

# THE CUSTOMER RULES



*The 39 Essential Rules  
for Delivering  
Sensational Service*

LEE COCKERELL

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## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction: <i>Be Nice!</i>  | ix |
| Rule #1 CUSTOMER SERVICE IS NOT A DEPARTMENT                               | 1  |
| Rule #2 YOU WIN CUSTOMERS ONE AT A TIME AND LOSE THEM A THOUSAND AT A TIME | 5  |
| Rule #3 GREAT SERVICE FOLLOWS THE LAW OF GRAVITY                           | 9  |
| Rule #4 DON'T GET BORED WITH THE BASICS                                    | 13 |
| Rule #5 ASK YOURSELF, "WHAT WOULD MOM DO?"                                 | 19 |
| Rule #6 BE AN ECOLOGIST  | 24 |
| Rule #7 LOOK SHARP   | 28 |
| Rule #8 ALWAYS ACT LIKE A PROFESSIONAL                                     | 32 |
| Rule #9 HIRE THE BEST CAST   | 37 |
| Rule #10 BE YOUR OWN SHAKESPEARE   | 42 |
| Rule #11 BECOME AN EXPERT AT CREATING EXPERTS                              | 47 |
| Rule #12 REHEARSE, REHEARSE, REHEARSE                                      | 53 |
| Rule #13 EXPECT MORE TO GET MORE   | 57 |
| Rule #14 TREAT CUSTOMERS THE WAY YOU'D TREAT YOUR LOVED ONES               | 61 |
| Rule #15 BE LIKE A BEE   | 68 |
| Rule #16 KNOW THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH        | 74 |
| Rule #17 LISTEN UP   | 79 |

|          |  |     |
|----------|--|-----|
| Rule #18 | BE A COPYCAT   | 86  |
| Rule #19 | FISH WHERE THE FISHERMEN AIN'T                         | 92  |
| Rule #20 | BE A WORDSMITH—LANGUAGE MATTERS                        | 95  |
| Rule #21 | MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE                                | 99  |
| Rule #22 | ALWAYS BE THE GIVING ONE                               | 105 |
| Rule #23 | IF THEY SAY THEY WANT HORSES,<br>GIVE THEM A MOTORCAR  | 111 |
| Rule #24 | DON'T JUST MAKE PROMISES,<br>MAKE GUARANTEES           | 114 |
| Rule #25 | TREAT EVERY CUSTOMER LIKE A REGULAR                    | 119 |
| Rule #26 | SERVE TO WIN   | 123 |
| Rule #27 | MAKE ASAP YOUR STANDARD DEADLINE                       | 126 |
| Rule #28 | KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN<br>NEEDS AND WANTS         | 129 |
| Rule #29 | HAVE A GEEK ON YOUR TEAM                               | 135 |
| Rule #30 | BE RELENTLESS ABOUT DETAILS                            | 139 |
| Rule #31 | BE RELIABLE  | 144 |
| Rule #32 | DON'T GIVE THE RESPONSIBILITY<br>WITHOUT THE AUTHORITY | 148 |
| Rule #33 | NEVER, EVER ARGUE WITH A CUSTOMER                      | 152 |
| Rule #34 | NEVER SAY NO—EXCEPT “NO PROBLEM”                       | 159 |
| Rule #35 | BE FLEXIBLE  | 164 |
| Rule #36 | APOLOGIZE LIKE YOU REALLY MEAN IT                      | 168 |
| Rule #37 | SURPRISE THEM WITH SOMETHING EXTRA                     | 172 |
| Rule #38 | KEEP DOING IT BETTER                                   | 176 |
| Rule #39 | DON'T TRY TOO HARD                                     | 178 |
|          | Acknowledgments  | 181 |
|          | If You Want to Learn More . . .                        | 182 |
|          | Index  | 185 |

## INTRODUCTION

### *Be Nice!*

At a recent family gathering in my home, the grown-ups were trading stories about companies that provide good customer service and those that don't. Out of curiosity, I asked my then twelve-year-old granddaughter, Margot, what she thought were the most important rules for great service. Without a moment's hesitation, she said, "Papi, the first rule is 'Be nice!'"

Out of the mouths of babes! I've spent my whole adult life thinking about service, beginning with teenage stints working in a drugstore and a lumberyard in a small Oklahoma town and culminating in my last corporate position as executive vice president of operations at Walt Disney World, where I oversaw a workforce of forty thousand people, resort hotels with more than thirty thousand rooms, four theme parks, two water parks, five golf courses, a shopping village, a nighttime entertainment complex, a sports and recreation complex, and more operations. Along the way, I held positions that included army cook, banquet waiter, food and beverage control clerk, director of food and beverages

for Hilton Hotels (including the Waldorf-Astoria), director of restaurants at a Marriott, general manager of another Marriott, and senior executive at Disney in Paris and Orlando.

Throughout these forty-plus years in the hospitality industry, I never stopped searching for better ways to serve customers. Yet despite all the vital lessons I learned over those years from hard experience, brilliant colleagues, and mentors alike, I never heard the basic truth about service expressed as succinctly or as accurately as in Margot's two words.

"Be nice" packs a wallop. Look up "nice" in a dictionary and you find terms like *friendly*, *polite*, *pleasant*, *appealing*, *kind*, *considerate*, *well mannered*, *refined*, and *skillful*. Who wouldn't want to be surrounded by such qualities when doing business? Margot's first word, "be," is also profound. As I thought about her wise answer, I realized that great service is not just about what we do; it's also about what we *are*. You can have the best policies, procedures, and training in the world, but if the people you entrust to carry them out don't have what it takes—forget it. Don't get me wrong, what you *do* is also vital, and many of the Customer Rules in this book are about exactly that—what to do and how to do it. But *being* comes before doing, and the quality of a person's being—his or her attitude, personality, demeanor, and other factors—is crucial in delivering superior service. As retail consultant Liz Tahir puts it, "There is no way that the quality of customer service can exceed the

quality of the people who provide it.” Both aspects of great service, being and doing, are addressed in this book.

Think of it this way: Let’s say you’re a customer, and the staff person you’re doing business with does everything by the book and completes the transaction efficiently and satisfactorily, but he is unfriendly, indifferent, condescending, and obviously counting the seconds until the workday ends. Now imagine doing business with someone who makes a mistake but graciously apologizes, corrects the problem, and treats you with courtesy and respect because she’s happy to be where she is, serving you. Which company will you return to?

*The Customer Rules* is both a perfect companion to my first book, *Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney*, and a logical follow-up. Whereas *Creating Magic* was geared to leaders and aspiring leaders, *The Customer Rules* is relevant to everyone from the highest echelons of management to the frontline troops who interact directly with customers or clientele. It’s applicable not just to customer service reps, but to salespeople and servers, tech support analysts and repair workers, desk clerks and ticket takers, delivery personnel and janitors, and even investment bankers, lawyers, teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals. *Creating Magic* made the important point that anyone at any level can exercise leadership. But leaders can lead only when there is at least one

person who follows. By contrast, anyone and everyone in a company can—and should—be responsible for serving the organization’s customers, whether they do so face-to-face, over the phone, or from the distance of a manager’s office or an executive suite.

*The Customer Rules* is focused entirely on one ultimate goal: to help you, no matter what your position or job title, serve customers with such consistency, integrity, creativity, and sincerity that they will not only keep coming back for more, but eagerly recommend your business to their friends, families, and colleagues. It draws upon everything I’ve learned, from my days as a frontline service provider to my years as a top-tier executive at companies with worldwide reputations for service, and from my experience as a consumer with a lifelong habit of observing how some businesses provide excellent service and others fail at that basic task. The end result is thirty-nine easy-to-follow yet essential Rules that can improve service at every level of a company’s operation. If you interact directly with customers, you’ll learn how to deliver the kind of superior service that makes you an indispensable asset to the company that employs you. If you’re a manager or executive, you’ll learn how to create service-driven policies and procedures and hire, orient, and train employees who will win your team or company the most valuable revenue-boosting asset you could wish for: a reputation for superior service.

The principles revealed in this book apply to any



industry and any company, large or small, private or public, profit or not-for-profit. They have proved just as effective in multinational corporations like Disney and Marriott as in local shops and online retailers. They work whether the product is as high-tech as a tablet computer, as complex as health care, or as basic as shoes or coffee. The Rules are presented in concise, bite-size chapters so you can read one or more in minutes, absorb the basic lessons, and put them into practice immediately.

At the end of the day, everything a business leader does is in the service of customer service. That has always been the case, and based on current trends, customer service will be even more crucial to companies' success in the coming years. In today's highly competitive marketplace, a business needs more than excellent products, good technical service, efficient procedures, and more competitive prices to win customers. It also needs to truly connect with its customers through authentic, human-to-human interactions that satisfy not only their practical needs, but their emotional wants. "The advent of global competition, customers' access to reliable information and their ability to communicate with each other through social media has meant that the customer is now in command," writes Stephen Denning, author of *The Leader's Guide to Radical Management*. "The shift goes beyond the firm paying more attention to customer service: it means orienting everyone and everything in the firm on providing more value to customers sooner."

Denning is right when he calls the present period “the Age of Customer Capitalism.” Today, the power has shifted from the seller to the buyer. That’s why I chose a title with a double entendre. The customer always rules, and there are Rules for winning customers, keeping customers, and turning loyal customers into advocates and emissaries for your business. This isn’t just some feel-good business platitude. Your customers are your single source of revenue and profit; without them your company would go out of business and you’d be out of a job. If you follow the Rules in *The Customer Rules*, you will better serve your customers and your bottom line. Even my twelve-year-old granddaughter could tell you that.

## Rule #1



### **Customer Service Is Not a Department**

If there's one thing I've learned in my forty-plus years in the business world, it's that customer service is far more than a department name or a desk that shoppers or clients go to with problems and complaints. It's not a website, or a phone number, or an option on a pre-recorded phone menu. Nor is it a task or a chore. It's a *personal responsibility*. And it's not the responsibility only of people called customer service reps. It's the responsibility of everyone in the organization, from the CEO to the newest and lowest-ranking frontline employee. In fact, *everyone* in the company should be thought of as a customer service rep, because in one way or another each of them has some impact on, and bears some responsibility for, the quality of the customer experience. Even if you never see or speak to a customer (or potential customer), you need to treat everyone with whom you interact—your vendors, your creditors, your

suppliers, and so on—with sincerity and respect. Trust me, the great service you give them will ultimately trickle down to your customers.

Great service serves bottom-line business objectives. Sounds simple, but I constantly meet executives who don't understand that. They say things like "I'm in the commodity business, and it's all about the product." I tell them that they'd *better* have a great product, because the most extraordinary customer service in the world won't compensate for a bad one. But then I tell them that unless their product is the only one of its kind on the planet (and will *always* be the only one), good quality alone won't guarantee long-term profits. Time and again, customer service has been shown to be the best way to distinguish an outstanding company or organization from its competitors. Let's face it, no matter what business or industry you're in, there's probably someone—or *many* someones—who offers more or less the same product or service you do. But if you provide the same product *plus* personal service that feels authentic, you will have a leg up. No matter what business you're in, great service is a competitive advantage that costs you little or nothing but adds huge value for your customer. And it's one advantage you can't afford to pass up, because in today's highly competitive marketplace your customers will leave you in a heartbeat if your service doesn't measure up. Don't take my word for it; look at the research. In one study, customers were asked why they stopped doing business with a company. Forty-

three percent named “negative experience with a staff person” as the main reason for taking their business elsewhere, and 30 percent said they moved on because they were made to feel they were not a valued customer.

My point is that most people *expect* quality products and services. It’s the lowest common denominator. But if your company gives people the products or services they want *and* customer service that exceeds their expectations, you have an unbeatable combination, and one your competition can’t easily imitate. Don’t get confused about the difference between the services you sell and *customer service*. Services are what consumers come to you for and pay for. Customer service encompasses the entire experience, from the moment a person logs on to your website or walks through your front door until the moment they log off or walk out. It’s what brings the human factor into a transaction. Some hardened number types scoff at the notion of the human factor. But as I’ve learned over the course of decades working at some of the most profitable companies in the world, the emotional element is as important as—even *more* important than—the money that changes hands. That is why it should be delivered not just competently, but with ultimate respect, sincerity, and care.

Some managers and executives turn up their noses at the whole idea of service. They believe it’s too “soft” for someone in their position of importance to think about, what with all the decisions they have to make and bottom lines they have to meet and the competitors

breathing down their necks. Creating better products, building fresh ad campaigns, pioneering new technologies or markets—those tasks feel sexy to them. They get their juices flowing. To them, customer service *is* a department. It's something they can delegate to nice people who get along well with others. They couldn't be more misguided.

That is why *everyone* in a company should be considered part of the customer service department. Several years ago, when I was in charge of operations at Disney World, we changed the title of our frontline managers to “guest service manager” and required them to get out of the office and spend 80 percent of their shift in the operations, providing service support to their direct reports. Overnight, our guest satisfaction scores rose sharply. So whether you're the CEO, a midlevel manager, or the head of a small department, give your team members—and yourself!—responsibilities and titles that reflect their role in pleasing the customer.

Great service does not cost any more money than average or poor service. Yet the returns it delivers are spectacular. So invest in your company's commitment to service by making it part of every employee's job description and the guiding light of your entire operation.