

*Updated & Expanded*  
SECOND EDITION

# UNLEASHING EXCELLENCE

*The Complete Guide to  
Ultimate Customer Service*

Dennis Snow & Teri Yanovitch



## **Praise for *Unleashing Excellence***

“In the restaurant business, achieving and maintaining excellent customer service is of paramount importance. *Unleashing Excellence* is a must read that would benefit any industry. It gives step by step guidelines that can be implemented with ease and invaluable insights that will help encourage your customers to keep coming back for more instead of leaving before the first bite.”

—**Fred DeLuca**

President and Co-Founder Subway Restaurants

“If your organization is not fully committed to service excellence, don’t read this book. If you are fully committed, then you MUST read this book. It provides all the nuts and bolts of how to create and sustain a service culture.”

—**Pamela Paulk**

Vice President, Human Resources Johns Hopkins Health System

“Business in the early twenty-first century has turned into a survival game—those who figure out how to keep their customers survive. If you need a customer service improvement plan and don’t know where to start, START HERE! Teri Yanovitch and Dennis Snow have put together a thorough guide for building a successful customer focus strategy in an organization of any size. In a plan of only 9 steps, *Unleashing Excellence* shows step-by-step how to build the business case for customer focus and service improvement, supported by successful business examples, guidelines and worksheets, and accountability strategies and measurement plans. The plan is logical, the book is easy to read and non-technical—highly recommended.”

—**Tom Willett**

Director, Management Development Programs  
Cornell University, ILR School

“There is no shortage of books extolling the importance of excellent customer service. What distinguishes *Unleashing Excellence* from the others is its focus on how to do it. If you are convinced of the value of service excellence and want to know how to provide it, this book is for you.”

—**Allan R. Nagle**

Former President, Tupperware Worldwide  
Former Interim Dean, Crummer School of Business, Rollins College

“Customer service is key to the success of any company. I recommend *Unleashing Excellence* to any company needing a ‘how to’ and ‘can do’ manual to implement service excellence in their organization.”

—**Richard A. Nunis**

Retired Chairman, Walt Disney Parks & Resorts

“Dennis Snow and Teri Yanovitch have once again authored an easy-to-read guide, rich with real-life examples of companies striving to achieve customer service excellence. We started following the simple ‘how to’ steps described in *Unleashing Excellence* (first edition) in June of 2004. ‘Everything speaks’ and ‘through the lens of the customer’ has changed our approach to providing great customer service. The

second edition is a must read as it expands the concepts and steps necessary to take an organization to new customer service heights. In this incredibly competitive world, following these concepts will improve your business and your personal life!”

—**Gary Webb**

Executive Vice President—Operations  
First Financial Bankshares, Inc.

“Once again, the authors have pinpointed the dynamics of the changing nature of delivering customer value through a focus on excellence. Wise words for any organization to heed.”

—**Dr. Robert K. Prescott, SPHR**

Graduate Faculty of Management Rollins College  
Crummer Graduate School of Business

“Few books written on the topic come close to the kind of thoughtful examination of the customer psyche that I’ve read here. Dennis and Teri seamlessly marry the intangible tenets of customer service philosophy with practical, easy-to-consume strategies that can help any organization transcend ‘business as usual.’ The authors illustrate their recommendations of ‘what to do’ with stories that make it easy to understand. And, *Unleashing Excellence* does not just tell us *what*, it shows us *how*.”

—**Chuck Kegler**

Director, Kegler, Brown, Hill & Ritter

“If your organization wants to make customer service a part of your culture, *Unleashing Excellence* is a powerful tool. The authors, with their keen understanding of what it takes to accomplish this in any business, walk you through understanding the process and the commitment that it takes to be successful. It is truly a step by step ‘how to’ guide. If this model can help a government agency reach a 93% overall customer satisfaction rating, it can help any organization. The book also helps anyone who reads it understand that excellent customer service isn’t a ‘program’ but a ‘process’ that never ends.”

—**Kimberlee Poulton**

Director of Communications and Marketing  
Florida’s Turnpike Enterprise

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*The Complete Guide to  
Ultimate Customer Service*

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**Second Edition, Updated and Expanded**

Dennis Snow  
Teri Yanovitch



WILEY

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## Preface to the Second Edition

Since the release of *Unleashing Excellence* in 2003, the world of business has gone through some dramatic changes. The global economy suffered an unprecedented blow, forcing governments, businesses, and consumers to re-evaluate priorities and scramble for ways to solve the situation and ensure it doesn't happen again. The quality and ethics of leadership have been universally questioned, and many once high-flying companies collapsed under the weight of corporate greed, faulty business models, and misplaced priorities. The total disregard for customers by a handful of unethical companies destroyed the financial lives of countless people.

We wrote *Unleashing Excellence*, however, for those organizations that *do* care about their customers and want to create an environment that demonstrates that care. This book is written for those organizations and those leaders who want to make a positive difference in the lives of their customers and their employees—and reap the financial benefits of doing so.

It comes as no surprise that the business landscape has become even more challenging since *Unleashing Excellence* was originally released. In addition to those issues already addressed, some of the most dramatic changes are the result of:

- The increased commoditization of most products and services. For nearly every dollar they spend, consumers have more choices than ever.
- The accelerated growth of the Internet. Already a strong presence in 2003 when this book was first released, online businesses have become a dominant player in many industries. Whereas the mom and pop specialty retailer in Burlington, Vermont, used to compete with the competitor across town, now it's competing with the competitor in Bangalore, India. Or with the eBay entrepreneur operating out of the basement in her house.
- The almost total access consumers have to information. A prospective customer, client, patient, resident, or passenger can learn all they want to know about your organization and your products and services from the comfort of their own homes. The oft-cited statistic that a dissatisfied customer will tell nine other people about their negative experience is grossly out of date. Through blogs and consumer advocate web sites, unhappy customers can *instantly* reach an audience of millions and share the details of their frustration.

These, as well as other changes, have made a comprehensive, strategic focus on creating a culture of service excellence more important than ever. The value of earning customer loyalty through a carefully orchestrated service experience is only going to increase in the future.

Positive feedback from readers of *Unleashing Excellence*, as well as from our consulting clients, has validated that the process outlined in this book works. Increased customer satisfaction, increased employee satisfaction, and improved business results have been reported to us. Readers have shared specific customer “wow” stories that were inspired through the disciplined application of the principles discussed in the book. The most common comment we receive from readers is that *Unleashing Excellence* is the only resource they've found that lays out a service

improvement process in a step-by-step approach, making implementation simple (but not easy!).

Not all of our clients and readers, of course, have achieved the dramatic results they had hoped for. While disappointing, there is something to be learned from the unsuccessful attempts at applying the book's principles. Comparing the successful applications of the *Unleashing Excellence* process with the unsuccessful ones yields four critical factors that are at the heart of those improvement efforts that did achieve their objectives.

1. The successful initiatives had unwavering commitment from the senior executive team—the CEO in particular. The senior executives were intimately involved in the planning and execution of the initiative and were relentless in their pursuit of service improvement. Their “failure is not an option” approach to the initiative virtually guaranteed its success.
2. The successful initiatives were launched with an understanding that significant change doesn't happen overnight. The leaders understood that each step in the book is important and that this is a process, not a quick-fix program. We've seen impatience doom many service improvement initiatives. A long-term commitment is needed in order to achieve the benefits of the process outlined in the book.
3. The successful initiatives did not focus on “fixing our frontline employees.” The leaders recognized that it must be an all-encompassing approach that not only focuses on employee behaviors, but also on processes, structure, internal relationships, and ultimately on leadership performance. Creating a culture of service excellence is the responsibility of management. The current level of customer care in an organization is a direct reflection of management priorities.
4. The successful initiatives built accountability into the process, and no one and no entity was exempt from

participating. Service excellence ultimately became *non-negotiable* at every level of the organization. Tools for timely corrective action were implemented so that poor customer service, internal or external, was not tolerated.

In addition to the success factors just described, we've learned other things since the first release of *Unleashing Excellence*, and we've included those lessons in this new edition. We've provided some updated tools as well as some new ones. We've shared best practices from clients and readers who've taken the principles and adapted them to their particular situations, along with their suggestions for successful implementation. And we've included our own observations of what works and what doesn't from our consulting engagements. Customizable copies of the forms and tools presented throughout *Unleashing Excellence* can be downloaded from [www.UnleashingExcellence.com](http://www.UnleashingExcellence.com).

Although the second edition of *Unleashing Excellence* contains plenty of new or updated information, the purpose of the book remains the same as when it was first published. Our purpose is to provide you with a step-by-step manual for raising the bar of service in your own organization. We're confident that, if you follow the process described here, you'll create customer experiences that separate your organization from the rest of the pack and will lead to intense, "walk-through-fire" customer loyalty.

## Acknowledgments

Writing and publishing a book is a challenging endeavor; one that requires the combined efforts of many other people besides the authors. Without the contributions of those listed here (and many more, we're sure), this edition of *Unleashing Excellence* wouldn't have seen the light of day.

First, we'd like to sincerely thank those clients and individuals who provided the case studies and examples used to bring the *Unleashing Excellence* principles to life. Thanks to the teams at Machias Savings Bank; Cummins (and their many entities); Cool Cuts 4 Kids; First Financial Bankshares; LYNX; Florida's Turnpike Enterprise; Naugatuck Savings Bank; Georgia Southern University; The Bartlett Group; Texas Bank and Trust; Walt Disney World; Community Blood Center of the Ozarks; First Citizens Bank; Westgate Resorts; Seminole Community College; and Springfield Clinic.

We are deeply indebted to our editor, Lauren Lynch, and the rest of the team at John Wiley & Sons, Inc. It has been an honor and a pleasure to work with such a prestigious publisher, and we appreciate the care and attention you've shown.

To name all of the friends and colleagues who have supported us over the years would be a dangerous task since we would undoubtedly leave someone out who should be recognized. But, please know that we cherish your friendship and your contributions to whatever success we've enjoyed. We feel truly fortunate.

And most importantly, we thank our families—you have had the greatest impact of all on our work and on our lives. To George, Melissa, Michael, Debbie, Danny, and David; we thank you for your love, patience, and support. You make everything worthwhile.

## Introduction

I just wanted a quick bite to eat, so I stopped at a fast-food restaurant. Thought I'd go inside rather than do the drive-through. None of the people working the customer counter looked happy, but hey, I'd be in and out. When it was finally my turn to order, a truly bored employee gestured for me to speak.

“I'll have a cheeseburger and a medium drink, please.”

“Mmph plfs wpl chlef?” She mumbled, never making eye contact with me.

“I'm sorry, what was that?”

“Mmph plfs wpl chlef?” she mumbled again, a little louder this time, still no eye contact.

I was getting embarrassed. “I'm sorry, I'm not understanding you.”

“~~Do—you—want—fries—with—that?~~” this time with eye contact that clearly communicated that she thought I was a moron.

“Uh, no thanks.” I quietly answered, trying not to make her mad.

She put my burger and drink on a tray, pushed it toward me with no comment, and went on to the next customer. As I walked away I heard her ask the next customer, “Mmph plfs wpl chlef?”

Scenarios like this one are all too common. The service provided by most companies is mediocre at best, atrocious at worst. How many times have you quietly (or not so quietly) fumed over slow, rude, inefficient, indifferent, or inept service? Chances are strong that you've suffered poor service many times—*this week*. But those few organizations that *consistently* provide excellent service, demonstrating that they truly care about their customers, are our heroes. They provide a safe haven from the usual storm of service aggravation. And they are very rare. The big question is—why are excellent service providers so rare?

Excellent service is rare because it takes real *commitment* to make excellence “business as usual.” The service concepts themselves are not complicated or difficult. The level of commitment required is the hard part. A service improvement initiative is similar to an exercise program. The beginning is exciting. You buy exercise equipment or join a health club, buy workout clothes, and read about exercise routines and healthy living. The first few workouts are invigorating and you feel good. Then, other things begin to take priority. You skip going to the gym or taking your run. Each time you skip a workout it becomes easier to skip the next one. Soon your running shoes are gathering dust in the closet or your gym membership lapses. Most people repeat this cycle over and over. Only those individuals who are *truly* committed to sustaining a healthy lifestyle are willing to put in the work of running when it's raining, working out when they are tired, or eating a healthy meal when a Big Mac is a 5-minute drive away. The same is true with creating a culture of service excellence. Many organizations begin a service initiative with banners, speeches, and rallies, only to allow the initiative to die a quick death when the real work begins. Most organizations don't truly commit to building a lasting service culture.

Our purpose in writing this book is to provide a *step-by-step guide* for planning, implementing, and perpetuating a service culture in your organization. Many of the customer service books out there spend much of the book explaining *why* customer service is important. Our assumption in writing this book is that you are

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already convinced about the *whys*. What is needed are the *hows*. This book is a how-to manual for creating service excellence. The order of the chapters is important. Each element of the process described is important. The chapters will guide you through the process of gaining involvement and “buy-in” throughout the organization and will detail the systems that need to be put in place. Creating a service culture involves all functions and all levels of the organization.

One thing is certain: Creating a culture of service excellence is certainly *not* a matter of telling employees to “be nice to customers and smile.” Some employees (like the one in the opening story) just don’t care. These employees have no business being in the service industry. In many cases, however, employees are doing the best they can with the tools available to them. When company policies get in the way of service, customers and employees are often the victims of a “non-service” culture. The airline gate agent who can’t give you a straight answer regarding a delayed flight doesn’t have the *mechanisms* she needs in order to provide you with the information. Surely, most gate agents would *love* to be able to make you happy. Their jobs would be much more pleasant that way. Without the proper mechanisms, however, there is nothing the gate agent can do. Over time, she puts up an emotional barrier in order to protect her dignity. To the customer the gate agent appears indifferent. Nobody wins in such cases—not the customer, not the gate agent, and not the organization. World-class service providers, on the other hand, see excellent service as the responsibility of the entire organization, and they build a culture to ensure that world-class service is delivered.

Some businesspeople still think of customer service as fluff. For these managers, service is too soft to pay serious attention to. To them, customer service is simply smiling and making eye contact. Conversely, stellar service performers see focusing on the customer experience as a vital component of their success formula and incorporate it into everything they do. From the way employees interact with customers, to the user-friendliness of

their processes, to the design of their facilities, these organizations make customer service excellence a priority. And they reap the benefits of doing so. Consider the following statistics:

- A study conducted by BIGResearch for the National Retail Federation and American Express found that 85 percent of consumers shop more often and spend more at retailers that offer higher levels of customer service. Eighty-two percent said they are likely to recommend retailers with superior customer service to friends and family.
- Eighty-seven percent of banking customers who experienced positive “moment of truth” experiences increased the value of products purchased or purchased new products altogether (McKinsey Quarterly, 2006 Number 1).
- In research conducted by the Journal of Marketing, an investment in a stock portfolio based on high scores as reported by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) between 1997 and 2003, a volatile time in the market, the high customer satisfaction portfolio outperformed the Dow by 93 percent, the S&P 500 by 201 percent, and the NASDAQ by 335 percent.

This book is for those companies that want to be known for service excellence. It provides principles and techniques that will endure in the long run. Excellent service is not an add-on; it is imbedded in the way exceptional organizations deliver products and services—every time, with every customer. It is not a program that has a lot of hype in the beginning and then fades away. This is a process; it does have a beginning, but not an end.

A large multinational corporation, or a small, locally based organization can implement the approach presented in this book. The principles are the same; it’s just the scope that changes. If you run or are a part of a small company, the Service Improvement Team and subteams discussed in Chapter 3 may not be appropriate. The functions and activities discussed in the chapter, however, are appropriate. Focus on the principles and tools;

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adapt the execution to your world. We have seen these concepts succeed in a small, 24-bed hospital as well as in corporations with thousands of employees.

When leaders of excellent companies are asked for the secret of success, one word shines through: commitment. Over and over in our consulting work, we've found that service improvement initiatives led by senior leaders who are relentless in their commitment to the initiative's success far outperform those led by senior leaders who pay lip service to the effort but aren't engaged in the actual work. The engaged senior leaders recognize the need for long-term commitment and know that, if their own commitment falters, the rest of the organization will follow suit.

Creating a culture of service excellence takes time. We live in a society, however, that wants change to happen immediately. We want results now! Lasting change doesn't work that way. As described previously, anyone who has successfully sustained an exercise program knows that you work, work, and work without seeing the physical benefits for quite a while. Then you notice that you're beginning to tone up and are getting stronger with more endurance. Later, other people start noticing your progress and ask how you did it so quickly. Right. If they only knew. With a service improvement effort, you need to do the upfront work before you see the results. You'll see some progress along the way, but the big results manifest themselves down the road. This delay is why most organizations begin and abandon one improvement program after another, similar to the reason why most people abandon one exercise program after another. Both are hard and take time. Those organizations that stick with it are the ones who become world-class.

Since this book is a how-to manual, read through it with a highlighter and pen available and mark those areas where you know your organization is struggling. We have tried to supply many tools to help you with the process, so you are not starting from scratch. As ideas that are applicable to your organization come to you, jot them down in the page borders. If you own or lead a small business or organization, we again caution you to not

disregard certain concepts because they appear suited for only large companies. The ideas in this book apply to *any* organization—you may simply need to adapt the execution of the idea. Customizable copies of the forms and tools presented throughout *Unleashing Excellence* can be downloaded from [www.UnleashingExcellence.com](http://www.UnleashingExcellence.com).

Pay attention to what other companies are doing to deliver excellent service. No matter the company or the industry, you can always learn from excellent performers. Pull together an influential team of people from your organization and discuss the strategies and tactics discussed in the book. Start to look at ways you can implement these ideas so that customer service becomes a key component of what your organization is known for.

Remember, though, that unless you are starting a new business, changing a culture takes 3 to 5 years. Don't be impatient; it will happen if you stick with it. Changing behaviors and current ways of doing things is rarely easy. And, while it takes time to form new habits, once these habits are in place, it becomes hard to remember how "we used to do it." Aristotle once said, "we are what we do repeatedly, therefore, excellence is not an act, but a habit." This book will help you to make excellent service a habit.