

Forbes

Are You Serving Your Customers with Honor?



Customers in the Middle. Getty Images

by **Chip R. Bell**

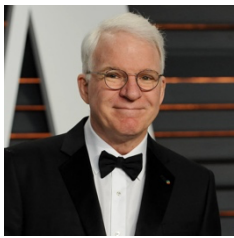
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Memorial Day and Veterans Day each year resurrect the ideal of "serving with honor." Serving with honor demonstrates a clear and present selfless and altruistic orientation. It engenders pride and admiration. We salute those who benefit more than themselves through their former or current service. But it is more than a military service feature; it is the essence of exceptional customer service.

To serve a customer in its purest form is to enter a covenant that promises worth will be exchanged for worth in a manner satisfactory to both. Covenants are implied agreements with an underlying expectation of goodness, honesty, and fairness. No customer likes the value of what they receive to be less than expected, any more than the service provider wishes to be disappointed should the customer not live up to his or her promise. Therefore, poor service is not only rude business manners but also business practices without honor.

Honor is the conscience of the covenant and, therefore, the sentinel of customer trust. Trust and its manifestations, such as reliability, predictability, and consistency, are what renowned customer service researcher Leonard Berry called the single most crucial feature of customer service. Someone with an honorable spirit strives to make service wholesome, not just excellent, tell the absolute truth, and pursue a high standard of beauty and attraction.

Make Your Customer Experience Really Good



"When people ask me how you make it in show business," said famed actor and comedian Steve Martin in an interview with Charlie Rose, "What I always tell them — and nobody ever takes note of it cuz it's not the answer they wanted to hear. What they want to hear is here's how you get an agent, here's how you write a script, here's how you do this — But I always say: Be so good they can't ignore you. If somebody's thinking, 'How can I be really good?', people are going to come to you. It's much easier doing it that way than going to cocktail parties."

My first impression of Martin's advice was that it was a plea for excellence—a kind of bootstrap, be-all-you-can-be sideline cheer you might hear from a motivational speaker. As I learned more about Steve Martin's character, I realized he was using a double meaning—be your best, but also be a good person. Customers trust service providers with the discipline of goodness. It is a foundation on which they want to build a relationship, not on a cheap gimmick that governs a single transaction. They enjoy how they feel when embraced by wholesome service providers.

Serve with a Scout's Honor Attitude

We asked Jessica, the front desk clerk at an Embassy Suites in Chicago, to recommend a nearby seafood restaurant. The restaurant she recommended provided a delightful experience. When my business partner and I declined dessert after a delicious meal, the waiter brought a plate of small cookies and overgrown strawberries. "These are compliments of Jessica," he proudly announced. We had to know more about the structure of this unexpected, equitable partnership.



Returning to the hotel front desk, we probed Jessica for the process. "Well," she said without hesitation, "we get terrific reviews on that restaurant, or I would not send my guests there. And they are very kind to all of us at the hotel. Sometimes I get an envelope with \$20 in it. It never says where it came from, but I am pretty sure it is their way of thanking us for the referral without making it the reason we send guests to them." Her openness and complete honesty elevated our

full trust in the hotel. "Scout's honor" is a phrase used to pledge our absolute honesty—the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Make Your Customers' Experiences Beautiful



My wife and I were vacationing in Ajijic, Mexico, South of Guadalajara. Ajijic is one of those little towns with a nice-looking main street complete with shops and restaurants, but one block off the main street is stark poverty. We had lunch at a little restaurant. As lovers of Mexican food, we ate way too much and elected to take a short walk a few streets over from the main street. We came upon a house on the edge of the town that was being painted a very loud, bright pink. In the deep South where I grew up, it would be labeled the color "pank," drawn out as long as you could make

the word's sound.

"Como estas," I said to the owner painting his house, using my very best Spanish. But the owner interpreted me not as saying, "How are you?" but rather, "What are you doing?" He pointed at his house, and with a big, wide smile, he proudly explained, "Hago mi casa hermosa!" ("I make my house beautiful"). It was a profound moment. Here was a very poor man in a very poor town in a very poor section of Mexico delivering beautiful—his very best. Customer experience beauty is delivering features that attract--the magnetic memory that fuels repeat business. Like the Hispanic house painter, it expresses authenticity, purity, and pride.

Be an ardent champion of wholesomeness and a living antidote to all features of service that erode trust. Let customers witness the best of who you are when serving them. Ensure bone honesty becomes a trait all customers expect when dealing with you. And make your customers' experiences colored with the purity of genuine dealings and unpretentious humility. Bottomline, serve each customer as you would serve the most important person in your life.

The spirit of honor knows how people should treat people and how organizations should treat customers. The honorable spirit lives honor, not as a script or set of actions to be displayed like an actor on a stage, but as a reflection of a deep commitment to the covenant. Shakespeare has Anthony tell Octavia before the battle with Augustus, "If I lose my honor, I lose myself." Help your customers see the soul of service in you.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award-winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2024 ranked him for the tenth year in a row in the top ten keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also the founder of the Chip Bell Academy, an alliance partner with On3.ai that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs with high level transfer of learning and retention. He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.