

Soothing the Savaged Consumer Soul: *Customer Love When Times Are Tough*

By [Jeanne Bliss](#)



11 Ideas for Companies *and* Customers

In these economic times, when our nerves are raw and we are stretched like a rubber-band ready to snap...we all need a kinder hand, a kinder voice...just plain more kindness in our life.

Nearly every interaction tests us now. Opening the cell phone bill and gasping...then endeavoring to get a bit of help. First the queue, then the call. Not much kindness there. Putting gas in our car. Forget about the boat. Buying groceries which are creeping up in price daily. Trying to sell our home or buy one. Calling the support line to have the appliances fixed which chose NOW to conk-out.

If you are in the business of serving customers, right NOW is the time to seek out the intangible opportunities to soothe the savaged consumer soul. Here are ideas that will bring you dividends in rising above the fray and in soothing the frayed nerves during this time of spending woe.

1. *Become Wizards at Alternative Solutions.*

Creative solutions that help your customers cope and manage with the current financial pinch will be long remembered. Can you offer revised payment plans or offer different pricing schemes? Coach your frontline how to hold a diagnostic conversation to understand the financial implications of the current market with customers. And, reach out to customers proactively, especially if service contracts or annual commitments are due. In this economy, customers are more likely to opt out and disappear. If you show up proactively with a helping hand, empathetic approach and creative options prior to this decision, you can save business and build allies, and the memory of your actions will serve you long after this financial pinch is over as you stand out as a partner in supporting your customers from their point-of-view.

2. *Listen; Then Repeat.*

This sounds ridiculously simple, right? Think again. Eight out of ten phone calls, retail interactions and service calls begin with prescribing a solution to a customer before the customer need is really listened to, understood and validated. This is a time when customers will want to vent. Let them. Then repeat back to the customer what they said. Because not only do we need to vent right now, we need validation...that times are tough, that prices are high, and that we're in pain. If your customer is not in dire straits, good results will also follow. Repeating the reason a customer walked in the store, called your number or emailed your 'contact us' address will take you to a level that is just not being received today...which is internalizing what the customer needs and using that knowledge to drive an outcome that is right for them.

3. *Practice Wild Empathy.*

Customer empathy is NOT a pity-party! The ability to empathize, and to put ourselves in our customers' shoes so we understand what they are going through – tests the humanity of our organizations—especially now. Bring groups of people together in clusters of twenty–thirty and have them identify the top 10 customer frustrations that are occurring right now. Identify which have emerged recently, and discuss how customers are responding and coping with challenges. Then bring people up in groups of two and have them role-play customer conversations. Film these and make them available to everyone. I guarantee that the small investment in filming will be worth it. This action will send a signal internally that it is recognized that times are tough. Giving people permission and good examples for how to empathize will provide not only comfort to customers who receive it, but also to your employees who are feeling the pinch themselves. The humanity and humility that comes with acknowledging this condition will bring you closer to your employees and customers.

4. *Deliver Small Heroic Acts of Kindness.*

Small kindnesses will go a long way right now. We are all so fatigued from walking away empty-walleted, that small gestures will really stand out. Zane's cycles, a bicycle shop in Connecticut sells \$15 million a year from a single shop. They give away any item that a customer is in a panic about finding (read: link that will fix a broken chain) that costs under a dollar. Think Dad with a 10-year-old whose bike is broken; one stop at Zane's and they save the day – WITHOUT charging anything. Every day Zane's extends these small heroics that send customers away shaking their head in amazement. My husband came home from the dry cleaners last week and they gave him a \$1 package of collar stays which he was going to buy – but they gave him. What can YOU do?

5. *Find your Best Customers. LOVE THEM!*

Your best customers, whether you call them 'Promoters' from how they rank you, or are your highest value from how you rank them...if they are hanging in there with you...they deserve all the love you can give. First, let them know that you're glad they're sticking around. Then, reach out to them. Are you developing new products or services? Bring a group of your best customers in for an evening of food and feedback. Perhaps you can send them a letter acknowledging that you value your relationship with them and offer an extra service. One company I work with rotates their executives through outbound calling their best customers per month. The impact of this simple personal and humane contact lets your customers know that you care about them and are reaching out to help. That in itself will set you apart!

6. *Play Defensive–End for the Front Line.*

Your people at the front who are working directly with customers are likely feeling two things right now: their personal pain in the wallet and the pain of their customers. NOW, especially is the time to come up with uncommon acts of kindness for them. Create a monthly casual conversation with your front-line so they can tell you what they are hearing and where they are perhaps being beat up a little by beleaguered customers. Rotate in 10–20 per month so everybody has a time to vent and have a bit of cheerleading. Host something fun once a month...bring in lunch, host a karaoke night. Most importantly LISTEN to what they have to say. Make a list of the biggest issues customers are having that they have heard and work to systematically cross items off the list. You'll need to create perhaps some tools to help them coach customers down from that ledge that some may be standing at right about now. Don't wait to do this!

7. *Hire those with Dash and Daring.*

Indications are that this financial crunch will take some time to recover. Profile the type of person who will thrive with customers in this type of economic environment; listeners, creative thinkers and naturally service-oriented people for those serving and interacting with customers. Hire for passion and the natural ability to empathize. Find leaders who find the glass half-full and that can motivate creativity and inspire creative solutions. While these skills are always desired, if you want to emerge above the rest, they are a necessity when times are tough. Amy's Ice Cream, a beloved place in Austin Texas actually has their applicants make a creation out of a white paper bag instead of filling out a standard application form. What's your particular brand of experience that you're delivering? And what can you do differently in the interview to make sure you've got a match for the job?

8. *Call Customers Who Have Left You!*

This is the time when acts of heroism for consumers and business accounts WILL NOT go unnoticed. So reach into your customer database and identify some customers who have left you. Then reach out to them. But before you do, build some creative financing and pricing options for them. When you call, first apologize. Then listen. Asking why a customer left and then really listen. Repeating back the reason is extremely powerful...and yet FEW DO THIS! Finally, ask to be given another chance and then offer your new creative finance and pricing options. Even if they don't bite right away...this type of gesture sticks with customers. One financial services company we did with this ultimately got back 35% of customers who had departed. Just the shock value that you realized they were gone and cared enough to ask "what happened" will set you apart from the rest!

Finally, for consumers... Here's a dose of "customer yoga" to manage your nerves during this season of spending woe.

9. Give What You Want to Get.

It's a jungle out there right now; and if we all let our stretched rubber bands go flying; well, somebody's gonna lose an eye (thanks mom)! Before you call that call center, remember the gal on the other end of the line is a stretched like a rubber band too. You'll get a lot more back if you decompress before you call. Just wrap your tone in velvet. Try a little tenderness for whoever answers the phone. Who knows, maybe 2008 could go down as the time when we all grew our humanity instead of the economy. While our bank balances may be a bit thinner, as people, we'd all be richer for working through this time with grace.

10. *Redefine 'Good Life'.*

We're too used to having our barometer of our success connected to how much we're spending. Stuck in that rut, our measure of how good our life is right now will clearly sink. Instead, redefine what "good" is. A great cup of coffee and the paper is good, but blended with thirty minutes that you give yourself to just 'be' is...well, great. Weekend at a four star hotel can be wonderful, but so can a great hike, or camping under the stars, or site seeing trip of the city you live in...that you never take the time to see. A movie is good, conversation with someone you love; even better. If we can re-blend our consumption to one part purchase and three parts enjoying the time between the spent; I bet we'd actually enjoy those purchases more. I bet all this great thinking-time will create the next new breed of consumer breakthroughs - which we can get back to after this economic intermission.

11. Release Your Inner Creativity; Control Your Inner Wallet.

Who would have thought that riding the bus would be where all the “in” people are? “Yet if you’re green...you’re riding lean.” Taking the time now to find out the options in your community to ease the stress on your gas consumption will do wonders for the stress in your wallet. In 2007, public transportation usage increased more than in the past 50 years. And in the first quarter of 2008, 88 million MORE trips were taken than in the first quarter of 2007. So get on that bus...it’s a party out there! Here are just a few of the new trends that have crept up in the past few months. “Stayvations” have increased...families are actually spending more time together home while consuming less gas! And, scooter sales are through the roof. So take a deep breath (maybe even a yoga class) and get creative! There are options out there that will give your wallet the rest it needs!

– Jeanne Bliss

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