

Forbes

Everything I Need to Know About Customer Experience I Learned from a Jack Nicholson Movie



Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider*. Getty Images

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The diner scene from the 1970 movie *Five Easy Pieces* appeared in many customer service training classes. Do you recall Bobby Dupea (played by Jack Nicholson) trying to order a plain omelet with a side order of wheat toast? He ran straight into: "No side orders, only what's on the menu," "No substitutions," "I don't make the rules," and "Would you like to talk to the manager?" His solution was creative but expensive: "I'd like a plain omelet with a chicken salad sandwich on wheat toast—

hold the chicken, hold the mayonnaise, bring me a check for the chicken salad sandwich, and you hadn't broken any rules."

If you were a customer service trainer, you could take that one movie scene and talk about "making it easy for your customers," "empowering your frontline," or even "how to manage a difficult customer." As a poignant metaphor, it was a trainer's dream. It even had a punchy closing line when the waitress asked in disbelief, "You want me to hold the chicken?" and smart-alecky Nicholson replied, "You can hold it between your knees!" Students cheered his rebellious "stick it the man" comeback.

Jack Nicholson is now 87. He has appeared in over forty movies and received every major theatrical award, including three Oscars, six Golden Globe awards, a Grammy, and countless other recognitions. Many of his films contain deep wisdom for success in business and life. They are also a powerful metaphor for delivering a great customer experience. Here are three of my favorites.

"You can't handle the truth."



It was the most repeated line from the 1992 movie *A Few Good Men*. Nicholson's Marine Colonel Nathan Jessup was on the witness stand being cross-examined by a young, inexperienced Navy lawyer played by Tom Cruise. At issue was the colonel's involvement in ordering an unauthorized "code red" that resulted in a soldier's death. But the most instructive line was a part of Colonel Jessup's caustic rebuttal, "You don't want the truth because deep down in places you don't talk about at parties, you want me on that wall."

Customer experience often disappoints despite the brags from leaders about their customer surveys and focus groups. However, they have little stomach for gaining candid insight that comes from spending consistent time on the frontline talking with customers and the people who directly serve them. PowerPoint slides are as frank as a TV ad in revealing actuality.

I worked with a large quick-service company and suggested they put a toll-free number on the customer's receipt, on all their napkins, and on a large store banner, making a big deal about getting customer feedback. "Oh, we give them a toll-free number for feedback," said their head of marketing. "It's on their drink cup, the last item customers throw away." Who keeps their drink cups so they can call corporate

once they get home? The message was clear: Deep down, you don't really want to know the truth.

"I have always told you some version of the truth."

Jack Nicholson's Harry Sanborn, in an unstable moment during an argument with Erica Barry, played by Diane Keaton in the 2003 movie *Something's Gotta Give*, spouts, "I have never lied to you, I have always told you some version of the truth." The sentiment is as authentic as a stereotypical politician or snake oil salesman.



Service quality researcher Leonard Berry found the most important feature of customer service is reliability. Unpack his research and the construct is more than keeping promises and being dependable. It is managing customer relationships in a fashion in which there is no dissonance, disappointment, or disloyalty. It is being trustworthy and wholesome. It not only ensures customers' experiences are in sync with their expectations but also includes managing customers' perceptions of their experiences. That requires seeing customer encounters through their eyes.

A hardware store salesperson sold an elderly customer the electric hedge clippers the customer requested. There was little effort to learn about the customer or his planned use of the clippers. A few days later, the customer returned. Not only had he gotten tangled in the long electric cord needed to operate the clippers, but he also accidentally cut the cord into with the clippers. A neighbor suggested he purchase battery-operated clippers. Did the customer get his needs met? From his perspective, the hardware store told him "some version of the truth, " which left him disappointed and disloyal.

"I want my environment to be a product of me."

In the 2006 film *The Departed*, Nicholson's mobster Frank Costello succinctly outlined his life philosophy to undercover cop Billy Costigan, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, in one sentence. "I don't want to be a product of my environment; I want my environment to be a product of me." It is an unwritten orientation of too many companies. It is an arrogant disposition that assumes customers must adapt to us not the other way around. You get a glimpse when you hear some version of, "But you don't understand how we do business here."



I purchased a new Apple iPhone at a local AT&T store. A week later I noticed I could not advance the phone speaker beyond the whisper level. A keynote in midtown New York put me a few blocks from the giant Apple store on Fifth Avenue. I headed for their Genius bar. I bounced my no-sound challenge off the face of the "I've heard this a million times before" expression of their Genius. There were no questions or eye contact. The Genius seemed enamored with my new product but bored with me. After ten minutes, he announced his verdict: "You have a defective iPhone. Take it back to the AT&T store for a replacement."

Returning to the AT&T store, the calm, partner-like salesperson placed my iPhone aside. He asked me a few questions, listened patiently, and maintained his focus on our conversation, not on my wayward phone?" My answer to his "Did you make any changes to the iPhone itself?" question brought a look of aha to his countenance. Turns out, I had purchased the wrong screen protector that covered up the speaker. Customer smart will trump product genius every time!

Excellent customer experience is an assertion, not a response. It is an attitude, not a tactic. Done well, it elevates the customer as it meets a need. We glimpse that orientation when we witness customers receiving generosity and empathy. Such customer experiences make us feel valued and significant. To borrow a line Jack Nicholson gave Helen Hunt in the 1997 movie *As Good as It Gets*, it makes customers "want to be a better man (or woman)."

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.