



How to Stop Being Your Customer's Jailor and Focus on Hope Instead



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November 15, 2025

by Chip R. Bell

Growing up on a cattle farm is a chance to see both the promise and perils of freedom. For months, cows leisurely graze, sleep in the shade, and drink water from a nearby pond. In the winter, when there is no grass growing, bales of hay are delivered to their "doorstep." But when it's time to transport cows to market, herding becomes a challenge. It starts relatively peacefully, but as cows are moved from the open pasture into small holding pens and then forced up a loading shoot onto a truck, they require electric prods to be coerced into compliance.

Our culture is all about freedom. Customers enjoy "grazing" in the fields of choice. They relish countless options and enjoy the security of personalization. And, when they are prodded to follow a lock-step freedom-limiting path, they quickly leave the "herd" for

greener service pastures. When they have no other option, they resort to disorderly ways to register their displeasure. So, what does this cattle metaphor have to do with you?

Let Your Customers Rule



Wild Alaskan Company is a subscription service that ships customers delicious frozen Alaskan fish (halibut, cod, salmon, etc.) packaged in single-serving portions. Customers can tailor the contents of their shipment and influence delivery timing. Who wants to return from a vacation to find spoiled fish at their front door? But if you elect to cancel your subscription, you get an over-the-top warm, personalized letter that accommodates your request, leaving you questioning the wisdom of your decision to depart. And they make returning to the subscription plan super easy. It is like you are dealing with an old friend and not some greedy enterprise.

Contrast that with Planet Fitness's time-consuming process which requires in-person cancellation or sending a physical letter to [headquarters](#). SiriusXM has been sued over its complicated cancellation [process](#). Amazon has also been hammered in the courts for making customer exit a draconian [experience](#).

Where are the freedom-limited places in your service delivery? Can customers easily and quickly reach a live person if they have an issue? Do you hold your customers hostage with high switching costs or complicated account closing rules? If your customers call, do you use your phone as an answering machine rather than as an easy tool for two-way dialogue? Do you hoard customers' data to make it laborious for them to switch to a competitor? When a wait is required, do you let customers stew in the broth of boredom, or do you effectively manage their wait like a fun theme park? Are you always reachable or do you impose access hours convenient only to you? Remember, customers are now accustomed to Amazon's 24/7 business hours.

Conduct a "Customer Hopes" Audit

The customer may not be king, but customers are clearly in control of an organization's bottom line. Putting on the "customer hopes" lens enables you to see what customers desire. This "all about me" perspective can be instructive and it can be balanced with your organization's needs and requirements. I always hope there is no wait beyond my appointment time at the doctor's office. But reality dictates potential delay due to varying patient issues and medical emergencies. If the doctor's



office started by wearing the "customer hopes" lens, they might "see" opportunities to effectively moderate my discomfort around wait.

Wearing a "customer hopes" lens helps spotlight unfair, unreasonable, and unexpected restrictions on customers' capacity to get what they want, when they want it, and the way they want it. If regulations require a restrictive process, provide your customers a clear rationale, sincere empathy, and accommodating assistance. Interview recently lost customers to get feedback on the true reason for their exit. Call your own department, disguise your voice, and ask for something out of the ordinary. Ask customers for suggestions on ways to reduce service effort and enrich their experiences.

Provide Early Warnings Before Any Covenant Changes.



Service is a covenant with customers to exchange value for value. Any unexpected change in that implied promise feels to them like betrayal. It can be services with automatic annual renewals, especially the ones customers are likely to forget. It is the execution of features hidden in the fine print that spell "gotcha" to customers. Google the "house cleaning for only \$19" ad to learn the truth behind their [lure](#). Warranty exclusions, disclaimers, and hidden fees are all surprises waiting to disappoint. Even if there is no legal requirement for early warning, a "no surprise" philosophy signals to customers you care about the relationship as much as the revenue.

If you limit customers' freedom in any way, you can pay a price with their tendency to respond with greater-than-normal fury. They take out their anger on your frontline, ramping up stress, burnout, and turnover. They look for ways to circumvent and sabotage your processes. They assertively trash your reputation with social media rants that inform hundreds or thousands of potential customers to stay clear of your "holding pens and loading shoots."

Customers' expectations for service freedom are rising. As more companies put "ease of service" front and center, customer standards for how service should be delivered get elevated. They use their UPS, USAA, and Chick-fil-A eyes to inspect your service delivery. And if your service is found lacking, they remove your brand from their "hide" and wander elsewhere.

Customers are obviously a lot smarter than cows. When cows get herded to market, they are unable to anticipate their imminent plight to jump a nearby fence to freedom. Today's

customers find astute ways to neutralize or immobilize their temporary service jailors. The most alarming part of their mutiny is the speed with which they recruit fellow customers to join them in their “uprising.”

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, international 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. (on3.ai), 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.