

How Leaders Can Unlock Success
Through Caring, Coaching, and Accountability

HONING —THE— HUMAN EDGE

E D W A R D M A D Y



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CHAPTER 5

Customers: Know, Listen, and Deliver

"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully.
Most people never listen."

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Amazon founder and executive chairman Jeff Bezos has said *ad infinitum* that his company is, has been, and always will be “customer obsessed.” Amazon has stood as the world’s biggest online retailer since 1999, so perhaps Bezos is onto something.

Are you customer obsessed? You should be. Your customer relationships are the ultimate driver of your success. Nothing is more valuable. Your customer relationships—and your focus on them—dial directly into your culture, and, crucially, they tie together your strategy, leadership, and team. Most importantly,

when you put the customer first, that customer will last. I like to say, “Don’t treat a Ferrari like a lawnmower.” It’s a way of reminding myself—and my teams—not to undervalue what we have. When you truly understand the worth of your customers, you’ll deliver the kind of service that matches their importance.

Amazon starts with the customer and works backward. Now, we can’t all be Amazon, but I have seen that obsessing about your customers rather than your competitors will drive your organization to be better, work harder, and succeed more often. Conversely, if you become competitor obsessed, you will always find yourself one step behind the market.

“Customer centricity” has become a business buzzword. However, there’s a big difference between proclaiming that you are customer centric and actually *being* customer centric. The latter involves maintaining a customer-focused mindset throughout all aspects of your organization. This means that *all* leaders and teams, not just the direct customer-facing ones, must be always thinking first of the customer.

While I was leading a Ritz-Carlton hotel that had won plaudits for its service, we became a training lab for early Apple teams led by Steve Jobs. They wanted to learn from our highly personalized, customer-centric approach. For example, The Ritz-Carlton allowed employees to spend up to \$2,000 without a manager’s approval to resolve customer complaints immediately.

Apple watched and learned.

Leona Helmsley, for all her flaws, monitored guest comment cards and mined them for actionable information as if they were gold. She not only read them but would call guests, thank them for their business, and ask for details regarding any negative feedback. (She may have been horrible to her employees, but she was all sweetness and light to her customers.)

Customer connection is a key driver for success, and connections today must be as personalized as possible. Increasingly, the customer's own focus is not simply on buying something but on being a part of something. Giving your customers a real sense of ownership and validation creates loyalty and a sense of identification between them and the brand. By creating a robust relationship between the buyer and product or product ecosystem (as Apple has successfully done), brands can increase their customers' lifetime value. This has become key to how we think of customer experience today.

Someone who knew this intuitively and was an expert at creating this sense of identification was the late musician Jimmy Buffett. Buffett always understood the laid-back, "on vacation" mindset of his customers, and he was able to parlay this insight into a very un-laid-back business of music and concert sales, as well as apparel, restaurants, foods, beverages, books, broadcasting, resorts, hotels, RV parks, and residential developments in multiple Sun Belt locations. Everything Buffett built or invested in reflected the brand's message of island escapism, and his customers proudly declared themselves Parrot Heads. That's loyalty. He always said that he shared his customers' "feeling that you just need to get away."¹ And by understanding that and focusing on it in all aspects of his business, he became a billionaire.

Identifying with and understanding every consumer who interacts with your business requires a concerted effort that can be summed up in these fourteen words that can apply to any industry:

Remember me. Recognize me. Anticipate my needs.

Give me what I want on time.

This is my golden rule of customer experience. It applies to earning your employees' loyalty as well, but the star player here is the customer. Everything we do is for the customer, not for us. Without this mindset, and the ability to deliver for the customer, we cannot succeed as a business. The customer calls the shots.

For my teams, the way to give our customers what they want and deserve is to get to know our most valuable customers in depth. If I am listening and observing, our customers will tell me—and show me—what they're looking for. Converting these insights into business differentiators ultimately builds loyalty.

Creating Customer Connections

When it comes to honing the human edge in business, good manners and etiquette are your differentiators. People remember how you make them feel. Listening to customers, respecting their time, and treating them with genuine care isn't just the right thing to do; it's what keeps them coming back.

The CEO of an important client company had stayed everywhere, been everywhere, and seen and done everything. So, when he came to stay at our luxury hotel for four weeks on a working vacation, we wanted to get his stay right.

During his visit, the CEO had typical business travel requirements: state-of-the-art technology, efficient service, good restaurants, and some spa relaxation offerings, mainly for his wife when she joined him. But what he also needed (whether he knew it or not) was to experience a personal connection to our team that would feel surprising and memorable.

One evening, the guest asked the concierge to make a reservation for him and his wife at the hottest restaurant in town. They had a great time, and when dinner was over, their waiter

brought over two dessert wines and said they were compliments of Frankie.

The CEO said, “Sorry, but who is Frankie?”

“Frankie,” the waiter answered, “is the concierge at your hotel. He hopes you enjoyed your meal.”

Our client recognized the powerful connection between our team and this glamorous restaurant and our ability to give him this surprising lagniappe at another business. It was superficially simple, but the personal recognition, and the connection between the hotel and the outside restaurant, had a huge impact and ensured his continuing loyalty to our hotel.

This is customer obsession in action. Frankie used his connections to provide a unique moment that created a lasting memory. Frankie’s gesture was not intrusive nor overly personal, but neither was it faceless or an exercise in box-ticking. Small, thoughtful gestures often have the biggest impact. Frankie’s story illustrates a core hospitality principle: anticipate needs and deliver with a personal touch. These moments build loyalty and leave lasting impressions.

Sometimes, it’s the little things.

So how do you create meaningful, heartfelt customer memories while simultaneously understanding the moving target of customer expectations? First, strive to be generous and to give more than what is expected. Overdeliver. Be patient, build trust, and do your best not to disappoint. If you create the proper conditions, your customers will develop an emotional connection to your brand and become your most valuable business asset. In times of crisis, loyal customers will stand by you. Without that connection, they’ll look elsewhere.

More than once, a hotel under my leadership has been asked to host and produce a dog wedding between loving and consenting

canines, complete with doggie bridal gown and tuxes, a rose petal-strewn aisle, photographers, a minister, loudly barked vows, and a lavish reception with a dog biscuit wedding cake. These events are typically capped by a wedding night in a suite with dog beds. The budgets are usually stratospheric.

Sounds silly, doesn't it? Not to the dog owners, our customers. Consequently, we never cut corners. We take pet weddings as seriously as we do human weddings, with all the usual care to detail and comprehensive staff on hand. Perhaps more, as we add "groundskeepers," walkers, and "treat administrators."

The dogs are not our customers, but their owners certainly are, and recognizing them, remembering them, anticipating their needs, and giving them what they want, on time, is simply what we do. It is our culture.

I divide my formula for successful customer relationships into three stages, each of which can be elaborated to fit your own company's unique needs:

Know + listen + deliver = relationship

These three drivers of meaningful customer relationships should become second nature to you and your team as they become the foundation of your customer-obsessed DNA.

1. Know

Knowing is the first phase, in which you learn your customer's needs. To truly know your customers, you must take the time and effort to understand them deeply and personally: their expectations, interests, social circles, what they care about most, and their way of life. Your brand should cater to fulfilling their emotional

needs. This creates trust and, as customer knowledge expert and author Rachel Botsman notes, trust is key because it represents a “confident relationship with the unknown.”²

For example, an accomplished author traveling to a large resort for the holidays mentioned on social media that his young son, who was coming along with him, was obsessed with Peter Rabbit and would be bringing his Peter Rabbit book along with him on the trip. The resort team had arranged for the guest’s airport car pickup and had been following his in-flight tweets. Reading about Peter Rabbit, they quickly arranged to have an employee meet the family at the baggage claim wearing a bunny suit (which, luckily, the resort had in storage for Easter egg hunts). The writer and his family were wowed, and the resort earned a loyal customer.

At The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco, we saw that guests were often interested in two local experiences: visiting Alcatraz Island’s now-closed prison and experiencing the island’s vibrant green landscape. So we combined a guest field trip to Alcatraz with the opportunity to help preserve the island’s historic parklands. Partnering with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and Garden Conservancy, the hotel brought participating guests to the island by motor coach and boat early in the morning to collaborate on projects to restore the historic gardens of Alcatraz, and then they got to enjoy an educational tour of the island. This customer-driven choice of voluntourism activities became a favorite, and it was in line with many community-centered programs The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company initiated. For example, immediately after Hurricane Katrina, The Ritz-Carlton, New Orleans, team launched home-building visits with Habitat for Humanity.

There’s a big upside to understanding and anticipating your

customer's needs. One way to do this efficiently is to use manual or app-driven preference tracking for your key customers. In the old days, hotel staffers kept notes about guest preferences when they heard (or overheard) guests discussing birthdays, allergies, favorite foods, and the like. Being careful not to be intrusive, staff could share this knowledge and create surprises for guests. Today, there are a great many computer programs that can help you do this, and they're often behind the birthday cards and other recognitions you receive from your own vendors and business partners.

As early as 2000, ski resorts had already begun tracking and storing customer behavior data, collecting information about people's spending and timing preferences via the electronic lift tickets they sell. These resorts could predict, almost to the minute, what time the majority of the sixteen-year-old snowboarders would take a lunch break (usually for pizza) at a mid-mountain lodge on a Saturday in February. This data capture was immediately monetized but, more importantly, it served the customer by ensuring that there was always enough pizza at the right time at the right spot on the mountain.

Do you feel like you understand what your customers want and need? Do you really know your customers, or do you just *think* you know them? When we began analyzing customer social media posts for one of my hotels, we saw that a surprising number of them focused on breakfast. Breakfast seemed like the meal our guests cared about most. By a lot. Who knew? We'd been almost exclusively focused on promoting our fancy, expensive (but less profitable) dinner menu. Paying attention to those posts provided us with the evidence we needed to step up what we now knew to be our critical breakfast game. Make sure you're paying attention too.

2. Listen

Listen to your customers, learn from them, build relationships with them, and they will tell you what they want from you. But just as importantly, *show* them that you're listening. A friend told me that when he and his wife checked into one of our hotels, his wife coughed. The woman checking them in at the front desk asked if she had a cold. His wife said she had a little one, a tickle in her throat. When they got to their room, there was a pot of tea and honey waiting for them, along with a note from the concierge wishing her a speedy recovery.

That's listening. That's *showing* that you're listening. And that's also communicating with the team, as the woman at the front desk had to speak to the concierge, who then organized food services, ordered room service delivery, and took the time to write a personal note.

Listening starts by making a commitment to it on all levels of the organization, acknowledging your blind spots, and working out how to get better at fulfilling and exceeding your customers' needs. Everyone needs to be involved, and you should use whatever tools you can to engage with customers and then incorporate that feedback into shaping and designing your products and services. This way, you can stay ahead of the crowd, differentiating your business from your competitors through the trust you've built with your customers.

These days, listening also means staying on top of (and engaging with) social media posts about your business and products. Nearly every industry has its specific review sites, and there are plenty of channels, including company business listings on Google, where customers can publicly review you as well. Ignore these at your peril. User- or influencer-generated posts are powerful, and you don't want your business to become a target for the wrong

reasons. When responding to an online review, consider it an opportunity to reiterate your product benefits and display your humanity, even if you are responding to criticism. Always be positive, constructive, and respectful. In my own industry, I am especially sensitive to social media comments made by Hollywood celebrities, as these comments can drive millions of dollars toward or away from a business. Hollywood is not just a place on the map; the words of its celebrity residents can provoke responses anywhere, and that's to be taken seriously.

Model Chrissy Teigen, for example, once posted a rave Instagram review of an Italian restaurant, showing herself enjoying their pizza and saying, “The best pizza and best people and actually, newly discovered, the best tomatoes bruschetta has ever been lucky enough to see.” Teigen’s post quickly generated nearly 150,000 likes and, to top it off, was featured in *People* magazine.³ All free advertising for one very happy restaurant.

From tracking technologies to online reviews to customer interviews and more, we have increasing access to a wealth of customer data—much of which we can now act upon in the moment, creating surprise and delivering greater satisfaction to those who give us their business.

3. Deliver

Uphold the highest standards in excellence and service. Be the best. Create strong, engaging teams, products, and experiences that reflect your culture, delight your customers, and make an impact. Show your customers an organization that stands by its promises, continuously tries to improve, and apologizes promptly and sincerely when it makes a mistake. Remember, as well, that

your customers will always measure you by the “what have you done for me lately?” standard. There are no days off.

For example, every Major League Baseball team plays 162 games in a season, which means eighty-one home games’ worth of seats to fill.⁴ Baseball team owners are like the owners of any other business: They need to supply value for the ticket price. But as they’re not in control of the final score, value means delivering an experience beyond winning or losing. That means the food, atmosphere, ease of getting into and out of the ballpark, comfortable seating . . . The list goes on and on. The ballpark experience is about far more than the game.

Really “delivering” can also speak to personalizing and/or customizing the user experience. This topic becomes increasingly important by the day, thanks to technologies that can help businesses deliver “on steroids.” This is particularly true in the luxury sector. Luxury is all about scarcity. It needs to offer curated personalization, customization, value for money, and craftsmanship. These days, personalization has been supercharged, thanks to all the data available to businesses about their customers. And while personalization is about tailoring an experience for the customer, customization is about giving the customer control over their experience. Rather than making assumptions about what the user or customer wants, customization allows each one to create their own experiences.

For example, when Netflix uses data (what you have watched in the past) to suggest streaming options that it believes will match your taste, that’s personalization. You do not control what options are presented or delivered to you. Conversely, Spotify gives you the power to create your own playlist of songs. That’s customization of delivery. You’re in control. Customer centricity lives.

The Human Heart of Luxury

Luxury isn't a static concept. It's alive—constantly evolving, shaped by the desires, values, and aspirations of the people it serves. I've spent my career immersed in the world of luxury, from The Beverly Hills Hotel to Hotel Bel-Air, and one thing I've learned is this: Luxury is as human as the people who define it.

At its core, luxury is about emotion. It's not just about beautiful surroundings or flawless service—it's about how you make someone feel. True luxury touches the soul. It creates a connection, a moment of joy, or even a sense of belonging. But here's the thing: what people want—what they value—changes over time. And so, luxury must change with it.

Decades ago, luxury was about exclusivity. It was velvet ropes and whispered conversations in hushed hallways. But today, people don't just want to be served—they want to be seen. They want to feel known, understood, and valued. The new luxury isn't about keeping people out; it's about inviting them in. It's about personalization, ultra-customization, and creating something so unique that it feels as though it was made just for them.

I often say, "Luxury is when you start caring about something you didn't think was possible." True scarcity in luxury doesn't lie in its price tag or availability; it's found in crafting moments that create purpose. It's about touching emotions that people didn't even know they had—those moments of surprise and delight that leave an indelible mark.

That's the power of great design, thoughtful service, and meaningful experiences—they open doors to new emotions and discoveries. It's why I believe luxury is so closely linked to the fundamentals of humanity. Both are rooted in connection, empathy, and the desire to make a difference. Businesses across all industries can learn from this: prioritize care, connection, and personalization to foster loyalty and trust.

There's no finish line in luxury. What was ground-breaking yesterday is expected today, and what's expected today will be outdated tomorrow. But that's what makes it exciting. Luxury evolves with people—it listens, it learns, and it adapts. When leaders embrace this humanistic approach, they can create not just memorable experiences but transformative ones.

At the end of the day, luxury is a mirror. It reflects our values, our aspirations, and our shared humanity. As long as we stay attuned to those deeper needs and craft moments that truly resonate, luxury will remain not just relevant, but timeless.

The Paradox Mindset

Rarely is anything crystal clear in leadership (or baseball), and living with two sides of any story is part of the job. I call this necessary skill the “paradox mindset,” and it means that at times, our actions and decisions may appear counter to each other despite being interrelated.

I’ve learned a great deal about the paradoxes in customer relationships by collaborating with Metis (discovermetis.com), a company that uses technology to identify and study the contradictions between what people say and how they feel or what they actually want. Metis connects the dots by comparing what people say to what they don’t say, thus unearthing the paradoxes, dualities, and hidden truths in what customers are really thinking.

To illustrate this, let’s consider Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity. One aspect of this theory posits that an object could appear to be stationary and moving quickly at the same time, depending upon the observer’s frame of reference. In other words, there is no absolute state of motion or stillness. Objects only move relative to each other, so the same object can be still or in motion, depending on how you look at it (and whether you, yourself, are in motion). In leadership terms, that’s the paradox mindset: the ability to see things from different angles to embrace seemingly contradictory points of view. That’s what makes us agile leaders.

I once faced a deep duality when advising a pro sports team whose popularity with the public was sinking. They knew they

had to rack up more wins on the field, but they also had invested heavily in modernizing their stadium, introducing new gourmet food and drink options, upgrading the stadium sound system and playing hipper tunes, even redesigning the players' uniforms to make them more fashion forward.

It wasn't working. None of it. What were their customers thinking but not saying? What else could they do to attract customers?

We did some extensive, cross-generational consumer research for them, using person-to-person interviews as well as comprehensive digital assessments. As it turns out, fans didn't want oysters or fish tacos; they wanted peanuts, popcorn, and Cracker Jacks. They wanted familiar music they could sing and dance to rather than the coolest tunes topping the charts. They wanted a clean and comfortable venue but not necessarily a modern, steel-and-glass masterpiece. In other words, the team and venue were going to have to move backward in order to move forward. The past had come, paradoxically, to represent progress. We had our work cut out for us, but at least we now knew where we needed to go. It was like when our hotel guests told us they really didn't care about our fancy dinners: They just wanted a good, familiar breakfast.

What might understanding your customers, in all their paradoxes, be like in your business? For one thing, you can't just think about making a sale as the win, the be-all and end-all. You must ask, how was it delivered? How did you follow up? The experience your customer has with your company will make or break their view of you and your products. Filling the seats (or selling the product) isn't enough. You want those seats filled by people who are happy they came and will share their joy, no matter the final score.

For me, a problematic guest interaction at one luxury hotel remains a great example of knowing, listening, and then delivering for the customer. We once had a guest call the front desk, angry that he had placed a pizza in the microwave oven in his room and the pizza was not warming up. A very confused manager went up to see what was going on. She was confused because . . . we didn't have microwave ovens in the rooms.

When the manager arrived, she saw that the guest had put his pizza in the room safe. The pizza was certainly secure, but it was never going to warm up.

What would you do at this point? Here's what our manager did. Rather than embarrass the guest, she apologized and radioed for a freshly made pizza to be brought to the room, gratis. Later, a new safe was installed; the old one was a bit sticky.

In a sensitive case like this (and in all cases, really), it's all about *doing* right, not *being* right.

In another (literal) example of delivery, a guest at a resort I oversaw wanted to buy a Lexus and pay cash, but he hated automobile showrooms. He asked the concierge to arrange for the purchase and have the car delivered to the resort, along with any papers he needed to sign. Within two hours, the guest had his car and was tooling around. Unfortunately, the customer had decided to take the car for a spin before getting it insured. Of course, he wrapped it around a tree almost immediately. He was fine, but the car was totaled.

The concierge stayed with the guest (who was pretty upset), hanging in there for the filing of police reports and the arrival of a tow truck. He also arranged for a rental car in the guest's name to be brought over to where he was now stranded by the tree—with maximum insurance coverage in place, of course.

How do your customers shape your business?

Beyond the purchase and use of products and services, how does your business further interact with its customers? In your next team meeting, try to inventory everything you're doing to serve and engage with your customers. For instance, are you listening to them in person and online? Are you preserving and acting on their calls and correspondence with you? What feedback collection tools do you use, and are you storing that data in a central location accessible to those who can act on it? Who receives this feedback, and how is that information shared within your organization? What priority are you giving it?

Team feedback exercises like this can lead to discussions about new and better ways to learn about your customers and stakeholders and to act upon their preferences. Imagine you own a sports team. Try discussing how best to serve the community, fans, ticket holders, sponsors, retail and facility partners, media, players, employees, fellow leaders, and future recruits. In one way or another, these are all your customers.

Customer Needs and Wants

There are various levels of customer experience, but as it happens, I have mostly worked at the luxury level. Customers' functional needs always matter, but in luxury-level markets, we find that emotional needs can be more prominent drivers. The right emotional connections can supersede functional needs in a guest's decision-making. And the consistent satisfaction of emotional needs in luxury hotel guests, for example, will often create deep brand loyalty and intention to return.

You can think about these needs more broadly by applying the thinking of Harvard Business School Professor Dr. Clayton Christensen, who speaks of brands being hired to do a job. He calls it "jobs to be done," and it provides a

helpful way to look at customer needs and motivations for buying your product or service.⁵

Dr. Christensen shares the story of a fast-food restaurant chain that wanted to increase its morning milkshake sales. The company started out by applying every trick of the marketing trade—but sales did not budge. Then they did something much more brilliant. They talked to actual morning milkshake purchasers about how they drank their shakes on their way to work. It turns out that most morning milkshake purchases were made for the same reason: Customers faced a long and boring commute and needed something to keep that extra hand busy and make the commute more interesting. They weren't yet hungry, but they knew that they would be in a while—so they wanted to eat something that would stave off hunger until lunch. At the same time, they faced constraints. They were in a hurry, they were wearing work clothes, and they had only one free hand while driving. A milkshake was easier and tidier than a bagel or doughnut, and trying to suck a thick shake through a straw gave them something to do during their long drive. A milkshake proved to be the perfect way for the company to address customers' morning emotional needs. There was a job to be done, and the milkshake did it.

What's the job of your brand or product? And how might it apply to your customers' personal, emotional needs (versus specific product preferences)? It works for luxury, and it can work for other sectors as well.

The Luxury Contingent

When serving on the advisory board for an ultra-luxury development in Asia, I focused my remarks on how to launch and lead an exclusive travel brand. Our advisory board included members of the very top hotel, travel, wellness, sport, fashion, and lifestyle entities in the world—in some cases, businesses that offered products of such rarity that few people have ever seen or touched a piece of their merchandise.

What we discovered is that every board member in the room had met success with the same proven approach toward branding to high-net-worth

consumers. I share this approach below, for anyone seeking to serve customers in the lucrative (and often glamorous) field called “luxury.”

First, define your target customers and the experience, service, or products that will have a visceral—i.e., emotional—impact on them. When leading Hollywood-area luxury hotels, I defined our customers internally as “Global Hollywood Elites,” followed by “Global Elites,” and then by “Status Seekers.” Typically, my teams do not market beyond those three groups, because non-elite sectors deliver less per-transaction revenue, and our hotel business model relies on scarcity and rarity as the keys to rate optimization.

I make sure that our scarcity rationale is spelled out to all new team members so that we’re on the same page when it comes to what customers we’re chasing. Sure, we could attract loads more bodies by selling bare-bones travel experiences through a warehouse superstore—but that would move us into the area of mass market versus luxury. That’s not how we are positioned.

Here’s what the luxury consumer will expect from a service or product. The emotional factor is powerfully present: impeccable craftsmanship, heritage and authenticity, exclusivity driven by scarcity, contemporary relevance, discretion and confidentiality, well-mannered and gracious service, and personal recognition. These factors are deeply meaningful for every one of our customers, especially because luxury purchasers share a profound need and desire for personal recognition. The importance of visuals and other sensory impacts also plays a role here.

Have you read about celebrities or VIPs offended by mediocre service who loudly exclaim “Do you know who I am?” Well, trust me, this is a real thing, and recognition is the way to luxury consumer’s hearts.

Here are three examples of luxury businesses who don’t always get it. These stories are true—and current.

1. An influential hotel journalist visited a new hotel for a formal review. Typically, luxury properties will have apps, mechanisms, and training in place to prepare front desk staff for VIP arrivals. In this case, the process clearly applied to the journalist in question, as he had already had over three hundred stays at the parent brand’s various hotels in the same city, publishing his reviews widely on internet forums for the

luxury travel industry. When the VIP arrived to check in, he was not greeted personally, he had to wait in a long line, and the young woman checking him in said, patronizingly, "Welcome, Mr. _____. Have you ever stayed with us before?" The stay itself, and the review, went downhill from there.

2. The celebrity star of a TV talk show wanted to buy an "it" handbag from an esteemed leather goods brand. Pricing for such bags begins at about \$10,000 and rises from there. When the TV star went to a brand boutique to make her purchase, she was turned away and told, "Well, you have to be meaningful enough to our brand to qualify to buy this bag. I see that you don't have a history with us, so I'm sorry. We just can't help you with a bag, but would you like to buy a scarf or bracelet instead? That way, you can get started with us." The news segment of the next morning's talk show was highly entertaining and lent new meaning to the word "snark."
3. A renowned luxury hotel approached an electric vehicle manufacturer about leasing and parking one of their cars at the hotel's front porte cochere, where a sleek EV charging station was to be located. The high visibility and luxury tie of such a collaboration made sense, and the hotel was willing to pay market rates for the vehicle lease. The national sales director for the car brand laughed at the hotel leader and snubbed her, saying, "Are you kidding? We have a two-year waiting list for cars, including George Clooney. We don't need you." The hotel went on to work with another luxury partner, and in other Tesla news . . .

Here are a few consumer expectations I have had to fulfill as a leader of luxury hotels. Because guest recognition is essential, I said yes in all cases.

- One guest wanted us to create a Broadway dressing room-style makeup mirror—with those big, round light bulbs around the edges—in the shape of a butterfly and have it installed in her suite. She also asked that it smell like her favorite perfume.
- Our engineering team was once tasked with installing a large disco ball, complete with special lighting, above the bed in a musician's guest room. Arrangements were made so that a watcher in the lobby

would radio to a team member near the room when the singer entered the hotel. This ensured that the disco ball was lit up and the artist's favorite song playing when he entered his room.

- We once had to arrange for a jewelry store to bring more than \$1 million worth of watches and \$10 million worth of diamonds for a guest. The treasures were then presented on a large velvet cloth placed directly on the guest's bed, all watched over by an armed security team.
- On one occasion, we had to dress an entire guest room floor with white pillowcases and have them laid over every inch of that space. This was after the guests had checked in, so the operational side of it was memorable.
- I have often had to rent the latest luxury sports car that meets the particular image requirements of a guest. Yes, that can mean a white Ferrari with a gold steering wheel.
- A team member was assigned to answer guest comment cards. One guest wrote that he was angry that the level of water in our toilets gave his privates an unwelcome bath. He went on to say if we didn't take steps to change the water level, he would not return. Yes, of course, we fixed the toilet . . .

The concept of "compromise" typically does not exist in the hearts and minds of ultra-high-net-worth individuals when they are seeking ultra-luxury. This means a good stay or even a great stay is not the goal. We'd rather deliver a once-in-a-lifetime stay that will become a core memory. It's like delivering an "immaculate inning" in baseball, when a pitcher strikes out all three batters in an inning, with nine pitches total. No runs, no hits, no walks—three strikes per batter. It's a sports rarity, but that's the goal with a great hotel stay as well.

Also, when delivering luxury, you may not love every customer—but try to avoid passing judgment. Holding one's tongue is an art. I've been there. For example, a well-known reality TV star once launched a destructive social media campaign against my hotel because she did not like the hotel's ownership group. She got loads of exposure for herself by posting vituperative remarks about that owner, telling her followers not to visit the hotel or its

restaurants. She was fierce and relentless in her messaging, and we suffered for it.

Unbeknownst to most of the world, though, there's more to this story. Before she went political, this reality TV name would have lunch at the hotel restaurant every single day, always ordering the house specialty salad, which was her favorite. Throughout the several weeks of her social media war against the hotel, she would surreptitiously send her assistant to the loading dock of the restaurant, every single day, right at noon, to pick up one of our house salads for her boss. No way she was going to give up the salad—and walk her talk!

Why Customer Obsession?

If you don't think your organization is sufficiently customer obsessed, take a look at the process advances and adjustments you can make to move the customer directly into your team's line of sight. Your team should be trained and empowered to collaborate and put their obsession into action. For example, "keeping track" is a priority among customer-obsessed and customer-centric organizations. Each engagement or conversation with a customer is noted and summarized. It is then made accessible to all team members so that collaboration within the team takes place with the customer in mind.

An example of this can be seen in the online chat mechanisms of major airlines. I fly a lot, and I've often had issues and needed repeated assistance with date and route changes. When I would visit the online chat of American Airlines, all of my related conversations with their customer service representatives over the past several years would pop up in chronological order so any member of their service team could see and act upon my known preferences and concerns. That tracking mechanism was very

helpful to me as a traveler, and it also allowed the airline to serve me more easily and intuitively.

But there may not always be a system or protocol in place to help you best serve your customer. We once had a hotel staffer who put the wrong suitcase into the trunk of a guest's car. The team members were concerned about what to do and how to fix the possibility of having two very unhappy guests. There was no record as to what car had received which suitcase.

The departmental leader harnessed the team, and they ended up chasing the misplaced suitcase an hour up the road and doing a quick trunk switch. The suitcase was rescued and returned to its rightful owner. (As it turned out, that misplaced suitcase was filled with about half a million dollars in jewelry!)

The crisis lesson here is that people and teams working together can often come up with ad hoc process adjustments or the simplest (and most expedient) solutions when systems are lacking. Calm, collaborative, and flexible team-centric problem-solving is a sign of customer obsession in action.

Here's another example of getting it right after getting it very, very wrong. A VIP guest checked into a Florida resort, leaving his new Ferrari with the parking valet. Later that evening, the guest and his wife took resort transportation to dinner at a nearby restaurant. They were sitting and enjoying a couple of glasses of wine, mildly gazing out the window at the road in front of the restaurant, when suddenly, they saw two cars revving their engines, getting ready to drag race. One was a Porsche, and the other a very familiar-looking Ferrari.

The two vehicles roared, burned rubber, and rocketed down the road.

The guest immediately called hotel security. Security checked the camera footage and saw the Ferrari leaving the resort with

the valet attendant behind the wheel. He was quickly fired. The guest's purloined car got a wax, wash, and tune-up, compliments of the resort. The property also comped the guest's entire stay and invited him to return.

Turning a negative into a positive is a critical part of the customer apology and retention process. While you're finessing your own team's processes, think customer specifics. Do you know your key customers well enough to be able to surprise and delight them? One of my hotels hosted a man and a woman, each of them single and frequent guests, who had met in the city as childhood friends. They reconnected as adults and decided to meet at the hotel for a nostalgic reunion. After two days, they decided to get married.

Assessing the situation even before there was a proposal, our concierge—guessing what may have been in the offing—went online and quickly got a license to perform marriages. Just in case, she also tracked down a harpist. When the engagement was announced, the team was ready. The concierge quickly hired the harpist, rented a bridal gown and tux for the couple, arranged for the chef to create a wedding cake, secured hair and makeup support, and had flowers placed throughout the suite. It was a beautiful wedding in the presidential suite and, from start to finish, it all came together in just six hours.

On the less celebratory side of things, customer obsession can also save the day during a painful crisis. Many businesses experienced customer abandonment during the pandemic's supply chain disruptions and the inflation that followed. With prices rising steadily, the customers who stayed by our side were typically those whom we took good care of in the best of times. It's the one-and-done consumer who disappears or goes price shopping when a storm hits—even though your price isn't always

your value. To nurture your customer ties before trouble arrives, consider sending handwritten thank-you notes to your loyalists, inviting them to a private dining event, or offering some other gesture to let them know you value their patronage.

A friend of mine was a very frequent customer of a major airline. She was thrilled once to receive a note from the CEO inviting her to dinner and a group chat where she could tell him about her flying experience. At the end of the dinner, she was given thirty thousand bonus miles for her time. My friend burned through those miles and still flies that airline exclusively to this day, even though inflation has required her to downgrade to the least expensive destinations or flight times. When asked why she's so loyal to the airline, she says, "Because they know me."

Customer relationships are built on shared experiences. These are impossible to replace or match in value; they are the ultimate currency of customer loyalty.

Seize every opportunity to interact with your customers. Listen to them, learn from them, build relationships with them. In return, they will show you your blind spots and tell you how to get even better at exceeding their needs.

Think long term, create memories, and act from the heart. Emotions have tangible value. Additionally, make sure, as author Jim Collins (of *Good to Great* fame) emphasizes, that you've got "the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus."⁶ Build and educate your teams to be as customer obsessed as you are. Place customer delight at the forefront of their purpose. Your selection and onboarding process is critical in this regard.

If becoming customer obsessed seems like a lot of work, it is. But you, of course, are not lazy.

Follow-up: How would you or your leadership team answer these questions?

1. What is customer obsession, and what have you done personally to demonstrate customer obsession or customer centricity?
2. Have you ever called a customer directly to hear their opinion or provide reassurance?
3. What are the risks to customers when an organization engages in a merger or acquisition?
4. Do you want your customers to be your friends? Why or why not?
5. Share an example of how the “know, listen, deliver” formula has helped you resolve a customer problem.



Author photograph by Fadil Berisha

About the Author

Named Hotelier of the World by *Hotels Magazine*, in recognition of his leadership of The Beverly Hills Hotel, Hotel Bel-Air, multiple Ritz-Carlton hotels, and Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, Edward Mady is a partner and chief operating officer for The Masterpiece Collection Ltd. He also provides coaching and consulting services to clients in hospitality, sports, philanthropy, luxury, consumer goods and services, aviation, retail, health care, entertainment, business, and human resource management.

Named one of *Angeleno* magazine's twenty-five most influential people in greater Los Angeles, Mady played a pivotal role in The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company's unprecedented capture of two Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards—a first for the hospitality industry. He currently serves as a board member for Surf Air Mobility, a publicly traded company transforming

regional flying through electrification and software, and he is a member of the board of the Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation and the International Advisory Board of the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is also a key industry advisor for the Cornell Institute for Hospitality Labor and Employment Relations and has served on the boards of directors for the Beverly Hills Conference and Visitors Bureau, the Hotel Association of New York City, the Hotel Council of San Francisco, the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Nob Hill Association, and the UCLA Extension Executive Hotel Management Program. Additionally, Mady has been involved in numerous philanthropic efforts supporting organizations that include the Motion Picture Television Foundation, Make A Wish Foundation, Meals on Wheels, and the Animal Rescue Foundation.

Prior to joining Masterpiece Collection, Edward Mady was general manager of The Beverly Hills Hotel and Regional Director, USA, for Dorchester Collection, also overseeing Hotel Bel-Air. Earlier, he spent two decades with The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, serving most prominently as vice president and area general manager overseeing five Ritz-Carlton hotels and resorts. His humanistic approach to leadership and crisis management has been covered in multiple articles in *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, and *Forbes*, and properties under his leadership have earned more than 128 of the world's top luxury rankings, including *Forbes*/Mobil Five Star, AAA Five Diamond awards, and coveted Michelin stars.