SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

HUG YOUR CUSTOMERS

By Jack Mitchell

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Summary of Hug Your Customers by Jack Mitchell

Written by Alyssa Burnette

How to win more customers by creating a positive sales experience.

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Introduction

Do you hug your customers? Most business professionals would probably say no! But if you're not a fan of physical affection or hugging strangers, the good news is that you don't have to be. Because this book isn't encouraging you to literally go out and hug your customers if that's something either of you would be uncomfortable with. Instead, the principle of "hugging your customers" is all about creating a company culture of warm, personalized customer service. And over the course of this summary, we'll learn how you can put those principles into practice and why they can make a big difference for your business.

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Why is Customer Service so Important?

Take a moment to think about your most recent shopping experience. If it was similar to the experience that most people have, it probably went something like this: you walk into a store and nobody speaks to you. Or if they do, it’s a lackluster, “Welcome to Walmart” that the employee doesn’t really mean. You know they’re just going through the motions and so do they; the greeting falls totally flat. Maybe you find what you’re looking for in a heartbeat or maybe you need some help locating an item. If the latter is true, you might have to wait forever before you find an employee who’s available to help you with your search. And once you find someone, they might not have a clue what they’re talking about. In fact, there’s a good chance that this experience will leave you more annoyed and confused than before.

Once you finally get ready to check out, the employee might or might not know what they’re doing. They might be lazy or disinterested and you might have to point out that they’ve overcharged you or neglected to apply the discount for a sale item. And by the time you check out and leave the store, you’ll probably be in a bit of a bad mood. Does this sound familiar? For many people, this is a pretty common shopping experience. And if it occurs at big chain stores like Walmart or Target, we tend to accept it because these stores carry the items we need at a relatively low price. As a result, we’ll continue shopping there even if their customer service is lousy.

This relatively common experience illustrates a few important facts about our shopping experience. Firstly, as we can see from this example, many people will continue shopping in unpleasant environments if they value low prices and accessibility. But this example also shows that the people who continue supporting a business in spite of bad customer service are not loyal customers-- they’re grudging customers. They’re not choosing to shop at a certain place because they value that business and want to give it their love and support. Instead, they’re shopping at that business for lack of a better option. If another business were to pop up and offer better customer service for the same low prices, those customers would jump ship in a heartbeat and give their business to a company that treats them better.

The author observes that, if you're an entrepreneur, this is an important factor to keep in mind when it comes to the way you run your business. We all know how annoying and upsetting it can be when you feel devalued and disrespected as a customer, so most people want to avoid making that same mistake in their own business. But it's not enough to say, "I don't want to do that in my business." It's not enough to give your employees a little standard customer service training. Instead, you have to actively cultivate a company culture that is the opposite of the environment we just described. By contrast, every interaction with your customers should leave them feeling like they just got a warm hug from a friend. And in the next few chapters, we'll learn about the strategies you can implement to create that vibe in your business.

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How to Create a Hugging Culture

So, what can you do to create a hugging culture in your company? The author suggests that the foundation for a hugging culture lies in a familiar old adage. Do you remember the popular phrase, “The customer is always right?” This phrase was coined in the early 1900s and popularized by such titans of industry as Harry Gordon Selfridge, John Wanamaker and Marshall Field. When they publicly embraced this concept, it set the tone for a new era of customer service. And although this idea seems to have fallen by the wayside in the modern age, the author argues that it’s time to bring it back. That’s because this strategy is the first step to create a “hugging culture” in your company.

In practical application, this concept means that your business philosophy should be concentrated on one thing: what makes your customer happy. If you can find out what makes your customer happy and give it to them, you can create loyal customers and a lasting business. So, how do you do that? The author offers an example from his own business as a guide. In his stores, the author prioritizes relationships with his customers over everything else. To do this, he teaches his employees to get to know the customers and encourages them to be friendly and kind. He also instructs them to learn their customers’ names and call them by their first names. This little detail might seem insignificant, but if you really think about it, you notice that this makes a big difference in the vibe of your shopping experience. For example, “Hey, Lauren! Great to see you today! Your husband’s retirement party is coming up, isn’t it?” sounds more welcoming and friendly than a plain, “How can I help you today?”

The author also aims to eliminate the standard greeting of “How can I help you today?” Although this question has been the cornerstone of customer service for a long time, the author observes that it’s outdated, vague, and lazy. If you want to create a truly personalized shopping experience, you should tailor your greetings accordingly. That’s why the author always instructs his employees to ask questions like, “Are you shopping for fun or for business today?” These simple questions are valuable because they help employees to connect with customers and initiate a conversation. By asking a more specific question like this, you give your customer a chance to open up to you. Maybe they'll tell you about their day or share a funny story that you can both laugh about.

These simple little details can make all the difference in a person's shopping experience! And it can definitely make a difference when they have a choice about which store to go to. Because if your store treats customers with respect, makes them feel like friends, and offers them a great deal, you've created a customer for life! And your customers will always be able to tell the difference between the gold standard of customer service you've established and the mediocre treatment they get at other stores. So, remember to stay consistent in your commitment to customer satisfaction!

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“Hugging Culture” Doesn’t Have to be a Metaphor

Earlier in this book, we mentioned that you don’t have to physically hug your customers if that’s something you-- and they-- will be uncomfortable with. However, it’s also important to remember that real, physical hugs can be a valuable part of your business if that’s something that works for you and your customers! The author has experienced the power of both a literal and metaphorical hugging culture in his business and he’s seen what a tremendous difference it can make. He first noticed the power of a literal hugging culture when he saw that genuine friendships can often develop between customers and employees. It might sound surprising, but if your commitment to customer service helps your customers feel at home with your business, you may develop a real friendship with them. And within the scope of that friendship, a hug might feel natural for both of you. So, if you’re both at a stage where a hug or a friendly pat on the back feels normal, let’s imagine two scenarios and think about what would be weirder.

In the first scenario, let’s say that you’re a manager and you’ve developed a friendship with a customer. They’ve trusted you to meet their needs in a professional capacity and over time, that trust has deepened in a companionship that often involves you guys getting together for dinner or going to Trivia Night with some other mutual friends. So, after you’ve established this history of hanging out and enjoying each other’s company, let’s imagine that one day, your customer leans in for a hug. You’ve just saved the day by helping him find the perfect gift for his wife’s birthday and he leans in to say, “Thanks, man! You’re a life saver!”

Although professional etiquette typically dictates that you don’t hug your customers, in this case, returning his quick and friendly hug is clearly the socially acceptable thing to do. If you lean in and give him a pat on the back, you’ll reinforce the sense of trust and friendship between you two. By hugging him, you’ll be saying, “I like you too! I’m happy to help!” So, even if hugging your customers is sometimes considered weird, that would clearly be the normal thing to do in this scenario. But if you stepped back and said, “Oh, wow, I don’t think we should be hugging since I’m a manager and you’re a customer," that just makes things weird! Essentially, you've just ruined an opportunity for closeness and community by deliberately putting distance between the two of you. You're not just turning down a hug-- you're turning down his trust and friendship. And that could damage your business badly.

So, as we've seen in the previous chapters, creating a "hugging culture" in your company isn't about taking everything literally or relying on a set of prescribed, outdated rules. Instead, it's about thinking with your heart and your head to create the perfect cultural balance. It's about using emotional intelligence to establish relationships with your customers. It's about learning what makes your customers happy and giving it to them. So, as you try to develop a hugging culture in your company, remember to think with your heart and your head. Use your social and emotional intelligence to read the room and understand the social cues your customers are giving you. If you do that, you'll instinctively know when it's appropriate to give your customers a friendly hug or a handshake and when to maintain professional boundaries.

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Integrate Old-School Values and Technology to Create a Successful Business

The concept that “the customer is always right” is a pretty old-school idea. (After all, it was pioneered in the early 1900s, when business practices looked very different!) But as you can see from the previous examples in this book, sometimes old-school ideas can teach us a thing or two. Hugging your customers and crafting an environment that keeps them happy may be an old-fashioned idea, but it can make your business successful! However, the author observes that you can learn from old-school ideas without abandoning modern advances. The business titans of the 1900s might not have had iPhones at their disposal, but you do! And the author thinks that blending your resources can lead to amazing results.

He saw this first hand in his experience with his own stores and that’s why he recommends that everyone should integrate personal warmth and technology into their business practices. It’s especially important to stay technologically relevant in today’s fast-paced and ever-evolving digital world. So, how can you blend technology with old- school customer service? The author recommends that you start by taking a customer- centric approach to this aspect of your business as well. For example, if most of your customers are older, they might not benefit from a fancy new app or an option for online shopping. But they would appreciate the fact that your records are well-organized and you can easily find their orders. So, in this case, you might want to prioritize digital software that can help you organize and locate orders quickly. You might also benefit from apps or spreadsheets that help you keep track of memorable details about your customers. In this case, the technological advances you add might not appear customer-centric in the same way as an app, but they will be more beneficial for your customers.

By contrast, if your customer base is mostly comprised of tech-savvy young professionals, a user-friendly online shopping experience is likely to be very important to them. Same goes for a strong social media presence or the ability to live-chat with a customer service representative. At the end of the day, the updates you add should be chosen because they'll serve your customers well. So, if you remember to put your customers first in both your personal and technological business decisions, you can seamlessly integrate technology with old-school customer service.

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Final Summary

“Hug your customers” might sound like a weird piece of advice but the author believes that this practice is the key to cultivating a successful business. That’s because the principle of “hugging your customers” is founded on the core belief that doing business with you should make your customers feel happy and at home. This business model is successful because it stands in direct opposition to the traditional customer service model employed by other companies. Although everybody says customer service is important to them, it’s rare to see a business that really lives into that belief. And your customers know exactly how rare it is because they’re used to feeling undervalued.

When you create a “hugging culture” at your company, you’ll stand out because your attitude challenges the status quo. So, how do you implement a hugging culture at your company? The author asserts that the cardinal rule is simple: find out what makes your customers happy and give it to them. If you get to know your customers and build a relationship with them, you can find out what they value in their shopping experience. And once you know that, you can implement their suggestions by making customer-centric decisions in every aspect of your business. The author believes that this should also apply to your use of technology in the workplace. Rather than taking a “one size fits all” approach, find out what technological advances will most benefit your customer’s needs. Then you can put them into practice to create a hugging culture that blends technology and superior customer service.

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