

# Forbes

## How to Manage Painful Customer Experiences



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**by Chip R. Bell**

One hour after takeoff from London's Heathrow Airport on an intercontinental flight to the U.S., the pilot announced the aircraft was returning, "because my windshield just shattered." After gasps from passengers, the pilot calmly announced that no one was in danger, but there would be a long delay to secure and load a different aircraft.

Once safely on the Heathrow tarmac, the pilot invited passengers to come up to the cockpit to see the windshield, something he had never even heard of happening. Everyone got a wide-eyed story

to tell friends and families. During the wait, flight attendants served gourmet snacks. There was an update every 15-20 minutes, and the captain came through the plane to reassure passengers and candidly answer questions. A few days later, passengers received a sincere apology letter from the airline CEO, along with 11,000 frequent flyer points.

While some glitches are rare massive tragedies, most are just bad-luck hiccups. Doctors have emergencies that leave patients stranded "forever" in the waiting area; hotels have room keys that occasionally refuse to work; and popular restaurants have longer-than-normal waits at peak hours. Wise service providers find ways to turn adversity into advantage. Here are four approaches for conquering service gremlins that bring pain to customers.

### **Show Confident and Compassionate Agility**

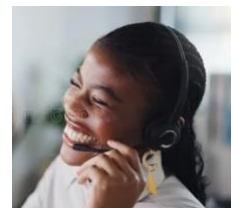


Restoring customer confidence is a crucial step in addressing any service hiccup. Customers want to know they are dealing with someone with the capability and determination to resolve their problem or issue. Specifically that entails can-do competence, attentive urgency, and a take-charge "I'll turn this around" attitude. Service failures erode customers' confidence in an organization, but confidence can be quickly restored if customers observe you moving nimbly and adroitly to address their problem.

One secret to confidence rebuilding is letting customers witness your healing efforts. Simply telling them, "Wait in the reception area and I'll work on your problem," may seem like a polite approach. However, it deprives customers of the opportunity to see you in emergency action. Let customers hear you call a peer and say, "George, we have a problem we need to correct ASAP." If appropriate, find ways to involve customers directly in the resolution. People will care when they get to share.

### **Find Ways to Turn Bitter into Better**

When my business partner, John Patterson, and I exited the Hertz courtesy van at the Hartford airport, the below-freezing winter wind bit hard. But the Hertz attendant had a warm smile and an eager-to-help attitude. "This is way too cold!" one of us commented. She almost giggled. Hearing our way-too-obvious Southern drawls, she said, "Now ya'll know in Hartford we do weather as entertainment!" Ten miles down the road, we were still laughing at her unexpected comment. How can you make service maladies seem more palatable to your customers?



Humor can sometimes convey a flippant message that suggests "we don't take this seriously." However, if there is a way to bring comic relief to an otherwise worried moment, it can allay pain leaving customers assured they have a trusted partner at the helm. A Southwest Airlines plane made a hard landing in a crosswind as it touched down at the Austin airport. Oxygen masks fell from the ceiling. As the jet raced down the runway, passengers overheard the pilot over the intercom saying, "Whoa, big fellow, whoa!" His comical retort completely erased the memory of the sudden, harder-than-normal landing.

## Use the Magic of Customer Misdirection



Several years ago, a YouTube video of a doctor giving a baby a shot went [viral](#). As the parent held the baby in his lap, the doctor started making goofy sounds and playfully punching the baby with the base of the syringe. His wacky gestures made the baby look up and down, loudly giggling as each tap was delivered. At the peak of the ploy, the doctor injected the baby in its leg. Rather than cry, the baby continued to laugh like nothing had happened. The parent was amazed by

his magic.

Misdirection is the foundation of many magic tricks. Observers are astonished as their attention is cleverly directed away from the sleight of hand trick that leaves them in awe. Just as Disney World entertains guests who are waiting in line to board that memorable ride, entertain your customers in a charming yet appropriate way. Upscale restaurants cover long waits with an unexpected hors d'oeuvre, "compliments of the chef." How can you manage the customer's perception of pain as you work to deal with the source of pain?

## Finally, Show Off Your Best Generosity

Special touches make the Marriott Rivercenter in San Antonio a hotel guests love. A business traveler was awaiting the arrival of her husband and son for a weekend getaway after her long business conference. The two were delayed by severe weather, which she happened to mention to a hotel employee. To her surprise, the frontline associate had milk and cookies sent to her room as soon as the two weary travelers finally arrived at 10 p.m. "That simple, unexpected gesture of milk and cookies was a welcome surprise," she later said. "It turned a very worrisome evening into a delightful memory."



An elderly customer of Umpqua Bank requested a stop payment on a check he had written to a firewood supplier. The supplier had promised to deliver a load of firewood and split it. But when the firewood was delivered, the supplier claimed he didn't have time to split it. "Get an ax!" he advised the old man. The bank retail service manager had to inform the customer that, unfortunately, his check had already been deposited. With two other associates, axes in hand, the retail service manager drove to the customer's home, split and stacked the wood, and swept his garage. How many times do you think the Umpqua customer has repeated his firewood story?

All customer service has its "not so fun" parts. Stand in your customers' shoes and consider what would soothe anxious feelings. Be a strong steward of your customers' emotional bank accounts by depositing resourcefulness, joy, patience, and generosity. When you are forced to make a withdrawal because of unforeseen circumstances, it will leave customers with a balance to sustain their loyalty.

## About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2025 ranked him for the eleventh year in a row in the top dozen keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also a senior advisor with On3, Inc., a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field-based learning programs, as well as an instructor with Fuel, Inc. (myfuel.io). He can be reached at [www.chipbell.com](http://www.chipbell.com).