

## Leading Service Magic in Today's Challenging Times



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By Chip R. Bell

Delight your customer! Exceed your customers' expectations! Provide value-added service! These have been the mantras of customer service gurus for a long time. Such a focus on "giving more" has improved customer service quality in many [organizations](#). It has also increased customer standards for what qualifies as "really good service."

But what is a leader to do when the budget-cutting ax is loosed, and tight profit margins get even tighter? How do today's leaders avoid sending a very mixed message by telling the front line to "wow" their customers in the morning and announcing staff cutbacks and expense reductions in the afternoon? How can value be added when there are no more resources to fund the addition? In a word: magic!

Service magic is different than exceeding customer expectations. Ask customers what actions would be “value added,” and they will focus on service generosity, not on service ingenuity. Their emphasis will be on taking their expected experiences to a higher-level...meaning “they gave me *more* than I anticipated.” It’s the upgrade, the extra helping, the complimentary dessert, or the baker’s dozen. The challenge is that customer expectations tend to climb right along with the addition. One-upping the last customer experience becomes a dead-end street; sooner or later, you run out of room...and revenue!

Service magic is an experience that is both captivating *and* unpredictable. It is the response that leaves customers more amazed than simply delighted; more awed than wowed. Here is an example to highlight the distinction between value-added and value unique.

### **Service Magic: A Case Example**



Our gardener replaces our annuals in the front yard each season. The process involves removing the old flowers, mulching the soil, and planting new flowers. A value-added wow experience would be for him to put in more flowers than we expected, lower our bill, or maybe prune the hedges nearby without being asked. What did he do? Remembering we’re avid fishermen, he saved all the earthworms he uncovered, put them in a container of moist dirt, and left them for us in a shaded area with a thoughtful note. New worms, rather than more flowers, were not the surprise we would have predicted.

Service magic need not be standard fare to create loyalty; it works best like the variable ratio of a Las Vegas slot machine. In fact, trying to make every customer encounter a magical one not only can exhaust associates but it also robs the experience of its specialness. How do leaders encourage customer service that is an inexpensive surprise rather than a costly extra? Three attributes make up the leader’s method for nurturing service magic—focus, affirmation, and trust.

### **Keep a Focus on the Ultimate Goal**

Service magic happens when employees are encouraged to keep their focus on the core business. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company’s promise of “Ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen” gives rise to many ingenious service acts that amplify

the guest's experience of the Ritz-Carlton vision. Chick-fil-A not only teaches associates to say "my pleasure" (instead of "no problem") but couples the hospitality lesson with their "serving is a privilege" core value to ensure it is spoken with sincerity.

Looking for ways to amaze customers without awareness of the organization's mission can risk associates being inappropriately wasteful instead of responsibly generous. Merrill Lynch professionals are encouraged to "go the extra mile" for their clients. Their "Client-First" vision, however, does not include extravagant gestures solely aimed at building loyalty. "We are here to uniquely serve our clients every day," says Charlotte, NC-based Merrill Lynch financial advisor Tom Berger. "But we also want to serve them in the future! And that means we must also stay focused on tomorrow's success, not just today's surprise."



### **Affirm Ingenuity, Not Just Excellence**

Service magic happens when employees are given affirmation for their customer-centered inventiveness. Associates at Trader Joe's hold frequent gatherings to share successful ideas, brainstorm new ones, and celebrate the authors of the best customer enchantment practices. Associates are empowered to be creative in how they surprise customers. When a clever idea fails or backfires, service magic leaders are quick to support, and help associates extract the learning from the experience.



Disney World is famous for encouraging magic-making. Always seeking to leave a young guest in awe, cast members unobtrusively listen for opportunities. A housekeeper overheard a child, as the family left their Disney World hotel room, tell her mother she didn't want to leave her new stuffed doll behind while they visited the theme park. The housekeeper swung into action. Upon returning to their room, the child found a letter from Minnie Mouse, who had stopped by and played with the stuffed doll so it wouldn't feel lonely. The rest of the vacation week was free of worry about a prized toy left behind. The magical gesture, related in a staff meeting, won the housekeeper the "Pixie Dust Award" for the month.

## Maintain a Setting of Trust

Service magic happens when there is an atmosphere of trust — where people are considerate and supportive. If people are given a license to criticize colleagues behind their backs, the setting becomes one of suspicion. If manipulative or unfair behavior is tolerated, the climate turns to one of protection. It requires leaders disciplined enough to model thoughtfulness and hold others accountable for the same.

Trust is something that happens *within* people only when it is created *between* people. However, trust does not happen by accident; it is crafted “by hand.” It takes personalized action and attention to the impact that leader actions have on associates. Service magic leaders are quick to credit others. They surprise associates by giving them assignments that bolster their confidence and communicate trust.



In the first month of my employment as a fresh-out-of-college banker, my boss sent me to an important conference he was originally scheduled to attend. I took on a special assignment—to get to know other bankers who worked with our competitors and gain insight into their plans and approaches. Rather than debrief me privately upon my return, he had me share my learning with the entire division. Newfound confidence spilled over into all my work.

Look back at the words highlighted—affirmation, focus, and trust. They are the keys to being a service magic leader. And the powerful by-product of customer service magic is this: creativity and inventiveness start showing up in all areas of the organization—from back-room operations to customer-facing encounters. With ingenuity comes productivity and morale — customer loyalty quickly follows.

## 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 2026 ranked him for the twelfth 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](http://www.chipbell.com).