frequent attention. A consistent follow-up plan is the key to maintaining top-of-mind awareness with all the people in our life. We want to make sure that people remember us when that next sales or career opportunity comes along. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only 5 percent of people obtain jobs through the open job market compared to 48 percent who attain their positions through referrals.

Keeping in contact with your customers gives you the

chance to show how much you care about them. Just because they used your company once does not mean they will remember you when they have the need again later. It gives you the opportunity to educate your clients on new products or industry information. A phone call, e-mail, or simple direct mail piece is easy and inexpensive. Most important, it provides real value in helping you maintain that all-important top-of-mind awareness.

Find Places to Make Frequent Contact

Most of us have an opportunity to join organizations that have frequent meetings. This is a great place to network for new contacts. Networking is a great way to develop prospects and market your business. Most powerful of all, though, is the way that networking enables you to build relationships, learn about others through meaningful conversation, and help other people by providing nice, warm, gift-wrapped leads. It's interesting that people who called me on January 2 were people that I had made contact with during the previous October, November, and December. I had maintained top-of-mind awareness because I stayed in the networking game all year.

As I sat at the first official networking event of the year, I couldn't believe the number of people who said they resolved to do more networking. They realized that it was important to their business and they were going to start that day. My expertise is networking but I was still surprised. They spoke of it as seriously as they would if they were about to try to stop smoking after years of bitter attempts

to quit. The networking group had spiked in size similar to the way the fitness center attendance increases in January.

Depending on your current professional situation or objective, the networking location of choice will vary. If you work for a large company, you may have social/professional organizations within your company such as women's affinity groups. You may choose to join a professional association that serves your industry. You might even choose to volunteer your time on a board that meets frequently so you can network with people who are interested in the same thing but come from different walks of life. If you are networking for sales contacts, you might choose to join a professional association that serves the needs and interests of the type of customer within your target market. Whatever you choose, just pick an activity that gives your regular opportunities to see the same people so you can build deeper relationships. If the group is healthy and dynamic, there will always be new people joining as well. This provides the best of both worlds — old relationships and new.

Frequent contact is key to maintaining relationships. Even among people who I hold in high regard, I'm surprised at how frequently we need to maintain contact because we experience changes in our lives and businesses. I sometimes forget to tell even my oldest friends about new services or products in my business just because I thought they already knew. Make time to stay in contact and learn about changes in the lives of the people you know.

Find Reasons to Make Contact

As you become more skilled at networking, you will create the need to follow up. Finding creative reasons to follow up will allow you to maintain top-of-mind awareness without feeling like a pest. It doesn't take long to make a quick phone call, leave a friendly voice mail, or send an e-mail. Alternate between at least two means of communication (e-mail and voice mail for instance) because some people prefer one or the other. Just do something besides ask, "So are you ready to purchase from me yet?"

Here are some typical follow-up scenarios that many of us can use regardless of what stage we are in professionally.

Leads for Potential Clients. What is your plan for following up when someone gives you a lead for a potential new client? If you don't have one, you should. Follow-up is a key indicator of extraordinary customer service, and you must possess a sense of urgency. If someone gives you a lead, follow up within 24 to 48 hours. As soon as you contact the lead, follow up with the person who gave you the lead to give them an update.

If you are giving a lead to someone and you don't hear anything, follow up on that lead. Even though you aren't responsible for babysitting leads you give, your reputation as a reliable source of contacts could be on the line.

After Meeting Someone New. You have many opportunities to meet new people and the activity of daily

life can cloud their memory. Giving new acquaintances a call, sending them an e-mail, or dropping them a handwritten note is a perfect way to help them remember who you are. It also gives you another chance to remind them about your business and who a good potential client is. If you talk with them over the phone or in person, ask them what kinds of leads they need. Make sure you asked enough questions to build your knowledge about that new contact so you can find many creative reasons to follow up later.

After a Trade Show or Convention. If your business depends on trade show or convention exposure, you understand how demanding it is. Booths, entry fees, and travel are major expenses alone. But then there is the number of working days devoted to getting ready, traveling to and from the event, and the long days devoted to on-site presence. Return on investment is critical.

You can create both passive and active exposure for your organization. The booth itself is passive exposure. Just because someone talked with you or picked up your brochure doesn't mean they will remember you in a few days. You need to make contact later and that means collecting contact information.

People aren't dying to be on another contact list so you have to offer incentives. One common technique is to register attendees for a drawing. It should be a high-demand material item — not a free appraisal of their financial situation. That's a tired old technique in the

financial services industry and people know it's a lead generator for sales calls. They also know that there isn't just one prize — everyone gets the prize. Being an item that is scarce has more perceived value.

You'll probably be surprised that 90 percent of leads generated at a trade show are never followed up on. After investing all the time and expense and gathering all those names, few people bother to do something with them to create top-of-mind awareness. Send a letter to everyone who visited your booth and registered. You can also announce the winner of your drawing while you include your business card and some information on your company. If possible, make phone calls to thank them personally because it's easier to gather additional information to prequalify them if you can have a two-way conversation. You made the investment in the event; now invest an equal amount of time following up. It could determine whether you attain return on investment or not.

After a Sales Presentation or a Job Interview. The follow-up thank-you note never goes out of style. In the case of a sales presentation or job interview, you were probably one in a sea of people who were interviewed. Today's competitive economy offers many quality options. Good follow up is an indicator of the kind of customer service and attention you will provide. It could be the deciding factor.

Updates on a Project. While you are working on your client's job, it is important to keep them updated on the progress. A good rule of thumb is to provide periodic

Follow-Up On Leads You Receive

When the day comes that your new networking buddy sends you a lead, follow up quickly – wait no more than 48 hours. Get a name, phone number, and e-mail address. Stop in or call the lead and follow that up with an e-mail. Next, follow up with the person who gave you the lead and tell them how the visit went. Most of all, provide excellent service to your new customer. Good news travels fast, but bad news travels at light speed. If you spoil the first lead that you receive, it will probably be your last. Do a great job, and you will become the referral of choice for your product or service.

My role model for sense of urgency in follow-up is Kerry Jensen with the Bentonville/Bella Vista Chamber of Commerce in Bentonville, Arkansas. He contacts the lead immediately and then follows up with the person who gave him the lead to give them an update. One time, I e-mailed him a lead, and he e-mailed back within 30 minutes to let me know that he had an appointment with the person that afternoon. Wow!

Why is follow-up so important? It reflects the kind of customer service that you will provide your prospective client. If someone has poor follow up, they might not win the new client because someone else reached the prospect already.

Once you make new acquaintances, contact them. Don't follow up with them because you want to sell them something, although they may be a potential client. Follow up to build a relationship of trust and familiarity. The more times you visit with them, the more they learn about your business and understand what kind of person you are. People are more likely to refer a friend to someone they know and trust.

It takes many contacts before you convert a typical prospect to a customer. Prospects may not have a need right now and they may forget about you by the time they do. The world is a crazy, busy place. Don't give your prospect the chance to forget about you.

updates as soon as you start billing hours to their account. A few years ago, I was selling a house as I had done many times. If you've ever been through the process, you know it's not terribly logical and roadblocks pop up along the way. Realtors tend to be people who are gifted as sales professionals who sometimes don't possess great organizational skills. They also tend not to provide all the necessary communication that buyers and sellers desire.

On this particular sale, the selling agent turned the process over to her assistant, Anne, once the initial contract was accepted. Anne's job was to escort the sale through the finance and closing process. Over the next few weeks, I almost grew tired of hearing from Anne. She called me every other day even if there wasn't a problem – just to keep me updated on the progress. When problems did arise, she called me immediately and often had suggestions for handling them. I had sold the property as a “for sale by owner” transaction. Even though Anne was representing the buyer, I felt comfortable with the proceedings every step of the way. This level of communication in the real estate industry is extraordinary.

Post-Business Transaction. Make a point to follow up with your customers after you finish their job. This is a great opportunity to find out how they liked your product or service, learn how you can improve, ask for referrals, and thank them for their business. Errors in the business transaction happen to us all from time to time, and this is a great way to repair a customer service or product problem that you might not have discovered any other way.

Following up allows you to ensure that your company delivered a great customer experience. Make it even more memorable — follow up personally. Customers are impressed when someone takes the time to call. This is as important for internal customers as it is for external customers. You never know who you will have an opportunity to work for or with in the future.

Be Unique When Periodically Checking In With Potential Clients. Levinson, Frishman, and Lublin in their book, *Guerrilla Publicity*, comment, “Keep in touch. Periodically call, e-mail, and send information to remind your contacts that you’re still alive, kicking, and available to them as a resource. Since everyone sends holiday cards, distinguish yourself by sending something they don’t expect such as funny postcards on odd, little-known occasions.” My favorite resource is www.holidays.net. Check out their list of fun and wacky holidays. My favorite is National Dog Day on August 26. One year, I sent my article “Marketing Lessons from My Dog Jazmin” out to my contact database and got great feedback.

If the greeting card idea seems stale, consider sending them articles that they would find interesting. Lots of people send articles to people that quote or feature them. If you want to be truly memorable, get to know people well enough to know what they are interested in and send them articles about those topics. They’ll be impressed that you cared enough to understand their interests. Whatever you do, never send e-mail spam. It’s grown into an Internet nuisance as we struggle to stay on top of business

critical e-mail communications. Besides, forwarded mass e-mails that are not relevant to the person's specific interests are impersonal.

Memorable follow-up is personally delivered. Customers are impressed when people take the time to follow up in person. Techniques can include calling to wish people happy birthday and sending out postcards with new services you offer with a quick, hand-written note. People often appreciate when you take the time to invite them to local networking functions that they may not know about. And, of course, the nice warm gift-wrapped lead is still an admired favorite.

My friend, Eric Elander, is a locksmith. We became friends because of his frequent follow up just to say hello. I'm also a customer because of his frequent follow up. There wasn't a phone call that he didn't start out by saying, "Hey, it's your favorite locksmith." Maybe it was the power of suggestion, but he ended up being my favorite locksmith.

Making Mass E-Mail Contact Meaningful

I'm an information junkie so I sign up for a lot of e-zines (pronounced e-zeenz) — e-mail newsletters. I love learning new things and e-zines provide the information I need to keep up with the changes in the industries I work with. I also sign up for e-zines from companies that I'm considering doing business with in the future — just so I don't forget they are a resource.

The e-zine is a popular marketing vehicle for many companies. It's incredibly inexpensive and you can create and send it the same day. For people who have a great idea and want to act on it NOW before the idea burns up in the atmosphere (a common problem that plagues visionary people), it's a perfect solution. Follow up is critical in forging lifelong business relationships and an e-zine is a great follow-up tool.

I never mind getting an e-mail from a company that I'm thinking about doing business with in the future — as long as it has value. A quick way to inspire me to hit the delete key the minute I get an e-zine is to find that it is only an advertisement — especially if the message is unsolicited. In fact, after I receive three or four “empty content” messages in a row from the same company, I'm inspired to unsubscribe from the list completely.

Nobody needs another e-zine or e-mail advertisement. It is a great way — and sometimes the only way — to reach some potential customers. However, we are dealing with a “what's due now” culture and reading someone's e-mail advertisement isn't a high priority. In fact, too much e-mail in my inbox stresses me out. It feels like a never-ending to-do list. That doesn't bode well for your e-mail to contribute to your target client's stress.

If you want people to engage with your company, your message to your prospect or customer — regardless of the medium — must be meaningful. I book professional speakers, trainers, and consultants for meetings and

conferences, so I'm on many speakers' e-zine lists. Most of them understand the concept well. They write an article on their topic of expertise and e-mail it to their permission database (that means people subscribed giving them permission to send them a mass e-mail). In the e-zine, they probably mention something about a new book or seminar they have coming up. Since I run a speaker bureau, I hang on to those because I can send them to my potential clients (people who plan meetings) because it shows the speakers are more than just pretty faces with a motivational message – they are experts who can deliver important messages to audiences in an entertaining way.

Here is the formula for a valuable e-zine: 75 percent meaningful content and 25 percent marketing message. This translates to a content-rich article that dominates 75 percent of the space – something your prospect or customer is interested in. It might be related to your company's product or service – such as an accountant sending out articles on wealth management issues or tax law changes. It might just be a more general article that would interest your target client such as the forecast for peak fall color in your area (assuming your target market is in one particular region of the country).

The purpose is to provide something that benefits them before you hit the “here's something you can buy from me” message AKA the “call to action.” That's basically the same information/marketing breakdown you'd see in a print magazine. The magazine business isn't about providing information – it's about providing a marketing

medium to a target client so they can sell advertising. The magazines draw the target client by providing meaningful information. Your e-zine or e-mail contact can have the same objective only on a smaller scale.

Engaging Your Target Market

We live in the information age. If you want your e-mail contact to be meaningful, you really must add value with every e-mail you send to total strangers. Even if everyone on your list is your fan or valued customer already, you still need to add information value.

People want to learn something that will improve their lives or fuel their interest in a particular topic. They want to receive information that is interesting to them. If you can customize your e-mail message to particular groups, do it! For instance, if your target client is real estate agents, send them information that is interesting to people in their industry. Become a conduit for the information that interests them so they don't have to search for it on their own. You add value when you save your target client time.

Value Is More Than Just Good Content

Other key ingredients include entertainment (such as humorous stories), organized, concise content (because people are more likely to read it), and graphically pleasing layout (tasteful and easy to read). Readers like information but they like to get it in a visual, quick-to-read, and entertaining format. Think of it as cheese sauce for the broccoli.

Great Examples of Meaningful E-Mail Contact

To engage our prospects and customers on the Internet, we can invite them to our website via e-mail. While there is something magnetic about a hyperlink in an e-mail, we still have to entice our audience to click it to cross over to our web site. I'm not a recreational Internet surfer but even I can be lured by the right invitation.

I'm on the Gap and Old Navy advertising e-mail list because their ads help me keep up with fashion trends. They don't send me articles but they show images of how to put the clothes together. I'm really busy and can't remember the last time I bought a fashion magazine. When I shop, I need to make exactly the right purchase in a short amount of time. While I may not shop Old Navy each time, they maintain top-of-mind awareness while providing me information I value. They first attract my attention with a highly graphic, visually interesting e-mail. When I click on some element that interests me, it drives me to their website where I stay a minimum of 15 minutes – even though I promise myself each time that I'm just going to delete the message without reading it.

I get some e-zines from photographers and graphic designers. I love it when they include things about their lives or portfolio images. I'm a photographer and do a good deal of my own creative work so I enjoy looking at their work. I also outsource most of my creative services for client projects. I'm asked for referrals often so it gives

me a chance to give my clients options that best fit their needs. It's good to have a variety of options because one size does not fit all clients.

I saw a brilliant ad one day on Weather.com. It was this sidebar ad for Acura. Now, I never click on those flashing ads but this one caught my eye. One image said, "Could a car company save a life?" and then the next image showed the picture of a big yellow Labrador retriever and so on – five images in all. I like dogs and I was curious so I clicked on the ad. I landed on the Acura website where it had a ten-minute video segment about an organization that trains special needs dogs. I watched the entire thing and even got teary-eyed because the dog had saved someone's life. I don't even know the connection between Acura and this organization other than the woman they interviewed drove an Acura other than the dog rode in it. The important thing is that I ended up on their website and once I got there, I traveled around the website.

Is E-Mail Contact Becoming an Endangered Species?

The public's rejection of e-mail marketing happened gradually over the last several years. It started with the endless stream of spam from uninvited sources and then everyone thought forwarding jokes and funny stories to all their friends was the greatest thing ever. Then more and more companies attempted to reach us via e-mail with content as meaningless as the online pharmaceutical e-mails. Then companies and Internet service providers

designed a slew of spam blockers that blocked the messages we wanted to get but still couldn't filter out the e-mails from third-world countries inviting us to help them cash checks for their heirs. ARRGGHHH!

All this has caused e-mail to be less effective. We can't even keep up with the business-critical e-mails anymore – if we even receive them! People are spending less time on the weekends and evenings sending e-mail because they are bombarded with meaningless e-mail co-mingled with their business-critical e-mail all day. They are turning their Blackberries and Treos off at night because they can't take the e-mail overload. There is such a thing as too much information.

Meaningful Content Can Cause Your E-Mail to Rise to the Top of the Inbox

I depend on e-mail. I have a number of clients who prefer to use e-mail for the bulk of their communication. I have several different databases that I communicate to for different things – events, information, etc. I understand the power of the medium but I've also watched the decline in its effectiveness. Witnessing this phenomenon take place has inspired me to make changes in how I communicate to my potential clients.

We must revamp what we communicate so that every e-mail has meaningful content that interests our target clients. For our e-mail contact to have peak impact, we

have to develop a reputation for sending messages that speak to the interests of our clients. They will place a priority on reading our messages when they trust us to provide customer-centered communication.

Business relationships are really where the power resides in this high-tech, low-touch world. People are starting to realize that we can do business easier around the world than in our own town. However, we are beginning to miss human interaction and friendships that lay the foundation upon which relationships are built. And in business, repeated contact using a variety of methods is where lifelong customers come from. And lifelong relationships translate to happier clients and bigger profits. I want that and I know you do too.

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Carrie is an expert on building business relationships. She helps organizations develop strategies for building lifelong business relationships so they can enjoy more clients and greater profit. She publishes an e-zine called *Effective Strategies*. It helps business professionals create strategies that range from finding prospects to transforming existing clients into die-hard fans. She is also the author of *Networking Zone: The Business Referral Network Construction Guide* and *Currency: Striking Networking Gold in a Relationship Economy*.

She is a publishing, communication, and training industry veteran. Carrie's corporate career spans 15 years, split between Texas Instruments and Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. Her company, Soar with Eagles, offers training, book publishing, event design, and consulting services as well as a professional speaker bureau.

Carrie is a native of the Tulsa area. She earned her Bachelor of Science and Masters in Business Administration at John Brown University, a private Christian university. After many years in Dallas, Texas, she lives in Rogers, Arkansas with her husband, Tom.

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