

How Can I Help You?

Service with a Smile—and a Story!

Susan Stites

When Sharon Love, owner of Incredible Pets, teaches customers how to care for their pets, she tells them a story. Terry Nicholetti, sales trainer and account executive for the *Washington Business Journal*, tells stories when teaching potential subscribers how to enhance their sales. Sandy Johns, Lands' End learning and development manager, uses stories to train customer service representatives. Craig Hunt—"Catfish Hunter," on-air personality for KYGO-FM, a Denver-based country music station—creates stories to connect to his listeners. Tracey Briggs, communications representative for Orlando Regional Healthcare, finds and writes *Healing Stories* about employees, patients, and their families.

Why are these people and their organizations using stories to develop exceptional customer service? "It just makes sense," says Love. "Which would you rather hear? A bunch of facts and figures about customer service or a story? People will remember stories long after they've forgotten the facts."

INSPIRING THE USE OF STORY

According to Jackie Johnson-Caygill, director of Lands' End Business Outfitters Contact Center, the retail company's rich storytelling heritage came from its founder, Gary Comer. "When the company was small, Gary recognized that stories would help people understand Lands' End and its values." Sandy Johns adds, "He always said, 'Take care of the customers and the rest will take care of itself.' When employees followed his advice, he would tell stories about their efforts and the positive results. This inspired employees to maintain a single-minded focus on the customer."

Comer also encouraged employees to tell stories to customers. "Gary asked them to discuss their own experiences with Lands' End products," says Johns. "He wanted them to talk about what they liked, how they used it, and how they cared for it. Customers had more confidence when products they ordered had the approval of a trusted employee."

For Sharon Love, using stories to develop good customer service at Incredible Pets came out of necessity. "We have three stores and thirty-five employees," she explains. "We don't have time to put employees in a classroom and teach them customer service. Individual store managers must train and coach. Because retail is a social environment, we found that storytelling just happened. It was the way people shared what they knew. Over time, we realized the most valuable learning came from the stories that managers and veteran employees told about their experiences with customers."

Stories about customer service can result from deliberate actions on the part of a single individual or arise naturally from employee experiences. Regardless of how they originate, if these stories are to support customer service, a philosophy must be in place first.

INSTILLING A CUSTOMER SERVICE PHILOSOPHY

Love uses stories to orient new employees to the store's customer service philosophy. One story, "Kitty Crates," on page 5, demonstrates several important customer service principles.

"First," says Love, "this story shows that employees have freedom to make whatever decision is necessary to ensure a customer, or a potential customer, is happy. It also allows us to show employees we support them even if we would've handled the situation differently."

KITTY CRATES

Contributed by Sharon Love

One day, some children were playing outside when they found some abandoned kittens. They wanted to help the kittens, but had never owned any before and didn't know what to do.

Being close to Incredible Pets, they went into the store and asked for a cardboard box. The clerk explained that a cardboard box would never hold the kittens and proceeded to take two brand-new crates from the shelf. She gave them to the children along with a new water bowl and some towels. Because the clerk was concerned that the children might not care for the kittens properly, she spent time teaching them what to do. The children took the kittens home, then returned the supplies to the pet store.

That should have been the end of the story. The clerk simply did what she needed to do to help.

However, many months later the children told a friend about the kittens they rescued and about the nice lady in the pet store who helped them. That friend happened to be my niece. I was pleased but surprised to hear the story—the clerk had never told me about it. When I asked about the incident, the clerk said, “I didn't think it was anything special. I was just doing my job.” In my mind, not only did this clerk do a great job in making potential customers happy, she also created a ripple effect when the children spread the word about the pet store to others.

In this instance, the clerk could've given the children a couple of used crates instead of new ones. There is always a chance to talk later about what could have been done differently. The story also demonstrates the *ripple effect* of customer service. If we provide outstanding service—give customers something to talk about—they will talk about it to others and attract more business.”

Tracy Storck, assistant store manager, learned the company's customer service philosophy in this way. “When my managers trained me, they used stories to teach me how to handle a variety of situations. I

learned our return philosophy by hearing stories about how they were handled. I also learned how to handle challenging customers.”

Now Storck uses these same stories when she trains employees. “The stories keep the subject interesting and fresh. And employees are more apt to ask questions when the problem is in the context of a story.” Storck continually learns from these stories every time she tells them. “Each story contains many lessons. Every new employee interprets them differently.”

Jackie Johnson-Caygill voices a similar sentiment regarding stories at Lands’ End. “Our philosophy is simple: Guaranteed. Period. To show we really do mean what we say, we share stories about employees who have taken the authority to do whatever is required to make a customer happy. When they hear about Nora Halverson, who sent her husband’s set of cuff links to a customer because the ones the customer ordered were on backorder, they understand the extra efforts our people extend to serve our customers.”

Martha Johnson, manager of the 55PLUS Program at Orlando Regional Healthcare, a group of not-for-profit hospitals, describes how the organization instilled customer service through story. “I was asked to join the hospital-wide customer service initiative, an intense strategic undertaking. Across the country, hospitals were experiencing a decline in customer satisfaction. Our hospitals were no exception. Our first step was to conduct a survey to see how employees felt about their jobs. We discovered most people were proud to work in our hospitals, but many felt their jobs had changed. There was too much red tape, too many interdepartmental issues. We knew that to improve customer service, we would have to change the culture.”

To accomplish this, they first developed a service statement: “We are here to serve when it matters most.” Johnson soon discovered employees had a slightly negative reaction to the word *serve*. “They saw the word as menial, subservient.” To overcome this, Johnson turned to stories. “I met with people and talked about the meaning of their work. I asked them to share the reasons they went into health care. Once they remembered why they chose this profession, they overcame their resistance. Their own stories helped them understand what it meant to *serve*.”

A clearly stated customer service philosophy is a prerequisite to identifying and sharing stories that support it. Without it, there is no way to know if the appropriate behaviors are being reinforced consistently throughout the organization.

IMPROVING SERVICE DURING THE SALES PROCESS

Terry Nicholetti joined the *Washington Business Journal* to improve sales and customer service. “We found that some people weren’t buying or renewing subscriptions because they lacked the time to read the paper,” says Nicholetti. “And even if they did subscribe, the papers got lost in piles of other materials.”

One of Nicholetti’s most successful customer service initiatives was the development of a free seminar on using the newspaper as a sales tool. “With this seminar, we not only build positive relationships with current and potential customers, we also teach them to build positive relationships with their own clients. A key component is storytelling. I’ve always told stories in my seminars, primarily to gain attention. But it didn’t take me long to learn that when people hear stories, they become engaged.”

Going a step further, Nicholetti gets attendees to use stories with their own customers. “I have them define their customers, and then I take them on a tour of the newspaper. I encourage them to find stories relating to their current and potential customers.” She challenges them to go beyond simply reading the articles they find. “It’s the story behind the story that counts. When you know something about someone and what they are going through, you can better serve their needs. In the most fundamental way, you know their story.”

Nicholetti emphasizes that salespeople who know their clients’ needs are more likely to gain their trust. “With their trust,” she adds, “you can help them write the end of their story by offering products and services that address their needs, their problems.”

Joan Fletcher, owner of Winning Ways, Inc., a consulting and seminar firm, vouches for how well Nicholetti’s approach works. She has completed Nicholetti’s class and now team-teaches with her. “Terry’s class opened my eyes,” says Fletcher. “It never occurred to me to think of newspaper articles as stories. Now I understand that my job is to figure out what my customers’ stories are. What has happened to them? How is their situation unique? How does their story relate to my business or something they might need?”

Sondra Singer also believes storytelling is a powerful sales tool. Singer, a certified radio marketing consultant, sells advertising for KYGO-FM. “Advertising, if done well, *is* storytelling,” she explains. “Once you know what a customer’s products and services are, it’s the

salesperson's job to help the customer construct a story that will compel others to buy them."

Singer believes product endorsements are an important storytelling tool. "A typical radio commercial is presented in third person—it's not personal," she points out. "But a product endorsement is a firsthand testimonial—a story told directly to the listener by a trusted on-air personality. It's a more intimate way to sell a product."

Singer says Craig Hunt, "Catfish Hunter," one of the station's popular on-air personalities, is an excellent spinner of product endorsements. His effectiveness stems from two well-developed skills. "First, he has outstanding customer service skills. When he develops an endorsement with a client, he goes out of his way to use the product and note its features and benefits—he won't accept an endorsement unless he believes in the product. As a result, he develops trust in two important constituents. The client trusts him to give a heartfelt endorsement, and the listener trusts that the product he's talking about is as good as he says it is.

"But that trust, that product knowledge, isn't enough," continues Singer. "Craig also has a knack for talking about the product using interesting and colorful stories. It's theater of the mind. Craig takes his experiences with the product and paints a picture. His stories are the context for the call to action."

Organizations that use stories in their sales process have two powerful advantages. First, by hearing customers' stories, they can better determine and fulfill their customers' needs. Second, when they use stories to tell customers about their products, they build trust, an essential ingredient in long-term customer relationships.

DEVELOPING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Lands' End teaches employees how to use stories to develop long-term customer relationships. As Anne Hore, director of employee and customer communications, notes, "Every customer sales representative is trained to listen to each customer and build a relationship. Their goal is to provide a lasting experience that makes each customer come back. And they do!" As a result, Lands' End has compiled booklets containing stories that demonstrate how each employee goes the distance for customers.

"These booklets are useful in helping people understand what Lands' End is all about," says Johnson-Caygill. "When customers receive

the booklets, they get a glimpse of everything we are willing to do. When employees read the stories, they see the many ways in which other employees have gone to great lengths to make a customer happy.”

If you ask Lands’ End employees which story is their favorite, you get varied answers. Kelly Ritchie, senior vice president of employee and customer services, likes the story where a distant customer casually mentions to an operator, “Stop and visit if you are ever in town,” and the operator actually pays the customer a visit. Johnson-Caygill recalls the team of employees who took an unexpected trip to Las Vegas to deliver attaché cases after the first shipment was incorrectly embroidered.

However, the one story they all love to tell is “Pre-Wedding Jitters.” “It’s a great story about relationships and trust,” says Sandy Johns. “Look at how much this customer had at stake, and yet she trusted us on her wedding day.”

For Johns, the story booklets are valuable tools for training customer service representatives. “First, they serve to remind employees

PRE-WEDDING JITTERS

Contributed by Lands’ End

One Friday when Ruth Lang was working the third shift in customer sales, she received the strangest but most fun call ever. A customer called and asked if Ruth would call her at 5:00 A.M. EST. She was staying in a mansion turned hotel that did not have a wake-up service. The next day was her wedding day and she was afraid that she and her sister would oversleep. Since she had been a loyal customer of Lands’ End, she knew she could count on us to help in any way. Of course Ruth couldn’t turn her down and agreed to call her. When the bride-to-be answered the phone the next morning, she said she and her sister were sure Lands’ End would come through. They said they were exhausted but that the day was going to be beautiful.

From *Lands’ End at Your Service: The People, the Stories, the Traditions*. Dodgeville, WI: Lands’ End, Inc., 2000, p. 3. Reprinted by permission of Lands’ End.

of their freedom to act on behalf of the customer. Second, we use individual stories to illustrate key learning points.”

Johnson-Caygill adds, “The Las Vegas story illustrates we’re all human and that mistakes happen. But these mistakes give us the chance to recover in a spectacular way. In reality, who wants to have that kind of mess-up? Who wants to go to Las Vegas at the last minute? But employees are empowered to make these kinds of decisions and the recovery gives great customer service.”

“There’s something much more essential that we want employees to learn,” adds Ritchie. “As important as it is to tell the stories that are in our history, it’s even more important to create new stories. Every time a customer has a problem, a need, or a request, we want employees to use judgment and creativity to meet the need. We want them to use their personalities to create their own stories—to become a part of the legend.”

KYGO-FM also creates stories to build relationships with radio listeners. The station has a “live and local” philosophy, which means programming is targeted to appeal to the Denver audience. No prime-time program is syndicated.

“Our program director, Joel Burke, is a master at knowing our listeners,” says Sondra Singer. “He often assigns new on-air personalities a playful variation of their real name. This gives the station a character of liveliness and fun. It’s how Craig Hunt became ‘Catfish Hunter.’” On air, Paul Donovan is also known as “The Professor” because of his penchant for waxing intellectual with the music. “Detour Dave” announces traffic from his helicopter. Steve “Mudflap” McGrew is the station’s nationally known comedian, who in his spare time plays guitar in a country band.

Each on-air personality is free to develop a unique rapport with listeners. Catfish uses his “Catfish Diaries” to connect with his audience. “I just go on the air and talk about my daily adventures. Sometimes I’ll tell them about a visit with my mom, other times I’ll take a current event and embellish it, make it funny.”

Catfish also has on-air rapport with “Dewey from Louisville,” a small community southeast of Boulder. Dewey adds a story-like quality to the show. “Dewey calls in and we banter on the radio,” says Catfish. “He’s always unemployed and his sister dances at questionable venues. We talk about topical stuff and Dewey gives his comedic take on it. The listeners love Dewey. Many think he’s real, but he’s actually from Atlanta.”

“With the ‘Catfish Diaries’ and ‘Dewey from Louisville,’ I try to create one or two memorable moments per shift, something the listeners will remember, an insight they will ponder. I like to find a good odd thing that sticks. Who knows? I’m now thinking of getting a dog and naming him ‘Flash.’ Then I can come on the air and tell my stories of ‘Fish and Flash.’”

Singer adds, “We like to extend the fun by interacting with our listeners and getting them to tell us their stories. For example, we sponsor an event called ‘Take the Plunge.’ Listeners write stories telling us how they fell in love and why they want to get married at the water park inside Six Flags Elitch Gardens. Each year, we pick the best stories and sponsor a big wedding. Our advertisers provide the cake, flowers, pictures, a certificate for the wedding ring, and the reception and honeymoon. Morning air personality Jonathan Wilde, who is also a minister, becomes the ‘Right Reverend Johnny Wilde’ for this event. He puts on his best preacher voice and performs the wedding ceremony at the top of the water slide. Once the couples have spoken their vows, they ‘take the plunge’ down the slide. Portions of the wedding are aired the next morning and the morning personalities recap the event. It’s a community effort and everyone buys into the story.”

Orlando Regional Healthcare also captures both staff and customer stories as a way to develop customer relationships. Tracey Briggs says, “Our stories touch customers in several ways. First, they highlight our compassionate care, which brings comfort to patients and their families. We compile our *Healing Stories* into booklets and put them in waiting rooms so people can read about the nurse who taught the new dad how to change a diaper or the doctor who came in on his own time to check on a patient. This brings peace to a family going through a difficult time.

“Our stories also validate the patient’s experience. People are surprised when we ask them to share their story. They are honored that someone feels their experience is significant enough to capture in a story. *Healing Stories* convey the message that our patients are valuable. Sharing their stories provides ordinary people with ordinary means a way to give back to the hospital that helped them.”

Finally, Briggs explains, stories provide inspiration to patients: “The reason people are in the hospital is often surprising and never comforting. We need to find ways to comfort them. Reading *Healing Stories* about people who have experienced similar ordeals and had

amazing healing experiences right here in this very hospital inspires them with faith and hope.”

Both internal, staff-driven stories and stories from customers play an essential role in building long-term relationships. Whether they are shared orally, as is the case at KYGO-FM, or in writing, as Lands’ End and Orlando Regional Healthcare have done, they can create a bond of loyalty between the organization, its employees, and customers.

FOSTERING INTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

To inspire staff, Orlando Regional Healthcare uses stories to enhance internal customer service. “When you share positive stories that highlight what employees have done, it motivates other team members to follow the example,” says Briggs. “Recognizing team members in a story acknowledges them for doing an outstanding job and inspires them to keep it up.” “The Hurricane Story” is an example.

This story illustrates how staff adjusted their routines to help the hospital prevail, even as other businesses closed. When employees see the extraordinary lengths the hospital is willing to take to accommodate them, they are more willing to do the same for each other.

The same is true at Lands’ End. To enhance internal customer service, it has an “all hands on deck” policy during the holiday peak season. “No matter where you work, everyone sets aside four weeks to

THE HURRICANE STORY

Contributed by Orlando Regional Healthcare

Dying branches hung precariously in the air, caught by the trees that survived both Hurricanes Charley and Frances, when the news arrived that Hurricane Jeanne loomed off the coast. *Could Central Florida withstand another blow?* Anxious feelings returned as everyone once again made preparations—buying gallons of extra water, searching for generators, and stocking up on nonperishable groceries.

As with the two previous hurricanes, restaurants closed their doors, shops boarded their windows, and employees

sent their workers home. Central Florida closed, except for a few essential services—police, firefighters, hospitals—the everyday heroes that guard the safety of the community. As residents gathered around their battery-operated radios to listen to storm updates, Orlando Regional Medical Center (ORMC) team members chose to set aside personal concerns to provide much-needed medical care.

Windows shook. Trees fell. Power lines snapped. But the storm could not match the strength of spirit within ORMC. Patients arrived injured from the storm or from debris cleanup with broken arms and legs, wounds from power tools and falling branches, to find care and compassion awaiting them.

As days turned into weeks, Central Florida worked to restore power and normalcy. Businesses remained closed, yet ORMC continued to serve around the clock. With schools and day-care centers closed, medical staff brought their children to work. ORMC corporate staff put aside normal duties to care for [them]. They read stories, rocked babies, played games, and changed diapers, giving parents peace of mind . . . so they could concentrate on patient care.

Corporate policies bent with the trying times, allowing employees to cash in vacation time for much needed home repair costs. Team members covered for each other when they needed extra time to repair the damage to their homes. Even a special team member Disaster Relief Fund was established to provide assistance to those worst hit.

Central Florida's most severe hurricane season in 40 years shook the foundation of the community, but only served to strengthen the resolve of the dedicated ORMC team. Team members developed a stronger bond with each other and the community.

As George Geans, manager of spiritual care, shares, "Our team members are living proof that we don't just care *for* our patients, we care *about* them as well."

From *Careholders' Report 2004*. Orlando, FL: Orlando Regional Healthcare, 2004. Used with permission.

help out, either on the phones or in the warehouse,” explains Anne Hore. “This means that everyone—regardless of their position—has a chance to work side by side to serve the customer.”

“It’s an opportunity to get new stories,” adds Diane Huza, call center manager. “When my hands are ‘on deck,’ I want people to grab me and tell me what’s happening. I want to know what’s going well and what’s not. This is often the time when I hear new stories.”

“The experience is great for everyone,” says Hore. “Employees get firsthand experience working with customers; it builds team camaraderie, helps with our holiday staffing, and we all get new stories to share throughout the following year.”

A key to enhancing internal customer service is deliberately seeking out and retelling stories that showcase employees helping each other and the organization supporting them in their work. These stories can energize and motivate staff and reinforce collaborative working relationships.

THE CHALLENGE OF USING STORIES IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

The most prevalent challenge these organizations encounter is getting employees to come forward with their stories. “Sometimes, we don’t hear about something an employee does until long after the fact,” says Lands’ End’s Johnson-Caygill. “We hire people based on their ability to treat people with dignity and respect. When they go out of their way to help a customer, they don’t think it’s any big deal. They’re just doing what’s second nature for them.”

Internet customer service specialist Nora Halverson, the employee who loaned a customer her husband’s cuff links, demonstrates this. When asked why she sent the cuff links, her response was simply, “We weren’t using them. Besides, if I have something and somebody needs it, they can have it. It didn’t even matter to me if the customer sent them back.” (For the record, the customer did return the cuff links after the backordered ones arrived.)

Orlando Regional Healthcare’s employees are equally reticent. “People believe good customer service is a part of their jobs—they just don’t see themselves as heroes,” remarks Martha Johnson. “They don’t tend to come forward with their own stories. We have to go out and find them.”

That is exactly what these organizations are doing. Says Johnson, “I started by walking around and asking people for stories. I also posted requests on the intranet. It’s important to train managers and leaders to be on the lookout for stories.” When Tracey Briggs took over the *Healing Story* initiative, she built on this work. “I look for stories in letters that we receive from patients. Then I call and ask them to share their stories. They are always impressed that someone read their letter and that their thoughts mattered. I also look for stories from their families and team members.”

Lands’ End implemented a *Legendary Customer Service Award* to draw out employee stories. Still, employees shy away from submitting their own. In Halverson’s case, it took three different leaders to get her to share her story. “I just wasn’t comfortable bragging about myself. However, I was given lots of encouragement from all three of my leads—Paul Berg, Steve Peterson, and Greg Gorsline. Greg was the one who finally submitted the story.” To Halverson, that was the end of the story. It took one further question for her to offer a final piece of information: “Yes, I did win the award.”

Getting employees—and customers—to tell their stories is a challenge, but people will come forward if organizations reach out and demonstrate their willingness to listen. Regular encouragement and positive outcomes can aid in this.

THE RESULTS TELL ALL

All five organizations have experienced benefits from story use. However, each has a different way of measuring success.

For some, it is financial. Says Tracy Storck of Incredible Pets, “We measure our customer service by how well we are doing monetarily. If customers keep coming back, we feel that our approach is working.” At *Washington Business Journal*, Terry Nicholetti points out, “Since I’ve started doing seminars, I’ve increased my subscription sales each year. When I give a seminar, between 25 percent and 50 percent of the attendees subscribe.”

At KYGO-FM, Sondra Singer proudly describes the many awards the station wins. It is consistently recognized for excellence in programming, including the National Association of Broadcasters’ coveted Marconi Awards for Large Market Station of the Year and Country Station of the Year in 2004.

Amount and type of feedback are key indicators for Joan Fletcher, Craig Hunt, and Lands' End. Reflects Hunt, "I've only had my 'Catfish' nickname for two years, but I can tell you that I've gotten more feedback by being Catfish for two years than I got in ten years being simply Craig." For Fletcher, "My seminar evaluations always say 'Tell more stories,' so I know the method works." Jackie Johnson-Caygill refers to the Lands' End letter board—a wall that contains letters from satisfied customers—for results. "We know our efforts are working when we see these letters from all our satisfied customers." In fact, the effort works so well that in 2004 the company received more than 1,130 positive letters or e-mail messages from happy customers.

Lands' End and Orlando Regional Healthcare also measure success through customer satisfaction surveys. "If we are getting good ratings, we are comfortable attributing our results to our training and development methods," explains Diane Huza of Lands' End. "These methods include storytelling." At Orlando Regional Healthcare 90 percent of people completing a customer satisfaction survey say they would recommend the hospital to others. "Since 2003, we've seen our patient satisfaction increase by a score of two points. This is considered very good," comments Martha Johnson. She attributes this improvement to all the hospital's customer service initiatives, including stories. "People were reluctant to accept the changes we were proposing. When they started hearing the *Healing Stories*, they got on board."

To this, Tracey Briggs adds changes she sees in patient attitude. "When I interview people, they often describe their experience in four steps. One: I didn't want to have surgery. Two: I needed surgery. Three: I had surgery. Four: I didn't want to go home. When we make this big a difference for even one person coming in to have surgery, I believe our customer service efforts are working. Our *Healing Stories* are a huge part of that effort."

LESSONS FROM THOSE WHO ARE DOING IT

What can you do to capitalize on what these organizations have learned? Try these techniques:

- To help employees internalize your customer service philosophy, have them tell stories about why they chose their profession.

- Assume employees are already telling stories about how they handled customers. Find ways to bring out these stories (including your intranet) and acknowledge them. And train managers and supervisors to be on the lookout for them.
- Share stories about outstanding customer service to inspire others to provide similar service.
- Identify key learning points for customer service training. Then find stories that reinforce them.
- Encourage employees to provide such outstanding service that they become a story themselves.
- Sponsor contests that reward the best customer service stories.
- Publish and share your stories with customers so they become part of your organization.
- Use media articles about your customers to learn their stories.
- Encourage customers to share stories about their experiences.

By using these story techniques in customer service, you will be able to more quickly and easily relate key philosophies and practices to your employees. In the long run, your employees will be able to connect more closely to their customers and help deliver exceptional service to them.

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