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How to Talk to Customers

**CREATE A GREAT IMPRESSION
EVERY TIME WITH MAGIC**

Diane Berenbaum
Tom Larkin



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

PRAISE FOR *HOW TO TALK TO CUSTOMERS*

“I hope you believe in MAGIC, because this system can really help you build the generous, intimate, personal relationships with customers that will power the growth of your business!”

—Keith Ferrazzi, author, *Never Eat Alone*, and CEO of professional development and consulting firm Ferrazzi Greenlight

“If you deal with people, this book is a must-have! The relationships with your ‘customers’ (clients, coworkers, family, and friends) will flourish as you put MAGIC to work.”

—Jason Checketts, manager of learning and development, Wells Fargo

“There’s no greater way to help your team build a culture of customer service than by using the MAGIC system. You’ll see results immediately . . . and those results will truly amaze you (and your customers!).”

—Brian Cole Miller, author, *Quick Team-Building Activities for Busy Managers*

“MAGIC is one of those simple-but-far-from-easy ideas that can revolutionize a company because it transforms how people think and act. At FreshDirect, we believe in MAGIC and strive to practice it daily.”

—Dean Furbush, CEO, FreshDirect

“Any call center senior executive, manager, supervisor—or anyone who talks to your customers—should read this book then commit to applying its simple principles. Tom and Diane bring to light the fact that all consumers are seeking a unique experience from companies today, and this is it.”

—C. Paul Turner, managing director, Training and Performance Improvement, Citifinancial Mortgage, Inc., and Citicorp Trust Bank, fsb

“Any organization interested in creating passionate and loyal customers should read this book. The MAGIC system shows you how to impress even the most discerning customers.”

—Rudy Escalante, CEO, ICSA Software North America, Inc.

“I love *How to Talk to Customers!* I want this to be required reading for our employees going forward.”

—Monica Kelly, quality analyst, account services,
Colonial Supplemental Insurance

“One of the most useful manuals for companies and individuals who are serious about exceeding customers’ expectations. Follow the 5 MAGIC Steps, understand why words are perceived as tragic and how they can become MAGIC, and MAGIC will become part of your company—and personal culture.”

—Jansje Stramwasser, senior training manager,
Convergys Employee Care

“The journey required to develop a long-term relationship begins with that first, critical face-to-face conversation. Berenbaum and Larkin have created a masterful roadmap for how to build immediate rapport and lay the foundations for enduring trust.”

—Andrew Sobel, author, *Clients for Life* and *Making Rain*

“What distinguishes you from your competition is often the customer’s perception of his or her service experience. Read this book to discover practical ideas that you can use to delight your customer, every time.”

—Deb Ketcham, manager of process improvement,
ACCO Brands Corporation

“Trust-based supplier-customer relationships are the wave of the business future. *How to Talk to Customers* is the handbook of how to create and navigate those critical relationships.”

—Charles H. Green, founder and president,
Trusted Advisor Associates

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In memory of Bobbie Chila,
who epitomized the spirit of MAGIC and never wavered,

and

To our clients and certified facilitators around the globe,
who bring MAGIC to life in their organizations.

This book could not have been written without you.

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P R E F A C E

It seems so simple, yet it is rare. In fact, we're still surprised when it happens.

When you answer the phone, it's nice if you sound like you are having a great day. Sound like you are happy to hear from me. When I walk into your store, look me in the eye and offer a genuine smile. Greet me as you would like to be greeted.

It seems so simple. So why are examples like these the exception rather than the norm?

The late Buckminster Fuller, American visionary, designer, architect, and inventor of the geodesic dome, was one of these great exceptions. Ten minutes shy of giving a speech to thousands of people in a huge auditorium, he had disappeared. Finally someone found him in the public restroom. He was picking up trash off the floor and wiping the counters around the sinks. The person said to him, "Mr. Fuller, what are you doing? Aren't you speaking in ten minutes?"

He replied, "Oh, I'm just cleaning my bathroom."

Whose world is it? Whose responsibility is it to make it a place where we like to be? Bucky felt it was his. And we feel it is ours.

Can actions like Bucky's become the norm? We think so. This book was written because we are passionate about *interpersonal sustainability*. We believe in treating each other in such a way that our actions make a positive contribution to another's day. Every interpersonal contact should contribute to the desire to be in a continued relationship with the other party.

We'd love to think about what *that* could do for business, and for mankind.

It seems so simple.

We actually believe it is. This book is filled with commonsense, instantly applicable ideas and tools that you can use to Make A Great Impression on the Customer (or anyone). To be MAGIC®.

Having over twenty-five years of experience in interpersonal training and consulting, we decided it was time to reach a broader audience and share our findings with the world. We are grateful that our publisher, Jossey-Bass, feels the same way. Our hope is that you will find the ideas useful and the stories inspiring.

Results matter, and so does the process used to get those results. In this book, we outline a logical process that yields tangible results. Making every contact MAGIC can be simple, and we guarantee you will stand out in the crowd if you apply these concepts in your daily business and personal interactions.

As you heighten your awareness of what the gold standard of customer service looks and feels like, you will see just how many little moments you have every day to make a difference. You will also become increasingly aware of how many hundreds of missed opportunities there were where you could have been treated better.

Our goal is to bring about a sea change so that the new norm is simply MAGIC. You will know when this is happening when you interact with like-minded people who are as excited about making your day better as you are about doing the same for them.

Have fun cleaning your restrooms. We'll see you there.

It really *is* that simple.

Westport, Connecticut
January 2007

Diane Berenbaum
Tom Larkin

How to Talk to Customers

PART ONE

The Essence of MAGIC

INTRODUCTION

Five **MAGIC**, Memorable Minutes

“We met in a hotel lobby in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was in town for the funeral of a dear family member. Gus was new at the hotel, but brought years of experience to his job at the front door. He had checked luggage at American Airlines for over thirty years.

“As I sat waiting for other family members to come downstairs that morning, I watched Gus in action—his gentle greeting, his outstretched hand; all were being welcomed in as family.

“Soon after that, I looked up to discover his hand was stretched my way with the same warm welcome I’d seen over and over again. Where the lobby had been bustling with ins and outs earlier, now all was quiet. He lingered, and we began to talk of life and family, and how much he loved his job. Soon my husband arrived. As we prepared to leave, Gus asked if he could follow along with our bags.

“He continued to visit with us. His gentle words were a warm blanket around my heart, as I admitted to myself that I had been wrestling with the events of the day. By the time we reached the car, my concerns about my family and the days ahead had lifted.

“Gus loaded our luggage into the car, then turned to me and said, ‘Now I’m going to tuck you into your car and thank you for our time together this morning.’

“As we drove off, he bowed, and I felt comforted by his presence. If only he knew how he had blessed me that morning. Perhaps he does.”

Isn't this the way customer service is supposed to be? Isn't this the type of interaction you wish you had every day? Yet the problem of poor customer service only seems to get worse.

Every once in a while, however, we as consumers have a truly wonderful experience as a customer of a company. These interactions leave us feeling so positive about our purchase, our relationships with the company, and ourselves that we say, "The experience was magic!" From LL Bean to American Century Investments to Nordstrom, there are a select few organizations—some you have heard of and some you haven't—that serve their customers at world-class levels day in and day out.

Although our opening story describes no more than five short minutes in one woman's life, those five minutes were certainly memorable. They were, indeed, MAGIC. (Throughout this book we will use the word "MAGIC" to describe any contact that "Makes A Great Impression on the Customer"—it's also the name of our customer service training program.)

Unfortunately, in many customer service interactions, five minutes can just as easily turn "tragic" instead. To illustrate this, we'll share the story of another colleague of ours.

Five **Tragic**, Memorable Minutes

"I recently had a very unfortunate phone call. I had discovered that I was not receiving certain e-mails.

"My conversation with the computer help desk person was like a 'Who's on first?' routine. First, he tested my computer and told me it was fine. No problems whatsoever. I told him that I knew of at least two e-mails that I had not received, and I was concerned that there were more. As I sent e-mails to myself, I received about nine out of ten. He sent me two, which I received, so he said all was well. I was not convinced.

"As a way to solve the problem, he wanted me to *send him all of the e-mails I had never received*. I'm not kidding! He needed to know when they were sent and how large they were. I tried to explain that I could not forward nor provide detailed info on e-mails that I never received. But he never understood.

"He never solved the problem. Later, I figured out that I had my e-mail open on another computer in the house, and it would download e-mail automati-

cally every fifteen minutes or so. Those e-mails were counted as ‘delivered,’ so they never showed up in the e-mail box of my primary computer.

“No matter—thanks to that phone call, my frustration level was through the roof.”

Everyone knows what it feels like to be in the shoes of our second colleague. You want to scream (and sometimes you do)! After those five tragic minutes that our colleague spent on the phone, she felt angry and frustrated—and certainly not likely to call technical support again. In contrast, the five MAGIC minutes described in our first story created a warm, pleasant memory that will be not only remembered for quite some time but retold again and again. Interactions like these, as short as they may be, can have a surprisingly strong personal impact, and they often affect how you feel for hours, days, and even months after they occur.

EFFECTIVE, MAGIC COMMUNICATION

Experiences such as these happen to all of us every day. It is exceedingly important to recognize both types of interactions and their effects. They represent two ever-present, distinct possibilities.

The disparity between those two possibilities carries far-reaching ramifications well beyond customer service interactions and into your personal, everyday life. How you communicate is the most dominant factor in your relationships with others—and, in turn, in the satisfaction you derive from your career and personal life. Simply put, your communication affects how others see you. In that sense, effective communication is at the heart of your ability to create an impression that puts you—your career, your business, and who you are as a person—in the best possible light.

Being a truly gifted communicator doesn’t come naturally to most of us. In fact, communicating effectively today might even be more of a challenge than it was in the past. Today, we are all forced to contend with e-mails, voice messaging, and a wash of technology that, despite its claims to help communication, often serves to muddy waters that are already sufficiently murky.

But effective communication is within everyone’s reach. One of the first steps toward this goal is recognizing that communication means more than a set of skills that someone can learn and practice. Instead, it begins with a mind-set. The right

mind-set reflects your implicit respect for everyone around you and a commitment to demonstrate that respect. A courteous mind-set not only can mean better communication skills with clients and customers but also leads to a happier, more fulfilling life away from work.

This book has been written to help you have happier and more productive conversations with customers, on the telephone and in other business situations. MAGIC provides *the* gold standard of behavior that will motivate the people in your organization, delight your customers, and improve business results. However, the principles and power embodied by MAGIC are there to serve everyone, from corporate executives addressing an auditorium of shareholders, to two neighbors chatting over a picket fence.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

How you use this book is entirely up to you. Naturally, we hope you read it in its entirety, and we suggest you read it in order. Understanding the book as a whole is critical to embracing the concepts of MAGIC and, from there, putting them into everyday practice. However, you may be confronting a particular communication issue in either your business or your personal life. If that's the case, you may wish to pay particular attention to the part of the book most directly related to your area of interest.

In every chapter, you will find

- MAGIC and Tragic Moments
- Experiment with MAGIC
- MAGIC Maxims

MAGIC and Tragic Moments

MAGIC and Tragic Moments are real-life illustrations from customers, colleagues, and friends, and depict the various types of communication challenges we all face. We will explore each of these examples and demonstrate how you can address these challenges simply and effectively. They may make you smile or laugh, and they will perhaps trigger some of your own pleasant and not-so-pleasant memories of moments past.

Experiment with MAGIC

For this book to truly function as a learning tool, helping you reach your goal of becoming a more effective communicator, you will need to practice the skills we describe. The Experiment with MAGIC sections describe exercises that will help you better grasp MAGIC concepts and apply your new skills to your own daily interactions—personal and professional.

MAGIC Maxims

At the end of every chapter, we include a special feature we call MAGIC Maxims, a concise summary of the major ideas addressed in that particular chapter. They're an effective way to refresh your memory about the MAGIC concepts presented, as well as a way to think about how you might apply them.

Ultimately, we hope this book will do more than help you gain just one or two new skills, but instead will lead you to adopt a new way of thinking, a new mind-set. Think of this book as a learning tool and coach for improving your daily business and personal interactions. Use the exercises. Review the maxims. Empathize with the characters in the stories. By doing so, you will be well on your way to improving your communications and creating MAGIC moments in all your relationships.



What Does MAGIC Really Mean?

Up to this point, we've used the term MAGIC to describe a truly positive and memorable customer experience. And, to a certain extent, we've hinted at what that term implies. Now we'll move on to the details.

MAGIC is an acronym for **M**ake **A** Great **I**mpression on the **C**ustomer. This is a straightforward concept; everyone in business wants to interact positively with customers and clients. You want them to feel good about what you do and how you do it. You want that feeling to be so persuasively positive that the thought of doing business with you again isn't even a debatable point—of course they're going to come back!

The same is true of your personal life. If you enjoy someone's company, you're naturally going to want to extend that relationship into the future.

But MAGIC is about more than just positive interactions. It is also about managing perception. It's been said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and nowhere is that more applicable than in your communications with others. The quality of your communication—be it with customers, friends, or family members—is really measured by how others perceive you.

You must make a choice—the choice to manage that perception, create a “quality” interaction, and make a great impression on the other person. Once you have made that choice, positive behavior follows.