Sometimes the smallest, unintended behavior can create relationship turnoffs. Subtle facial expressions, gestures, vocal intonation, or appearance can make the difference between winning customer loyalty or losing it.

—Paul R. Timm

AFTER READING THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO

1. Recognize the kinds of behaviors and personality factors that please customers.
2. Use 15 specific individual behaviors that convey a positive personality.
3. Respond to difficult people with appropriate communication styles.
4. Apply six organizational behaviors that convey a customer-centered culture.

THE WAY IT IS . . . The Power of Personality

"G’morning, Hon," "Hi, there!" and a chorus of other greetings ring out whenever customers enter a Waffle House. The ubiquitous southern restaurants are famous for a cheery hello, especially at breakfast time. You never feel like a stranger at Waffle House.

More than 20 years ago, Ferris Peterson opened a bank account near his office. Being new to town, he needed the checking account and the branch office was close by. A week after opening the account, he walked in to make a deposit. He stated, 'I'd barely cleared the door when a teller cheerfully called across the lobby, 'Good morning, Mr. Peterson.' I was stunned. She had remembered my name after only one transaction. I remained a loyal customer of that bank for decades, based largely on the personality of the employees."

The Disney organization builds incredible loyalty by providing a "happiest-place-on-earth" atmosphere in their theme parks. People enjoy themselves in large part because the
employees (whom Disney calls "cast members") seem to be enjoying themselves. Smiles and greetings are exchanged freely and convey the organization's personality.

Every organization, like every individual, has a personality. This personality is conveyed by countless "little things," mostly verbal and nonverbal communication cues. Some people are unaware of how these cues work—how subtle behaviors send "messages" to others. In this chapter we will talk about the importance of personality-projecting communication behaviors in customer service.

**BEHAVIOR AND PERSONALITY FACTORS THAT PLEASE CUSTOMERS**

Behavior is, of course, what people do. It is conveyed to others via both verbal (using words or language) and nonverbal communication. Even when no words are exchanged, personality can still communicate loud and clear. A salesperson who ignores a customer, an employee who routinely shows up late, and a repair person who leaves a mess all communicate something. Likewise, the friendly greeter at a store or restaurant, the cheerful voice from a call center, or the associate who always has a smile and a cheerful comment communicates something as well.

Keep in mind two important rules of communication: (1) anything can and will communicate, and (2) the receiver of the message determines what it "means." Therefore, the projected personality is in the eyes of the beholder and what may be an attractive personality to one may be less so to another. Nevertheless, some behaviors almost always get a good response.

The remainder of this chapter looks at some kinds of behaviors—of individuals and organizations—that convey messages to customers. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all possible behaviors, but it does reflect the more common ones that associate closely with customer service.

Each customer encounters two interrelated personalities: the personality of the individual who provides service and the overall personality of the organization. This organizational personality reflects the company's "culture." Culture is a composite of many factors that project the shared values of the people who work there. The culture can strengthen and reinforce individual behavior and, of course, individual behaviors reinforce the culture. For example, if a company is an enjoyable, fun-loving place to work, its people will convey a sense of enjoyment to customers. If the culture is more formal (say, at a law firm or medical facility), this personality—these shared values—may be reinforced by employee behaviors that convey competence and professionalism. (Of course, lawyers and medical-office employees can also be fun-loving and personable.)

Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton understood organizational culture when he taught his managers that "People will treat your customers the way you treat your people." Enthusiasm, comradeship, a sense of enjoyment, and humor quickly become evident to Wal-Mart's customers. Southwest Airlines, which has a culture of informality and fun at work, projects an organizational personality very different from that of many of its competitors. This personality has been useful both in attracting customers and in enlisting employees who enjoy working in such an atmosphere. Indeed, research studies of the best companies to work for consistently identify "having fun" as a critically important criterion.
FIFTEEN INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORS CAN CONVEY PERSONALITY

Often the subtlest behaviors can send the most powerful messages to customers. It’s the little things that mean everything. Awareness of these alone can improve service, yet many employees are essentially clueless about the impact of their behaviors. This chapter looks at 15 behaviors that, taken together, project personality.

1. Greet customers like guests

Woody Allen once said that 80 percent of success is just showing up. In customer service, 80 percent of success is treating the customer like a guest who just showed up. When guests come to your home, you greet them, right? You wouldn’t ignore someone who comes into your living room. Yet we’ve all had the experience of being totally ignored by service people in some businesses. Friendly greetings, like those offered routinely at Waffle House, are some of those little things that mean a lot.

Initiate conversation promptly. Studies have clocked the number of seconds people had to wait to be greeted in several types of businesses. Researchers then asked customers how long they’d been waiting. In every case, the customer’s estimate of the time elapsed was much longer than the actual time. A customer waiting 30 or 40 seconds often felt like it had been three or four minutes. Time drags when you’re being ignored.

A prompt, friendly greeting can help people feel comfortable and reduce stress customers may experience. Why would customers feel stress? Because they are on unfamiliar turf. While employees work there every day, customers are just visiting. A prompt, friendly greeting can help everyone relax and grease the wheels of comfortable interaction.

Speak up. Employees should verbally greet customers within a few seconds of entering the business or approaching a work location. Even if busy with another customer or on the phone, workers should pause to say “hello” and let the customer know that they will be ready to help him or her soon.

Get the customer committed. Some fast-food restaurants send a clerk out to write your order on a sheet of paper while you are waiting in line. You tell the person what you want, she marks it on a slip of paper, and then she gives it back to you to present at the cash register where the order is called out. Why do they do this? It is a way of getting the customer committed. If no one greeted you or wrote your order, you might be more likely to leave, especially if the line seems long, before reaching the register. But psychologically, this strategy makes you feel as if you’ve “ordered,” so you stay in line and follow through with your lunch purchase.

Some years ago PCs were gaining widespread popularity, and the behavior differences between the successful and unsuccessful salespeople were striking. The less successful ones rattled off a lot of techno-jargon, apparently intended to impress customers, while their successful counterparts quickly invited the novice computer user to sit down and do something on the computer. Research observations of auto salespeople showed similar patterns. The best car sales reps didn’t spend much time...
talking about the car a customer was looking at. He literally tossed them the keys and invited the prospect to test-drive the car.

Employees should greet each customer promptly, verbally if possible, and try to commit them to doing something as soon as feasible when they come into the business or work area.

2. Break the ice

The best way to start a conversation depends on what the customer needs. In many cases, especially in retail stores, customers need first to be reassured that this is a nice, friendly place to do business. They need to overcome worries about being high-pressured into buying, a major turnoff for many people. Often customers want to browse and get the feel of the place before they commit to doing business. To dispel those worries, use a non-threatening icebreaker. The best icebreaker for the browser can be an off-topic, friendly comment. Some good ones might be:

- A compliment ("That's a great-looking tie you're wearing" or "Your children are sure cute. How old are they?")
- Weather-related or local-interest comments ("Isn't this sunshine just beautiful?" or "Some snowfall, isn't it?" or "How about those Bulls last night?")
- Small talk (Look for cues about the customer's interest in sports, jobs, mutual acquaintances, past experiences, and so on. Then initiate a relevant comment.)

If a browsing customer seems to be focusing attention on a product (say he or she is holding several shirts or is looking at a particular item), the person can be reclassified as a "focused shopper." The best icebreaker for the focused shopper is one that is more specific to the buying decision. It may:

- Anticipate the customer's questions ("What size are you looking for, sir?" or "Can I help you select a . . .?")
- Provide additional information ("Those widgets are all 25 percent off today" or "We have those in other colors in the stockroom")
- Offer a suggestion or recommendation ("Those striped suits are really popular this season" or "If you need help with measurements, our estimators can figure out what you'll need")

Be attentive to customers' needs. Give them time to browse if that's what they need, but be responsive in helping them make a buying decision when they are ready. Retail-industry research shows that 60 to 80 percent of all shopping decisions are made in the store at the point of sale. This is precisely the point where customers come face-to-face with the employee's and the organization's personality. Reassure customers that you can help them. Ask questions to identify their needs, concerns, or problems.

3. Compliment freely and sincerely

It only takes a second to say something nice to a person. Such comments can add enormous goodwill and move people toward a positive experience. Employees should look for opportunities to say something complimentary to their customers and coworkers. Safe ground for sincere compliments includes:
a. Some article of clothing or accessories they are wearing (“I like that sport coat!” or “Those shoes look really comfortable. I’ve been shopping for something like that” or “What a beautiful necklace.”)

b. Their family (”That’s a great family picture” or “How old is your daughter? She’s beautiful” or “Your son looks like quite the athlete.”)

c. Their behavior (“Thanks for waiting. You’ve been very patient” or “I noticed you checking those items. You’re a careful shopper” or “Thanks for being so cheerful. Customers like you make this job much more fun.”)

d. Something they own (”I like your car. What year is it?” or “I noticed your championship ring. Did you play on that team?”)

4. Call people by name

A person’s name is his or her favorite sound. We appreciate it when people make the effort to use our name in addressing us. Just as in the earlier example about the bank teller calling a customer by name, this action can project a company’s personality to its customers and build loyalty.

When appropriate, employees should introduce themselves to customers and ask their names. If this isn’t appropriate (such as when there is a line of waiting customers), they can often get customers’ names from checks, credit cards, order forms, or other paperwork. Be careful not to become overly familiar too quickly, as some customers may feel it’s disrespectful. We are generally safe calling people “Mr. Smith” or “Ms. Jones,” but we may be seen as rude calling them “Homer” and “Marge.” (This is especially true when younger employees are dealing with older customers.) It’s better to err on the side of being too formal. If people prefer being addressed by their first name, they’ll tell you so.

5. Talk to customers with your eyes

Even in situations where you may not be able to say “hello” out loud or give undivided attention to a customer right away, you can make eye contact. Simply looking at your customer tells him or her much about your willingness to serve. Eye contact creates a bond between you and the customer. It conveys your interest in communicating further.

LOOK INSIDE How Often Do You Compliment?

How frequently do you compliment people? To get a better answer, try this: Carry a note card or small notebook and simply tally each time you compliment someone. After each conversation, jot down the number of compliments you included. Do this for a reasonable amount of time—an hour, half day, or full work day.

Then, to build the habit of complimenting, try this: Set a goal to give 10 sincere compliments each day. Keep track. See what happens. You’ll probably see a sharp increase in your personal popularity. People love to be complimented. And, of course, complimenting internal customers (e.g., coworkers) can help create a supportive and pleasant work climate.
As with your greeting, the timing of eye contact is important. Make eye contact with your customer as soon as possible—within a few seconds—even if you are busy with another person. It’s not necessary that you interrupt what you are doing with the customer at hand. Just a pause and a quick look capture new customers and reduce the chance they’ll feel ignored and leave.

When working with customers, be sensitive to how you look at them. Communication expert Bert Decker says that the **three I’s of eye contact** are intimacy, intimidation, and involvement. Intimacy (as when we’re expressing love) and intimidation (when we want to exert power) are both communicated by looking at another person for a long period—from 10 seconds to a minute or more.³

But most communication in business settings calls for Decker’s third “I”: involvement. In Western cultures, people create involvement by looking at the other person for 5- to 10-second periods before glancing away briefly. This is generally comfortable for people. If you look away more often than that, you may be seen as shifty or suspicious; if you lock in eye contact for longer, it feels like intimidation or intimacy. These traditions vary in other countries.

### 6. Ask often “How am I doing?”

Legendary politician and former New York City mayor Ed Koch would constantly ask his constituents, “How’m I doing?” The phrase became his tag line. There is some evidence that he even listened to their answers. After all, he survived as mayor of the Big Apple for many years. We can learn something from the Koch question.

Businesses need to ask that question in as many ways as possible. In addition to using more formalized measurement and feedback systems, employees should demonstrate an ongoing attitude of receptiveness. Being receptive to people’s comments and criticisms can be challenging and at times frustrating. It takes a lot of courage not only to accept criticism but to actually request it. Nevertheless, getting a constant flow of “how am I doing” information is a critical key to projecting an open personality.

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**SERVICE SNAPSHOT  The Watch Repair Guy**

Mr. Stearn ran a very small watch repair shop. The shop was no more than 10 feet square. He was a real expert at repairing time pieces, and his prices were good. Two customers squeezed into his tiny shop. They were both bent over the work counter while Mr. Stearn adjusted the one customer’s watch. The second customer stood not more than five feet away from Mr. Stearn for several minutes without ever being acknowledged. It was so uncomfortable that the second customer was just about to step out of the shop and go elsewhere when Mr. Stearn finished with the first customer and finally acknowledged the person waiting.

Mr. Stearn ran a real risk of losing a valuable customer before he got a chance to show what he could do—simply because he made no eye contact and did not take the time to welcome a customer.

**Probes**

1. What should Mr. Stearn have done when the second customer came into his shop?
2. How does this illustrate the principle that little things can mean everything?
7. Listen with more than your ears

Since so few people are really good listeners, this skill provides an excellent opportunity to project a positive personality. There is no such thing as an unpopular listener. Everyone becomes more interesting when they stop talking and start listening—to us!

The minimum requirements for good listening are these:

- **Focus on the content of what people are saying, not the way they are saying it.** Customers may not have the “right” words, but they know what they need better than anyone.
- **Hold your fire.** Don’t jump to make judgments or finish a customer’s thought before he or she has finished talking.
- **Work at listening.** Maintain eye contact and discipline yourself to listen to what is being said. Tune out those thoughts that get you sidetracked, thinking about something else.
- **Resist distractions.** Make the customer the center of your attention.
- **Seek clarification from customers to fully understand their needs.** Do this in a nonthreatening way using sincere, open-ended questions.

8. Say “please,” “thank you,” and “you’re welcome”

At the risk of sounding like a self-help book about things learned in kindergarten, “please,” “thank you,” and “you’re welcome” are powerful words for building customer rapport and creating customer loyalty. Stick with these terms and avoid saying something like “there you go” when concluding a transaction. There is really no good substitute for these traditional terms.

When a customer thanks you, respond with “You’re welcome.” Again, stick with this phrase, although a popular favorite seems to be “no problem.” “No problem” seems to imply that you expected the customers to be potential problems, but dealing with them wasn’t as bad as expected. That’s not the message you want to convey. Stick with the basics: you’re welcome.

9. Reassure customers in their decision to do business with you

Marketers talk about the problem of **buyer’s remorse**—the feeling that a purchase was a mistake. This feeling can set in pretty quickly, especially when people make a large purchase. At the time of sale, service providers can inoculate against buyer’s remorse by reassuring customers that they’ve made a good purchasing decision.

Phrases like “I’m sure you’ll get many hours of enjoyment out of this” or “Your family will love it” can help reassure and strengthen the buyer’s resolve to follow through with the purchase and, as importantly, feel good about it. A government agency employee might say, “I’ll bet you’re glad that’s over with for another year” or “I’ll handle the renewal—you’ve done all that is necessary.” Such reassurance can project your personality in positive ways.
10. Smile

As the old adage goes, “You are not dressed for work until you put on a smile.” Or, as a more cynical person might say, “Smile—it’ll make people wonder what you’ve been up to.” But more importantly, it’ll tell customers that they came to the right place and are on friendly ground. Personality is rarely projected without a smile.

Keep in mind that a smile originates in two places, the mouth and the eyes. A lips-only version looks pasted on and insincere. It’s like saying “cheese” when being photographed. It doesn’t fool anyone. In fact, it might scare them away!

The eyes, however, are the windows to the soul and tell the truth about your feelings toward people. So smile with your eyes and your mouth. Let your face show that you’re glad your guest arrived.

Now, in fairness, some people smile more readily than others, and in some business contexts smiling may be inappropriate (at a funeral home, for example). For some people a more serious facial expression is comfortable and natural. But in most cultures, a smile is generally both expected and appreciated when meeting people. If people don’t smile spontaneously, they can practice it. This need not be a Cheshire cat, ear-to-ear grin (in fact, that may really get people wondering) but just a pleasant, natural smile.

Employees can work on their facial expression as an actor would. If you are a person who does not smile readily, work on it by looking in the mirror and practicing. This may sound a bit weird, but the advantages of smiling may call for such drastic measures.

11. Use good telephone techniques

Many customers make their initial contact with a company via the phone. Handling such calls requires some special behaviors, especially if it is the only contact with customers. A key to successful phone use is to make up for all that lost nonverbal communication by using the voice effectively. Here are a few key behaviors that can help project personality when on the phone:

- **Give the caller your name.** Let the caller know who you are just as you would if in a face-to-face situation (via a name tag or desk plaque). Answer the phone with your name.
- **Smile into the phone.** Somehow people can hear a smile over the phone. Some telephone pros place a mirror in front of them while they’re on the phone to remind them that facial expressions can transmit through the wires.
- **Keep the caller informed.** If you need to look up information, tell the customer what you are doing. Don’t leave a caller holding a dead phone with no clue as to whether you are still there.
- **Invite the caller to get to the point.** Use questions such as, “How can I assist you today?” Or “What can I do for you?”
- **Commit to requests of the caller.** Tell the caller specifically what you will do and when you will get back to them. (“I’ll check on this billing problem and get back to you by five this afternoon, okay?”)
- **Thank the caller.** This lets him or her know when the conversation is over.
- **Let your voice fluctuate in tone, rate, and loudness.** You hold people’s attention by putting a little life into your voice. Convey honest reactions in expressive ways. Let your voice tones be natural and friendly.
Use hold carefully. People hate being put on hold. When it’s necessary, explain why and break in periodically to let the person know he or she hasn’t been forgotten. If what you’re doing will take longer than a few minutes, ask if you can call the caller back. Write down your commitment to call back, and don’t miss it.

Use friendly, tactful words. Never accuse the customer of anything; never convey that the person’s request is an imposition.4

12. Reach out and touch them

Physical touch is a powerful form of communication that can impact customer perceptions of personality. Successful employees often take an opportunity to shake hands with a customer or even pat him or her on the back, if appropriate.

A study of bank tellers shows the power of touch. Tellers were taught to place money or receipts in the hand of the customer rather than on the counter. Researchers found that customer perceptions of the bank rose sharply among customers who had been touched in this way. In a similar study, restaurant servers who touched their customers when serving the food or while handing the customers something found that their tips increased dramatically.

Among internal customers and coworkers, a literal pat on the back can build instant rapport. But don’t overdo it; some people resent people who seem too touchy-feely. Recognize different preferences; try touching behavior but be willing to adjust if the person seems uncomfortable or ill at ease. And, of course, the key word here is appropriateness. Never touch a person in a manner that could be interpreted as being overly intimate or having sexual overtones.

13. Enjoy people and their diversity

J. D. Salinger said, “I am a kind of paranoid in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy.” If everyone had an attitude like that, as employees we’d look forward to every meeting with every customer. Of course, we quickly learn that some customers do not seem to be plotting to make us happy. Most are very pleasant. Some are unusual. A few are downright difficult.

Every person is different; each has a unique personality. But the kind of people who offer the richest opportunity for personal growth are the ones who are not like us. If we were all alike, it would be a rather uninteresting world. Accept the wide range of diversity among customers and coworkers and learn to enjoy it. Know that people’s needs are basically the same at some level and that treating all people as guests will create the most goodwill.

Work on verbal discipline. To be more accepting of others, focus your “self-talk”—those internal conversations in your mind—and your comments to others on the positive, and avoid being judgmental. Instead of saying, “Can you believe that ugly dress on that lady?” avoid comment or say in a nonjudgmental way, “She dresses interestingly.” Instead of saying, “This guy will nickel-and-dime me to death,” say, “This customer is very cost-conscious.”

At times you’ll have to force yourself to avoid the negative and judgmental. Accept the challenge and make a game out of it. Sincerely try for one full day to avoid saying anything negative or judgmental about another person. If you make it through the day, shoot for another day. Verbal discipline can become a habit that pays off. You’ll find yourself enjoying people more.
Increased diversity among customers and coworkers is a reality of modern organizations. People come in all sizes, shapes, ages, and with a wide variety of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This variety can make work fun—so long as we back off on judging and treat them like our guests.

People who are different from us are just that: different. Not better or worse. Avoid the tendency to judge; accept the diversity for the quality it brings to our lives.

14. Maintain a positive attitude about selling

Ultimately, great customer service is a form of selling. In business, we treat people well in hopes that they will feel good about buying from us. Despite this reality, some of us hold imagined negative stereotypes about selling. Customer contact people sometimes refuse to call themselves salespeople, preferring terms like “associate” or even “consultant.” Yet everyone is in sales to some degree. We constantly sell (con- vince, persuade, or whatever term you prefer) other people on ourselves, our products or services, and our company.

Like any profession, selling requires certain skills and attitudes. But often these skills and attitudes are different than one might think. For example, it surprises some people to find that you do not need to be an extrovert to be successful at selling. Quiet, thoughtful people often are very successful. A quiet self-confidence is more important than “techniques.” Elwood Chapman, who has trained thousands of salespeople, says that you will likely be good at sales if you agree with statements like these:5

- I can convert strangers into friends quickly and easily.
- I can attract and hold the attention of others even when I have not met them.
- I love new situations.
- I’m intrigued with the psychology of meeting and building a good relationship with someone I do not know.

SERVICE SNAPSHOT  Looking Good at the Auto Repair Shop

“Man, some of these guys look scruffy,” said Roger, the owner of Furrin Auto Repair Services. He was drinking his morning coffee and looking at his crew of mechanics, each getting to work on repair projects for customers. “I wonder what my customers think of these characters?”

Then Roger struck on an idea. He decided to try an experiment. Since each of his repair people was paid on commission for the amount of repair work done (and often, customers requested a particular mechanic to work on their car), he wondered if customers ask for guys who dressed a little better.

That evening he called the crew together and invited the mechanics to volunteer to change their dress and grooming. He would not require this, but if they wanted to participate in the experiment, they could do so. Several agreed to cut their hair shorter, shave daily, and even wear clean uniforms, which Roger provided.

The outcome: Those who cleaned up their act created far more repeat business than the others. The customers would ask for the better dressed mechanics, while those who chose to dress and groom themselves in the “old way” found themselves getting less work.
15. Watch your dress, grooming, and workplace attractiveness

From the moment we meet people, we immediately begin to size them up and draw conclusions about them. What we decide about their character, trustworthiness, and ability is largely a factor of first impressions. And, as the old saying goes, you only get one chance to make that first impression. The way they dress is a first clue.

But remember, the key word in dress and grooming is “appropriate.” Salespeople in a surf shop would look foolish in three-piece suits; an undertaker would look ludicrous in a tank top and shorts. Some organizations issue uniforms to standardize the look of their people. These may be coveralls, full uniforms, or partial uniforms such as blazers, vests, name badges, or logo work shirts. Some employees like these (they save on the costs of a wardrobe) while some resist the sameness of the uniformed look.

Determine what level of professionalism you want to convey to your customers; then create a look that projects your competence and your company’s personality. Your customers notice these things.

SIX ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIORS THAT CONVEY A CUSTOMER-CENTERED CULTURE

In addition to the individual behaviors previously described, a customer also assesses the personality of the entire organization by looking at group behaviors and attitudes. The communication rule that anything can and will communicate still applies to these behaviors, of course. The composite result of group and individual behaviors conveys much about the organization’s culture. If the customer likes a company’s culture, that company is well on the way to building satisfaction and loyalty. The following are some organizational behaviors to consider.

1. Consider your company’s appearance and grooming

What does your customer see when he or she comes to your business? Are the facilities attractive and well maintained? Is merchandise displayed in an appealing manner? Are employee desks tidy? Is the customer or employee lounge area clean and tidy? Does the work space look like an organized, efficient place?

A cluttered work area conveys a sense of disorganization and low professionalism. Look around you, and see what your customer sees. If the view is unappealing, take time and spend some money to make the place look good.

Check, too, for barriers. Often people arrange their work space with a desk, counter, or table between them and the customer. While sometimes this is necessary, it can create a barrier—both physical and psychological—between the customer and the one serving. Companies may establish a better personality by doing the following:

- Invite customers to sit beside a desk with the employee instead of across from him or her.
Offer a comfortable living room-type atmosphere as a place to meet customers or as a waiting area. (An auto body shop had a waiting room that looked like a living room in a nice home, complete with easy chairs, a TV, a coffee table with recent magazines, and even fresh flowers.)
ANOTHER LOOK  Life Would Be Easy . . . If It Weren’t For DIFFICULT People

By Connie Podesta

Every time we communicate with another person, we choose (often unconsciously) to use one of four communication styles: aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. Assertive communication, however, is the only one of the four that enables us to build healthy, happy, and functional relationships. The other three all involve some degree of manipulation, avoidance, or form of game playing that makes it difficult to maintain a relationship built on trust. As business owners, it is imperative we learn to communicate assertively at all times. Our business’s foundation is our reputation. No matter how much we market and advertise, the strongest marketing tool we have is word of mouth. It is vital we have the respect of our customers, vendors, and associates.

Their opinion of us will determine our success and profitability. Therefore, we must learn how to avoid communicating in any way that would undermine our reputation as a fair, honest, and experienced businessperson.

To do that, we must understand how NOT to communicate. At the same time, we will be learning to recognize negative communication patterns and how to react so we will be prepared when difficult people use them to get their way.

AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

The aggressive communicators’ only concern is getting their own needs met regardless of the methods used or the consequences of their actions.

The two most manipulative emotions used when communicating aggressively are HURT and ANGER. People who use HURT attempt to make people do what they want by inducing guilt (whining, crying, playing the “victim,” being moody, etc.) so they can avoid responsibility for their own choices and behaviors. People who use ANGER employ intimidation and control tactics (yelling, put-downs, abuse, sarcasm, etc.) to make others feel frightened and powerless so they can get their own way.

The problem with aggressive behavior is when we use guilt or anger to get our needs met, other people begin to resent us, avoid us, or become aggressive themselves. We cannot have a healthy relationship when either party is being aggressive and using manipulative behaviors.

PASSIVE COMMUNICATION

Unlike aggressive communicators, people who communicate in the passive style seldom say what’s really on their minds. Passive communication is based on compliance and the hope they can avoid confrontation at all costs. Passive means to take the path of least resistance by tuning out, ignoring, avoiding, or backing away and withdrawing from a person or situation rather than dealing with it head on. They often put their needs last in an attempt to be liked by everyone and to please those around them. Unfortunately, in their attempts to please everyone, they usually end up pleasing no one.

PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

The passive-aggressive communication style is probably the most difficult one to deal with in a relationship. A combination of styles, passive-aggressive avoids direct confrontation (passive), but attempts to get even through manipulation (aggressive).

Passive-aggressive communicators avoid confronting others and steer clear of face-to-face discussions, but they nevertheless want to get their own way or make others suffer. And they usually do it behind another person’s back. This style of communication is usually hurtful and can even be dangerous to an organization.

As business owners, we can never afford to have people out to get us and sabotage us behind our backs. Unfortunately, I often see competitors resort to this, thinking their best way to get ahead is to
belittle or demean their competitor. Please remember the best way to get ahead is to always take the high road. Have the best product and the best service available and let your actions speak for themselves. If our customers cannot trust us to be honest, then they will not trust anything else about us either.

**ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION**

Assertive communication is the most effective and definitely the only healthy form of communication. It's how we express ourselves when our self-esteem is intact, giving us the confidence to communicate without games, manipulation, gimmicks, threats, or hidden agendas. When we are being assertive, we work hard to create mutually satisfying solutions. We communicate our needs clearly and forthrightly. We care about the relationship and strive for a win/win situation. However, and this is the part that confuses many people, we NEVER allow ourselves to be treated inappropriately or disrespectfully. Being assertive requires a sincere belief that all individuals, including oneself, are valuable people who are worthy of being treated respectfully. Being assertive uses negotiation rather than manipulation, openness rather than secrecy, and honesty rather than game playing.

Note: Assertive communication is the ONLY communication effective when dealing with difficult people. When we are being assertive we understand we always have a choice of how to behave in a healthy and responsible way.

So now what?

Surely you can identify many people in your own life that favor each of the four styles. In fact, if you are honest, you yourself have communicated in all of the ways at some point or another. Most of us use a combination of these four styles, depending on the person or situation. The styles we choose generally depend on what our past experiences have taught us will work best to get our needs met in each specific situation.

The biggest problem is most of us do not even think about communication at all. We just say what comes to mind, using techniques we have thought worked the best since childhood. As a business owner, however, communication must be thought through. You cannot take a chance on alienating a customer by saying something thoughtless, cruel, or hurtful. On the other hand, you must understand how to react to people who use the techniques on you. Hopefully, you have come to the conclusion life is not about changing other people, but about changing yourself and your reactions to others. Success comes when you learn to take control of your life, your business, and your future by being assertive and making healthy choices, then taking responsibility for those choices.

- Do as some auto dealerships have done: remove all sales office desks and replace them with small round tables. Now the customer and salesperson sit around the table and work together to make a deal. When the table is round, they don't feel as if they are on opposite sides, engaged in "combat" with each other.

Finally, look for customer comfort. Are your customers invited to sit in a comfortable chair? Does your office or store encourage them to relax? Are waiting areas furnished with reading materials, and perhaps a TV? Are vending machines available? Is the vending area kept clean?

Recently, auto dealers have begun to emphasize ways to make their car lots and showrooms, many of which are decades old, more attractive and customer friendly. Some now feature landscaped settings with benches and pathways, different display areas for each auto brand, and interactive systems with screens that show how elements like paint colors and upholstery coordinate together. Take a look at your work areas from the customer's viewpoint.
2. Get customers to interact with your organization

Make it easy for customers to sample the company culture—the organizational personality. We talked earlier about getting customers to promptly order their food, try a new computer, or test-drive a car. Other, perhaps less obvious ways to involve customers may include:

- Personally handing them a shopping cart or basket
- Asking them to begin filling out paperwork
- Inviting them to touch or sample the product
- Offering a piece of candy or fruit while they wait
- Offering a product flyer, information packet, video presentation, or sample to review

If the organizational culture enables such activities, the customer is increasingly likely to have a positive impression of the company's personality. It doesn't matter so much what they do, so long as they begin to do something.

3. Correspond regularly

An athletic shoe store and a rental car agency represent two good examples of the simple idea of correspondence. A week after purchasing some running shoes, customers receive a handwritten note from the store owner simply thanking them for buying. In no fancy prose, it expresses appreciation for the business and invites them to return via a one- or two-sentence message. Similarly, a small city airport car rental desk has employees write thank-you notes to customers when the desk is not busy. The notes are handwritten on the company letterhead and personalized to mention the type of car rented. They thank the customer and invite them to rent again the next time they are in town. The cost of doing this is practically nil since

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SERVICE SNAPSHOT  Touching the Stuff at the Gap

Some retailers arrange merchandise so that customers can easily pick it up. In fact, they are encouraged to do so even though this may call for more work from employees as they continuously refold and re-display product. Marketing expert Paco Underhill describes this:

A trademark of the Gap clothing stores, for example, is that customers can easily touch, stroke, unfold, and otherwise examine at close range anything on the selling floor. A lot of sweaters and shirts are sold thanks to the decision to foster intimate contact between shoppers and goods. That merchandising policy dictates the display scheme (wide, flat tabletops, which are easier to shop than racks or shelves). That display scheme in turn determines how and where employees will spend their time; all that customer touching means that sweaters and shirts constantly need to be refolded and straightened. That translates into the need for lots of clerks roaming the floor rather than standing behind the counter ringing up sales. Which is a big expense, but for Gap and others, it’s a sound investment—a cost of doing business.
the desk is busy when flights come in but then has slow periods in between. Why have employees sit around and waste time when it’s slow? Instead, they write these notes and build customer loyalty.

A print shop sends all customers a monthly package of coupons, flyers, and samples, including a motivational quote printed on parchment paper suitable for framing. Additional copies of the quote are available free for the asking. The mailing acts as a reminder of the quality of the work the shop can do as well as a promotion.

Don’t let your customer forget you. Another way to make customers remember your company is to send them information about upcoming sales, changes in policies, new promotions, and the like. Keep the customer tied in. Likewise, discount coupons or special hours for preferred customers are often appreciated. All correspondence can, of course, be done electronically so long as you gather customer email addresses.

4. Use hoopla and fun

People enjoy working in an organization that has fun. Successful companies have regular rituals, whether they be Friday afternoon popcorn, birthday parties, or employee-of-the-month celebrations or other, more creative celebrations. Excellent organizations are fun places to work; they create rituals of their own.

As a manager at a telephone company, Jim initiated frequent sales contests, complete with skits and prizes. Each time a particular product was sold, the service representative could pop a balloon and find inside a prize ranging from a $10 bill to a coupon good for a piece of pie in the company cafeteria. Employees loved it and got involved. The rewards at such events need not be large or costly. The fact that employees are being recognized, even with little things, can be very motivating for them.

Other ideas to promote fun in the workplace include:

- Employee (or hero) of the week/month recognition
- Awards luncheons (include some tongue-in-cheek "awards")
- Win a day off with pay
- Casual dress days
- Halloween costume day
- Family picnics

Don’t fall into the trap of thinking these things are hokey. Employees at all levels enjoy celebrations and hoopla—and the good cheer can spread to its customers.

5. Reward the right actions

Sometimes organizations inadvertently reward one behavior while hoping for something else. In all too many cases, an organization hopes something will happen but actually rewards an opposite behavior instead of rewarding right actions. For example, a company rewards individuals and departments for never receiving complaints. The hope is that receiving no complaints means the company is doing a good job. In reality, however, you may well bet that no complaints are heard because the complaints are simply being suppressed.

Here are some other examples of possible reward conflicts where the wrong behaviors may be rewarded and the right behaviors ignored:
JetBlue, the airline founded in 2000, keeps looking for ways to stay fresh and customer friendly. At one meeting, Arm Curtis-McIntire, Vice President of Marketing, shows sketches of possible flight attendant uniforms saying “There is my hip-hop request.” The clothing style features the slightly baggy pants crafted by noted designer Stan German.

That offhand comment in a meeting with marketing colleagues shows one reason JETBlue has been the success story among the airlines in the early part of the 21st century. No detail, not even flight attendant uniforms, goes unseen. The company is always looking for ways to update and refresh its image.

Getting the details just so is vital for any business. At JetBlue, customers see little things like satellite TVs facing every seat. The seats themselves are leather and the planes are new. Passengers can assume that if the little things are first rate, the big stuff like safety and reliability are being handled properly as well.

Probes

1. How do the “little things,” like those described in this example, help project organizational personality?
2. What is your initial reaction to JetBlue as a place to work? Would this be an attractive employer for you? Why or why not?

Rewarding employees for fast transaction handling when the customer may be left uninformed or may resent being rushed along. For instance, the restaurant that encourages employees to get the customers fed and out may make people who prefer to eat more slowly unhappy. Or, the buyer of electronic equipment who is rushed may leave the store not understanding how to work the features of his or her cell phone or I-Pod.

Encouraging salespeople to “cooperate with each other to best meet the customer needs” while paying a straight commission. For instance, salespeople practically trip over each other to approach the new customer before the other guy gets him. So much for cooperation.

Encouraging employees to send thank-you notes to customers but never allowing on-the-job time to do so. This creates the impression that it really isn’t that important.

Constantly stressing the need to reduce the amount of return merchandise by docking the pay of clerks who accept too many returns. The result: Customers encounter employees’ reluctance to take back unsatisfactory products.

Paying people by the hour instead of by the task accomplished. Hourly wages are simpler to administer, but they basically pay people for using up time!

The organization’s reward system needs to be tilted to the advantage of the employee who provides excellent service. Any rewards should be given in direct relationship to the employee’s contribution to customer service that is consistent with the company’s mission and service theme.

6. Stay close after the sale

Customers hate a love-em-and-leave-em relationship, yet many companies offer just that. Once the sale is made, the customer goes back to feeling like a stranger. The
relationship with the customer doesn't go beyond the current transaction. There is little or no incentive for the customer to come back or remain loyal.

Look for opportunities to contact the customer after the sale. Establish an ongoing friendship, and they'll keep coming back. Some ideas for contacting the customer after the sale might be:

- Mail thank-you notes
- Call to be sure the product/service met their needs
- Send out new-product information
- Send clippings of interest or newsworthy information that may reassure customers of their good purchasing decisions
- Send birthday and holiday cards
- Invite people to participate in focus groups
- Call to thank customers for referrals

A FINAL THOUGHT

Individual and organizational behaviors convey impressions to customers via little things. Often employees are unaware of how they are coming across and, as such, are at a distinct disadvantage. They run a significant risk of offending or at least failing to impress customers. Broadening our awareness of how other people read our verbal and nonverbal messages is a useful step in improving customer service.

Likewise, just as individuals project their behaviors to customers, so do organizations. The company's collective behavior patterns constitute its culture and may be perceived as favorable or unfavorable by customers (internal and external). The ways managers and leaders interact with subordinates and associates will have considerable impact on the way all employees behave toward customers.

Assignment Portfolio

Summary of Key Ideas

- Behavior is what people do. It is conveyed via verbal or nonverbal communication.
- Individual actions as well as organizational behaviors convey messages to customers which may be productive or counterproductive to the customers' perception of service received.
- Any behaviors (or lack of behaviors) can communicate; the receiver of the message (e.g., the customer) determines what the message means.
- Projecting positive personality depends on both individual actions and the organization's behaviors or culture.
- Individual behaviors that impact customer service include greeting customers, breaking the ice by initiating conversation, complimenting, calling people by name, establishing and maintaining eye contact, asking for feedback, listening skillfully, reassuring customers in their buying decisions,
smiling, using good telephone techniques, using appropriate touching behaviors, enjoying people, and being positive about selling.

Organizational behaviors that tell the customer about your culture include the appearance and grooming of employees, the appearance of work areas, the frequency and quality of correspondence with customers, the propensity to get customers doing something relevant to the buying decision, the use of hoopla and fun to celebrate company successes, reward systems that motivate appropriate employee behaviors, and staying close to the customer after the sale.

**Key Concepts**

- aggressive communication
- appropriate touching
- assertive communication
- behaviors, individual and organizational
- buyer's remorse
- getting the customer committed
- icebreaker
- organizational culture
- passive communication
- passive-aggressive communication
- rewarding right actions
- three I's of eye contact
- verbal discipline

**Reviewing the Facts**

1. What constitutes behavior, and how is it conveyed?
2. How can an organization’s culture impact customer loyalty?
3. What are some specific behaviors that project individual personality?
4. What are icebreakers? How can they best be used with different types of customers?
5. What are the three I’s of eye contact?
6. What are some specific actions you can take to be a better listener?
7. How can physical touch be used to project positive personality?
8. What are some factors that project a company’s culture? List several examples.
9. What are some examples of reward systems that encourage the wrong kinds of behaviors?

**Applying the Ideas: Does Behavior Influence Customer Loyalty?**

1. This chapter implies a strong relationship between behaviors (of individuals and organizations) and the likelihood of customer loyalty. Let’s test that idea. The following are two simple data-gathering forms. The first lists the behaviors discussed in the chapter and invites customers to rate these. The second form asks three simple questions about customer loyalty. We call this the Customer Loyalty Index (CLI).
Select five to ten customers of a given business at random. These may be people who frequent a nearby restaurant, customers of a popular store, or even students in the same school.

Write the name of the company or organization in the blanks on the questionnaire. Make a copy of the following questionnaire for each respondent and administer it to your selected customers. Then score the results as described at the end of the questionnaire.

Write a one-page summary of what you found. To what degree did your samples agree with each other? How do their answers on the first questionnaire relate to the answers on the CLI?

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part I Behavior Questionnaire

When you last did business with, [______________________________], did the employees there

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure or Does Not Apply</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>greet you promptly?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>use opening comments to help you feel at ease?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>compliment you in any way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>call you by name?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>make and maintain eye contact with you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>ask for feedback from you in any way?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>listen carefully to your needs or wants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>say &quot;please&quot; and &quot;thank you&quot;?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>reassure your decisions to do business with them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>smile freely and often?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>use good telephone techniques?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>appropriately touch you (with a handshake, pat on the back, etc.)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>seem to enjoy people and their diversity?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>seem to have good attitudes about selling?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>keep the workplace clean and attractive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>dress and groom themselves appropriately?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>seem to enjoy working for this company?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part II Customer Loyalty Index (CLI)

1. Overall how satisfied were you with [_____________________________]?
   - Extremely unsatisfied/Unsatisfied/Neutral/Satisfied/Extremely satisfied

2. How likely would you be to recommend [_____________________________] to a friend or associate?
   - Very unlikely/Not likely/Maybe/Very likely/Certain

3. How likely are you to do business with [_____________________________] again?
   - Very unlikely/Not likely/Maybe/Very likely/Certain

Scoring

- For Part I of the interview, score 1 point for each "yes" response. The total possible is 17.
- For the CLI, score each item on a 5-point scale from left to right (e.g., the most negative response is a 1, the most positive is a 5, and those in between are 2, 3, or 4).
- After you have tallied scores for your entire sample of customers (five to ten), write a brief analysis of the results. Comment especially on the behaviors that most seem to relate to customer service, as your customers see them.

Applying the Ideas: Hooray for Waffle House

The following was posted on a Waffle House blog by a happy internal customer—an employee:

Hi welcome to the waffle house! There is your official greeting my name is amber i work at waffle house i have for 2 yrs now i’m a grill op. and i love my job. I don’t know many people who can be as proud of their job or love there job as much as i do. my whole family works at waffle house. I have 6 brothers and sisters i am the oldest the youngest is 7. my mom is the unit mgr. I’m a grill op my 16 yr old sister is a grill op my 22 yr old sister is a salesperson, my 16 yr old brother is a our waffle boy. he drops waffles hash browns etc. my 20 yr old brother is a grill op and my 12 and 7 yr old sisters can’t get enough of the place. they come up after school to sweep mop and help do odd and end things. my son 4 yr old son and 3 yr old nephew come to waffle house to eat or help rack eggs all the time. they love it. the owners of our waffle house are so nice and friendly. we talk on! the phone every day. the customers all know us and love the fact that our whole family is there. well at least one on every shift. (it’s an invasion! lol).

As i said before i love my job now i don’t know if that’s all my waffle house songs brainwashing me or if i really do lol. just joking. it’s the only place a family can eat, talk, listen to music and enjoy the ambiance at the same time, and the show isn’t that bad either. so thanks for hearing me out. Oh and the omelet trick is to season your pan w/ nonstick coating and let it set on the grill for a few minutes to get it nice and greasy then drain the grease and go on about your omelet flip. It’s all in the wrist. a nicely seasoned pan doesn’t hurt either.
1. Employees have a dramatic impact on the organization’s personality. What does Amber’s blog posting say about the loyalty of this employee at Waffle House? How does her personality shine through?

2. What elements of personality discussed in this chapter are evident in this case?

3. As a manager of a similar organization, what could you do to encourage the display of such enthusiasm from your staff?

**CONSIDER THIS CASE: HOW DIFFICULT IS IT TO TREAT SOMEONE WELL?**

Marcia and Lamar had just moved into a larger home and wanted to furnish the family room tastefully but without spending a lot of money. Saturday was the day for their furniture shopping, so off they went.

Their first stop was a deep-discount Furniture Barn. The place was appropriately named—it looked like a barn—and its merchandise was piled high in irregular heaps. Some was wrapped in plastic from the manufacturer while others were uncovered and collecting dust. The Barn had a pretty good variety of goods, but the “display” left a lot to be desired. The goods had no posted prices, although the company had a reputation for good deals.

Upon entering the Barn, a middle-aged fellow with a beard, scandals, cut-off shorts, and a sleeveless tee shirt called a greeting to Marcia and Lamar from across the cavernous room where he was stacking dining tables. “Lemme know if ya need help,” he yelled from across the room. But that was the last they saw of him. They wandered around the Barn for about 10 minutes before making a hasty retreat, apparently unmissed.

Their next stop was Whooley Furniture, a few miles away. Here the merchandise was displayed attractively and prices were clearly posted on each piece. Anne, a 40-something woman, greeted them and introduced herself when they came into the store. They shook hands and Lamar introduced himself and his wife as they chatted briefly about what they were looking for. Anne invited them to look around, directed them to the family room furniture section, and said that she would be happy to answer any questions. She mentioned that they had a sale on LazyChair brand recliners and showed them where they were. The saleswoman was dressed in slacks, a yellow blouse, and wore a tasteful necklace. She was quite attractive, although not a raving beauty. She smiled pleasantly and gave them some space as they strolled through the store.

Marcia and Lamar were on a pretty tight budget and the merchandise at the Barn would have probably been cheaper, but about an hour later they had spent about $2,000 with Anne at Whooley Furniture. Asked by friends why they shopped there, Lamar summed it up: We felt like they wanted our business, and Anne became a friend.

**Probes**

1. If you owned the Furniture Barn, what lesson would you learn from this case? What actions would you take?

2. How important is the personality of salespeople in such a business? Would Anne’s approach be appropriate for all kinds of businesses?

*A fictional organization.*
CONSIDER THIS CASE: HOSPITALITY IN THE BIG CITY

When people think of “down home” hospitality, big city hotels don’t generally come to mind. But this past weekend in New York City, Midwesterners Dennis and Sylvia were downright shocked at just how friendly those big city folks can be.

They arrived in New York on a rainy Friday afternoon. The taxi from the airport took almost two hours, but the driver knew the shortcuts through Queens and gave them a running commentary on the various neighborhoods and explained why he chose to avoid the traffic-choked freeways. He also reassured them that the flat rate fare applied and that he was as anxious as they were to get them to the hotel.

Despite the friendly cabby, their patience was wearing thin as they checked into the downtown hotel. But travel exhaustion soon turned to laughter as the desk clerks greeted them warmly and joked about the “liquid sunshine.” The check-in process was quick and painless and they were given a choice of several room options. The bellman, a smiling giant of a fellow, welcomed them to the Big Apple and helped them with bags and got them settled into their room, all the while chatting pleasantly and telling them about the features of the hotel and nearby restaurants.

An hour later, when Dennis and Sylvia decided to go out to dinner, they realized they had forgotten umbrellas and the rain showed no signs of letting up. Overhearing this, the desk clerk offered his own personal umbrella with a smile. All he asked was that they bring it back before he got off duty at midnight “or else he’d have to charge them interest,” he joked.

Probes
1. How does this case illustrate the importance of little things and personality?
2. How important is it to defuse unpleasantness even when the problems are not caused by you?
3. Describe any similar experiences you may have had where people surprised you with unexpected pleasantness. How did it feel?

Notes
4. An excellent 30-minute videotape training program featuring the author is Winning Telephone Techniques produced by JWA Video in Chicago. For information, call 312-829-5100.


9. This was posted on a pro-Waffle House blog by a truly enthusiastic "internal customer"—an employee! See: [www.geocities.com/waffleshrine/](http://www.geocities.com/waffleshrine/). Downloaded April 30, 2006.