

# Hello/Good-Bye

*Two Crucial Moments with a Customer*

We've been tough taskmasters throughout this book, urging you to do everything right and to never let up. We've drilled in the value of putting in exceptional effort, day and night, with your customers. But there is a place for shortcuts in customer service, too. In Chapter 3, we mentioned that concentrating on certain *crucial emotional moments* with your customers is your guarantee that you're putting your efforts where they make the most difference—where they lodge most vividly in memory. We covered one of these crucial emotional moments, *service recovery*, in Chapter Four. Now we focus on the other two: *hello* (your greeting) and *good-bye* (your farewell).

Hellos and good-byes are beginning and end points, the two highest positions in what memory researchers call the *serial position curve*. In a list of items or events, they will be remembered most easily. If you want to prove this to yourself, follow in the footsteps of memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus and give a friend a list of items to remember—let's say turkey, salt, pepper, tomatoes, pumpkin, cheese, milk, oregano, chili powder, butter. Odds are good that the first and last items (turkey and butter) will be the ones most easily remembered <sup>1</sup>.

The same is true for hellos and good-byes. Handle them superbly,

and you'll reap a disproportionate dividend in what "sticks" as a customer's opinion of you.

## Timelessly Time-Sensitive

Greetings and first impressions have been uniquely important to human relationships for thousands of years. Odysseus's son Telemachus knew that first impressions matter: "[H]e glimpsed Athena now and straight to the porch he went, mortified that a guest might still be standing at the doors," writes Homer.<sup>2</sup>

Fast-forward a few millennia to postcard-perfect Bar Harbor, Maine, where Chris Cambridge owns The Scrimshaw Workshop, a gift shop perched next door to an immensely popular ice cream shop. Chris understands the importance of a good "hello" as well as the ancient Greeks: While customers at other shops are greeted with a "No Food, No Drink" sign, or, at best, "Please Finish Your Food or Drink Before Entering Our Store," Chris bucks this trend. Imagine how many more customers Chris wins by upending this norm with this welcoming (and brave) statement:

**YES! YOU MAY BRING IN YOUR ICE CREAM CONES**  
**—Just be careful of their drips.**

To make *sure* you get the idea that his store is a welcoming place, Chris added this in a smaller font:

***P.S. We love your dogs, too!***

*(See the sign at [www.micahsolomon.com](http://www.micahsolomon.com))*

In many businesses, it's a front desk receptionist, host, or other human greeter who welcomes and bids farewell to visitors. So, it's cru-

cial that the person in this position conveys a warm welcome and a gracious, heartfelt farewell; the handling of these two moments is key to your brand's image. This is why inbound and outbound reception is best handled by a skilled, trained, and motivated veteran with great customer-focused traits. It's why we recommend against treating reception as an entry-level, stepping-stone position—because, whatever you call it, “First and Last Impression Creator” is among the most important positions in your enterprise.

### **Which Level of Service Do You Provide? Let Them Know from “Hello”**

One of the first things a greeting does is convey the level of service a customer may expect from your establishment. Are they going to get *non-compliant* service, *compliant* (reactive) service, or *anticipatory* service?

Non-compliant service (“Can I get some water from you, please?” “*Uh, there’s a vending machine down the street.*”) will push away customers every time. They asked for a glass of water and received nothing—except a grudging set of directions. (In fact, non-compliance is such a wretched level of “service” that we’ve given our readers the respect of wasting very little copy on it in this book.)

Compliant service (“May I have some water?” “*Certainly. Here you go!*”) is pretty much the baseline for the contemporary business world. It doesn’t offend customers, but it won’t win them over either. Compliant service can be well-executed, but it’s not going to build loyalty for your brand.

Anticipatory service (“*Welcome. It is such a hot day today. May I offer you a glass of water?*”) is extremely rare. But as we’ve discussed, this is where customer loyalty is created. When customers’ wishes are anticipated, they get to bask in the magical feeling of being cared for. That feeling creates loyalty, which builds strategic value for your company.

So, if you can tip your hand at the front door that this exceptional level of service is what they can expect—if you can manage to literally “have them at hello”—you will predispose your customers to think well of you throughout the rest of the service experience.

Greeted properly and warmly, a customer will be less sensitive to minor issues later in the encounter. A good greeting enhances subsequent human interactions and can—significantly—affect a customer’s perception of a physical product that is offered for sale.

A crucial aspect of a proper greeting is recognition. What is recognition? Being seen, literally and figuratively: being acknowledged, being welcomed, and being appreciated. Recognition, to cite Danny Meyer again, is “the number one reason guests cite for wanting to return.”<sup>3</sup>

When a customer is arriving on a *repeat* visit, this should be a special type of recognition: that the customer was *missed*, that his return fills a gap that was there in his absence. Beth Krick, an administrator we admire at a small primary school in Pennsylvania, greets the children and parents every morning at drop-off. So, when a child or a parent is absent for a few days, Ms. Krick is sure to notice, and she commemorates the return with a heartfelt “*We missed you.*” What a standard for any company, of any size, in any field, to strive for: to give that level of simple recognition to every returning customer.

### **The Customer May Come in Contact with You Earlier Than You Expect**

Remember that service begins as soon as the customer comes in contact with you—but only the *customer* gets to determine when that first moment is, and it may be much earlier than you think, or would wish. For example, suppose a customer parks his car in a retailer’s parking lot, and the first things he sees are broken chain link fencing and cigarette butts strewn all about. In this

instance, the first contact has occurred, unbeknownst to the retailer, who now must struggle to overcome this negative impression. It's unfair (the retailer may not even control the lot), but it's reality. This is why every carefully managed resort pays attention to the arrival sequence: the flowers, the signage, the friendly security guard at the gatehouse, the doorman. By the time you get to your room, you should feel gently transported to another world.

## Don't Rush Your Hellos and Good-Byes on the Telephone

A proper telephone answering sequence includes an *appreciative greeting*, a *clear introduction*, and a *sincere offer of assistance*. Calls are closed with a *personalized farewell* and a *warm invitation to return*. In many companies, the opening can be short, but still sweet: “*Thank you for calling L&M Stagers! This is Bill. How may I help you?*” (But not: “*L&M Stagers! This is Bill.*”) The closing can be as simple as “*Thank you for calling, Mrs. Peterson. I hope your project works out well for you and that you’ll think of us the next time you’re in town.*”

It's easy to imagine that it takes too long to handle hellos and good-byes properly. But actually, a whopping six extra seconds per call is sufficient to answer *and* close the call this way. If you get thirty calls a day you would be investing a full three minutes per day in delivering excellent customer service that will impress the callers—three minutes in the course of an eight-hour work day! So don't let volume become an excuse for slipshod hellos and good-byes on the telephone.

## Serving Disabled Customers Is a Responsibility *and* an Opportunity, from the Moment You Welcome Them at Your Door

Your facility's entrance—your visual “hello”—is where your attitude toward customers with disabilities is most clearly on display. We under-

stand how in some business settings, after years with nobody in a wheelchair showing up, keeping your ramps clear and in top condition may seem like a service to . . . exactly nobody. But we don't think of it that way. Instead, we remember that visibly inviting and welcoming disabled clients sends a powerful message not only to them, but to their families, friends, and the myriad others who care about them. It says that you have broken down barriers to entry; you're on the right side of this issue.

Did you know that the majority of physically challenged customers do not use wheelchairs or scooters? It's important for you as a business leader to understand the full range of physical disabilities and to become aware of cost-effective ways to make your establishment more compatible with them. Many disabilities are subtle, and you will only understand how to accommodate them if you spend some time studying them. For example, in our aging society a very common disability is arthritis and related (and often very painful) musculoskeletal disorders. This is a good reason to use "universal access" handles instead of round doorknobs at all of your points of entry, on restroom facilities, and wherever else possible within your facility. It's also an important reason to make doors self-closing and only lightly weighted. It is a good investment to read some of the best source books on this subject. Directly or indirectly, thousands of dollars have likely been spent—or should be spent—making the "bones" of your facility appropriate for disabled customers; your research will ensure that investment is used appropriately.

Visual and auditory disabilities are also quite common. Make sure you're creating an unusually positive "greeting" for such customers and their allies, in person and online.

The web has huge potential as an equalizer for people with sight and hearing loss. As a first step, make sure you aren't inadvertently slamming a virtual door in their faces in any of these common ways:

- ▶ *Captchas*. These are letters and/or numbers rendered as an image rather than text, in order to require a real human being to look at the

screen. By thus separating human and automated input, a captcha can help achieve the very admirable goal of preventing automated hacker attacks. The problem: Captchas are also unreadable by a visually impaired person who uses a screen text reader. This undoes decades of progress in accessibility; if you don't have a legitimate need to use captchas on your site, *don't*. If you do, find a captcha program with an *intelligible* audio alternative.

▶ *Graphics without readable alt tags.* An alt (alternate) tag, as we've mentioned, describes or substitutes for the image when using a text reader. Think of it as a caption. Make sure your web team checks the comprehensiveness and accuracy of your alt tags just as carefully as you proofread your site for, say, dead links.

▶ *No way to get service except by phone.* If a customer who is hearing impaired wants to contact you to return an item, is email offered as an alternative? If telephone-only is your policy (because you're trying to re-sell them or for some other reason), then you'd better have a well-functioning TTD/TTY machine to support special-needs customers. But we recommend including email support for them as well.

Of course, barriers to entry can occur at many places other than entry and exit points. For someone using a wheelchair, a single narrow hallway with no reasonable and clearly marked alternate route can botch the whole deal. Here are some other bottlenecks we've seen that shout "I don't care much about you!"

- ▶ The celebrated spa that always has a fresh floral arrangement perched on (and thus blocking the use of) the toilet stall's grab bar
- ▶ The lavishly renovated espresso cafe—with a juice cooler jutting out to make the turn into the restroom impossible in a wheelchair
- ▶ The railing for a bustling National Park Service gift shop's ramp that is entirely obscured by overflow merchandise

- ▶ The office building elevators that have the slot for keycard access placed high above the buttons
- ▶ The many businesses that put their vehicles and dumpsters in the cross-hatched areas next to handicapped spaces, apparently unaware that this area is necessary for wheelchair and scooter loading and unloading

*(Photographic food for thought at micahsolomon.com)*

In addition to the physical aspects of your product, it is important to consider the way your staff interacts with the physically challenged guests they are assisting. Too often we see service workers towering over a guest in a wheelchair or grabbing a visually impaired guest by the arm in an attempt to guide her somewhere (rather than offering an arm for the guest to take). There are plenty of good training programs on the market for how to properly serve disabled customers. It is well worth investing in one.

## Turn Your Receptionist into a Predator (Who Kills with Kindness)

It's okay to be a bit goofy when you're training your staff: A bit of over-the-top oratory is one of the best ways to make things memorable. For example, here's a metaphor that Leonardo offers as a silly, imaginative, exaggerated way to explain the job of a greeter:

*A predator cat loiters, prowls, watches, and waits. Then as soon as something enters its hunting ground, the cat is suddenly hyper-alert, intently focused: Am I going to hunt this? To serve our customers, think and act like that cat. Become as alert as the predator cat does when prey enters its territory. And focus single-mindedly on deciding: Is service called for in this situation?*

*Your hunting ground is the reception area: It starts at the*

*front door, and extends to the elevator lobby. No customers should ever pass by your area without you focusing on them and being ready to “hunt” them. How many times have you yourself stepped into a building and the receptionist is behind the counter doing her thing, and you have to get to the counter to trigger her attention? That receptionist isn’t acting like a top predator.*

*If she were, then whenever someone crosses her hunting ground, her instinct would be to scan the area immediately in order to figure out what the movement is. And if it’s the right moment, she would move in to see whether there is something she can pounce on—I mean, someone who needs assistance!*

Goofy? Sure. But a dollop of goofiness enlivens the training process. And it adds considerable spark to the daily routine of your receptionists to have a picture in their minds of themselves as predators, with everyone who passes through the reception area evaluated as potential prey.

## It’s Google—Not You—Who Decides Where Visitors Enter Your Site. Be Sure They’re Greeted Properly Anyway

Here’s an online conundrum: “Hello” is crucial—but *you* can’t decide which page on your site your visitors first land on. *Google* is in charge of where most of your visitors will land. And, of course, Murphy’s Law will ensure that they land on some arcane, highly technical back corner of your website—one that definitely doesn’t put your best foot forward!

Let’s outwit Murphy with this three-pronged strategy:

1. Anticipate that “lost” visitors will arrive (via Google, links embedded in Wikipedia, etc.) on obscure inner pages of your site, and respond by making *each* page extremely welcoming. Include:

- ▶ The name of the proprietor (and often a portrait with some words of welcome)
- ▶ A live chat link
- ▶ A “first time here?” tour button
- ▶ A “contact me now” button

2. Consider *paying* to reduce the wrong points of entry. There are various ways to persuade people to come in through the front door, as it were. You can use Google Adwords and other pay-per-click options, such as banner advertising on the favorite sites of your prospective customers. Placing your bait carefully in the online waters where the customers you want are swimming is, in many cases, a notable improvement over inefficient “spray and pray” advertisements on television, radio, and general-interest printed matter.

One of the features of targeted online advertising is your ability to control prospective new customers’ points of entry. People who click on such ads can be directed to an inviting and uncluttered page, where you provide the most relevant initial meet-and-greet information. You can even ask for their permission to market to them—in effect, to begin a dialogue with them about their needs and your services. Of course, ask them for the *minimum* information possible. If you can get the first part of your message across by email, then just ask for a first name and an email address. As always, offer them an easy out. If they want to get to your regular site, make it clear how to do so. If they want to chat or email with you, put those links on this page as well.

3. For visitors who arrive directly at your homepage, provide different experiences for new (unrecognized) visitors than for returning customers—just as you would in the physical world. For returning visitors, welcome them back and invite them to personalize the visit. For new visitors (or ones you can’t recognize), welcome them with a “new here?” screen and invite them to start a dialogue with you: take a guided tour, receive some free information—anything to keep them from wandering off before you have some way to keep in touch.

## Taking Control of Good-Byes

Good-byes are often rushed—or skipped altogether. After all, you are frequently so relieved to have gotten one job wrapped up successfully, and to be able to move on to the next one. So a transaction often ends with an invoice. What a wasted opportunity! If your customers are happy, the good-bye is your last, and one of your most notable, chances to bond with them, to add an important final chapter to the service story.

Try to close each interaction with your customer in a way that is memorable and sincere. Too many otherwise-fine service experiences come to a miserable close that consists solely of handing back a credit card or “OK” or “NEXT.” How much hard-earned good will is lost that way? *A lot.*

So, try to never close an interaction without providing a personalized farewell and an invitation to return. If handled properly, this farewell will be *personal*, *resonant*, and *long lasting* (see below)—but before you move to the closing, make sure you ask a final question, slowly and sincerely: “*Is there anything else I can do for you?*” If the answer is “No, thank you,” then move to the closing, as follows:

1. *Personalize it:* Use the customer’s name, for starters. Offer your business card, if appropriate for your type of business. Beyond these obvious things, *customize* your language to fit this customer’s history with you. For example, if this is the last day of a convention or holiday, add your sincere wishes for safe travel. If you are a retailer, express your hope for satisfaction with the item purchased.

2. *Make it resonant:* If appropriate, give a parting gift. It can be a lollipop for the customer’s child, a vintage postcard, or a book. An ideal gift is something that is emotionally resonant with your brand as well as appropriate to the customer. *Invite your customer to come back again as she leaves.*

6. *Long lasting:* Unless inappropriate for the type of purchase, send a follow-up note. Personal and handwritten is better than preprinted—this is the best \$1 investment you may ever make.

## A Good-Bye Gaffe

Your good-bye at the end of successfully resolving a customer's trouble call should never morph into an attempt to make an additional sale. Trouble calls need to be about just one thing: solving the customer's problem. Customers feel especially vulnerable and dependent on you during these calls, because you're the only one who can help them. Since they feel one down, for you to sneak in a sales pitch at the last moment can come across as having their arms twisted or being bait-and-switched. Yes, they may buy whatever you're pitching at that moment, but they'll often resent you for it later.

## The Hazards of Subcontracting Your Hellos and Good-Byes

Be cautious about subcontracting your greetings and your farewells. Of course, subcontracting is often a necessary part of business; properly handled, it can be appropriate and desirable. But such arrangements can also be Trojan Horses, filled with enemies of your cause who ransack the precious goodwill of your customers—sometimes even before the customers quite make it in the door.

We're being melodramatic in our language about this to make sure you mark our words with special care: The quality of the subcontractor's entire staff, their selection process, their training standards, their appearance and grooming, their code of conduct—*everything*—has to be absolutely integrated with your own. From the point of view of customers, if an employee wears the company logo or answers their calls or opens the door for them, that employee is *your* employee.

To make matters much worse, so many of these subcontractings-gone-wrong happen at hellos and good-byes. The rationales do not help: “*Oh, he works for the security company*”; “*Oh, they're the parking subcontractor*”; or “*I'm sorry she barked at you on the phone—she's a temp.*”

In essence, such statements are a way of coaxing customers (or yourself) to accept the idea that “*that is not us.*” To your customers, such statements are just infuriating baloney. “If I buy a product from you,” explained one such customer, “and it’s serviced by somebody else you hired, well, I’m sorry; to me that’s *your* service.” And if that rough service happens at an entry or exit point, it is harming a critical, emotion-filled moment that has a strong hand in shaping your customer’s perception of your brand.

### **When a Botched Welcome Isn’t Your Fault, You Still Need to Fix It**

A botched hello or good-bye can occur in spite of your best intentions. Your staff still needs to recognize and address it—before it colors the customer’s entire experience. Hospitality veteran Jay Coldren tells of an incident that made an impression on him early in his career. Jay had recently started as a manager at a well-known country inn and restaurant when a couple from Pittsburgh drove up for a three-night stay to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary. The trip had been arranged a year in advance; the couple had read the chef’s cookbook together before they set out; waxed up their car so they would arrive in style; even packed up a special picnic to enjoy on the four hour drive. Together they had enjoyed scheduling nearly every last minute of how they expected to spend their visit. But unfortunately . . .

*As the staff unloaded the luggage, our female guest said to her husband, “Don’t forget my hanging bag.” Her husband looked into the trunk and came up with a horrified expression on his face. Apparently, she had left her bag beside the car in their garage assuming he would pack it, but he never saw it. At this point, she pretty much fell apart:*

*This poor woman was checking into one of the most expensive places on the planet with nothing but the clothes on her*

*back! As the doormen and I tried to figure out what to do to make this couple happy, one of the staff who had been there a lot longer than me drove up to the front of the inn in the company car. I looked at him oddly and he just smiled and said, "Get me their keys and the address; I'll be back before dinner." I was floored. No one asked him to do this, and there wasn't a moment's hesitation on his part. He was so much a part of the service culture that he just knew the exact right thing to do. He was halfway to Pittsburgh before the lady actually believed that we were really going to get her luggage at her house. He drove eight hours straight and made it back before their dinner reservations at nine.<sup>4</sup>*

## Good-Bye for Now from the Authors—with Resources and Assistance for Your Journey

Good-bye is your last—and perhaps your most memorable—chance to add a final brush stroke to the fresco of customer experience. It's important to make it count. And as we add our last stroke to your experience with this book, we want to let you know how grateful we are that you have spent this time with us.

We encourage you to contact us on any subject we have covered or that you feel you'd like to have covered more thoroughly; we are always pleased to hear from you.

Leonardo can be reached at [Linghilleri@westpacesconsulting.com](mailto:Linghilleri@westpacesconsulting.com). His consulting firm's tag line is "Architects of Legendary Customer Service," and he awaits the next challenge to fulfill his firm's brand promise.

Micah is most quickly reached at [micah@micahsolomon.com](mailto:micah@micahsolomon.com). Also on this website ([www.micahsolomon.com](http://www.micahsolomon.com)) are the photographs and additional narrative examples related to this book and these subjects that we think you'll find helpful.

Thank you again for spending this time with us, and best wishes for providing exceptional, loyalty-building service.