

From the best-selling book
***Becoming A Category of One: How Extraordinary
Companies Transcend Commodity And Defy
Comparison***
by Joe Calloway

Tiebreakers

What's Your Tiebreaker?

I'm trying to decide who to do business with. Should I choose you or one of your competitors? You all look pretty much the same to me. One of you has to have something that will tip my decision in your favor. That's the tiebreaker. Whoever's got the winning tiebreaker gets my business. So, what's your tiebreaker? What can you point to with confidence and say "This is the reason that you should choose us. I rest my case."

In the chapter "The Commodity Trap" I talk about getting beyond price and quality to more powerful differentiators. In this chapter we'll look at some examples of how companies create powerful tiebreakers in ways that may surprise you. Perhaps the biggest surprise may be that by simply doing what you said you'd do, but doing it with absolute consistency, you can create the greatest differentiator of all.

Whatever your tiebreaker is, or, if you're really good, whatever your tiebreakers are, rest assured that it's got to be there in plain sight. You can't make your customer guess or have to work to figure out what your difference is. One of the most valuable exercises you can do for your business is to have everyone answer the question, "Why choose us?" In my case, as basically a one man business, I ask that question all of the time. I never assume that the answer is obvious to a potential customer.

Here's a dose of reality: my competitors are good. Really, really good. I never fall into the trap of thinking that I'm the obvious choice because I am just so much better than the other guys.. I look at who I'm stacked up against and all I can see are competitors who know their stuff and deliver the goods. The ones that aren't very good aren't my competition. Remember that. If you actually are obviously better than someone else in your category, then they aren't your competition. Pay attention to the best in your category and know that this is who you're up against.

Remember the premise of this book – becoming a Category of One. What you want to do is create such a clean break from your competition that customers and potential customers quite literally believe that there's no comparison between you and the other guys. That's an extremely ambitious goal, but one that you must pursue every day. In my own business, I am constantly working towards the position of being able to truthfully say "I don't do what they do" when it comes to my competition. For you, it may be a case of being able to say "We do what our competition does....BUT...." Then you go on to identify one differentiating factor that is so compelling that it gets you the win. That's your tiebreaker.

The Ultimate "Wow" Factor

It seems that every business today is looking for the "wow factor." I hear it all of the time. People are wringing their hands and running around frantically saying "What's our 'wow

factor?’ We’ve got to find a ‘wow factor.’ We can’t compete without a ‘wow factor’.” Okay. Fine. Let’s think about this “wow factor” idea.

A friend of mine is in the business of matching up companies with outside experts. His job, in effect, is to help companies get better by putting them with the right resource. I asked him what he thought about the whole “wow factor” frenzy. He said “Quite honestly, I’m getting really tired of all of this ‘wow factor’ stuff. I think everyone pretty much knows what they have to do. They just need to do it.”

There’s your “wow factor.” Just do what you know you have to do. But let me take it a step further and really get to the ultimate “wow.” Do what you do, extremely well, every single time, with every customer. Relentless, attention-getting, differentiating consistency of performance. This can be your ultimate tiebreaker and is, for some Category of One companies, if not their key differentiator, certainly the foundation upon which everything else is built.

Beyond Table Stakes

Another popular term being bandied about along with “wow factor” is “table stakes.” What this means is that there are some basic expectations that you must fulfill just to get in the game. That’s absolutely true, of course. As noted elsewhere in the book, you have to come to the marketplace with a minimum standard of value pricing, product quality, and good service.

Often I will advise a client that what they should be focusing on is to provide really good service every time to every customer. That’s when I hear the argument that good service is just “table stakes,” and that what they are interested in is a “wow factor.” Here’s the problem. Most of the time, they aren’t delivering really good service every time. It’s just most of the time. Or, more likely, just some of the time. But the same can probably also be said for their competition. The great challenge for any company of much size at all is to deliver quality and service consistently. And therein lies your potential differentiator – consistency.

If you deliver on those “table stakes” factors of basic customer expectations, but do it with incredible consistency, that differentiator alone can quite possibly take you to Category of One status. Companies that do what they do extremely well every time, with every customer, are exceptionally rare. If you can get to that level of consistency, chances are very good that you will find yourself in a Category of One.

Own An Expectation

We spend so much time worrying about thinking “outside the box” that we may be overlooking the potential returns if we look inside the box for tiebreakers. Think about your customers’ basic expectations of you. I’m talking about what your customer expects in every transaction and in all aspects of his relationship with you. If you sell hamburgers, then the basic expectations might be for a good tasting hamburger, at a competitive price, delivered to you quickly, in a clean environment, by friendly, professional people. What if you chose one of those basic expectations to absolutely master. What if you, in the minds of the customers, owned that expectation? What if you delivered on that one fundamental expectation so incredibly well that it truly set you apart from your competition?

In the western United States there are thousands upon thousands of customers who would say that In-N-Out Burger is such a company. In-N-Out Burger was started by the Snyder family, and, according to the company website, they had a clear vision about what they intended to deliver to customers: “Give customers the freshest, highest quality foods you can buy and provide them with friendly service in a sparkling clean environment.”

The great thing about In-N-Out Burger is that their customers could pick any of the elements of that vision statement as something that the company “owns.” They consistently excel in quality, friendly service, and a clean environment. Wait. Not just clean. “Sparkling clean.” What a difference in power that one word, “sparkling,” adds to the intention.

But I would wager that most customers would say that the one basic customer expectation that serves as In-N-Out Burger’s tiebreaker and main differentiator is the quality and taste of the hamburger itself. Customers rave over these hamburgers and will even wait longer for them than they would for any of their competitors’ hamburgers.

If you can establish product superiority in today’s marketplace, that’s a differentiator that almost automatically puts you in a Category of One. All you have to do is be respectably competitive in everything else. Clear product superiority is exceptionally rare today and rarer still if you can sustain it for a long period of time. If you can get there – you rule.

Wild Goose Chase

Many companies get so distracted by their search for the “wow factor” that they take their eye off the ball. The ball, of course, being the foundational elements of your business – those basic customer expectations. It’s easy to find yourself in search of what amounts to a “wow factor” gimmick instead of doing your job exceptionally well, every time, with every customer. You end up on a wild goose chase and your customer ends up taking her business elsewhere because you forgot to tend to the basics.

My wife had lunch the other day with a friend at a casual dining restaurant. She ordered a salad as her entrée. When the waiter brought her salad, she literally said, “Wow.” The salad was the most impossibly vertically ambitious structure she had ever seen. This was basically a lettuce based salad that went straight up. It was a tower. She had never seen a salad like it. She said to the waiter, “That’s the tallest salad I’ve ever seen.” The waiter replied, “That’s our wow factor.”

As the waiter left the table my wife thought, “No. That’s your ‘wow, what a completely stupid way to serve a salad’ factor.” She told me later that the salad was practically impossible to eat. You just couldn’t get to it without making a mess. But somebody, somewhere in that restaurant company had decided that just being different would be a competitive differentiator. Sometimes being different is just goofy. First, make a good salad that people can actually eat. Forget the gimmicks and concentrate on good food.

Hotel Bathroom Origami

I travel a lot. When I say I travel a lot, I’m talking about twenty-five years of airplanes, restaurants, and hotel rooms. For someone like me, who studies what creates success in business, travel is the perfect real world laboratory. If you travel enough you will experience the entire spectrum of service and quality, from extraordinary to wretched. As a frequent traveler I have been the beneficiary of fabulous service and the victim of service so bad it almost seemed like someone were playing a practical joke on me.

I have a particular interest in hotels. It’s very much a love/hate relationship in that no one love a great hotel more than I do. At the same time, a hotel that misses the mark can drive me absolutely crazy (see my adventure with the hotel in Austin, Texas in the chapter “Your Brand Is Everything”). What I have discovered in over two thousand stays in hotels around the world, is that it’s never a “wow factor” gimmick that wins me over. It’s not the hotel origami.

Although I’d seen hotel bathroom origami for years, it wasn’t until I heard my friend Lou Carbone talk about it that I really began to take note of this strange, exotic, and rather peculiar

hotel art form. Lou is a customer experience management expert, and author of the fabulous book “Clued In, How To Keep Customers Coming Back Again And Again.” In a presentation he did about customer experience, Lou had photos of some of the most insanely elaborate hotel bathroom origami I’d ever seen.

Hotel bathroom origami is the art of turning tissue, toilet paper, or towels into amazing sculptures of dragons, orchids, clouds, fire trucks, or other intriguing shapes and forms. What never ceases to amaze me is that often the hotel that puts this much effort into turning tissue into white, fluffy bouquets of delight is the same hotel that didn’t have enough people at the front desk during check-in rush hour, had two burned out light bulbs in lamps in my room, and made me wait over ten minutes in the restaurant before a waiter showed up to take my order. Instead of figuring out how to significantly reduce the time required to check in guests, which would truly delight me, the hotel does toilet paper origami. They think that their “wow factor” of having paper and cloth orchids and dragons around the room will win me over.

You want a “wow factor”? Stop it with the origami toilet paper and just get me checked in in less than three minutes. Make sure the room is clean. Use light bulbs that are over 50 watts so that I can see what I’m doing. Do the basics well and I promise not only to be wowed, but to come back. Hey, I love the warm chocolate chip cookies at Doubletree Hotels, but what I love more is that they generally do a really good job with the basics.

How To Get Rave Reviews

On a business trip to Chicago, I was delighted to find that I would be staying at The James hotel. The James had been listed as number 29 on Travel + Leisure Magazine’s “World Best Awards” top 100 hotels in US and Canada. The New York Times said “The James is now the only game in town” and one reviewer called it “the city’s hippest lodging.” It was featured as a 2007 Conde Nast Traveler magazine “Hot List” hotel. The magazine also listed The James as one of the “world’s top new 138 hotels,” being one of only 19 in the United States to make that list. It’s review said that The James had set a new standard for service.

Talk about rave reviews! I wanted to know the secrets of The James. I was ready to crack the code of incredible service and blow the lid off the story of how to create an extraordinary customer experience. In short, I was ready for “wow factors.”

The punch line to this story is underwhelming. Nothing “wowed” me. There was no single moment when a hotel employee did something so over the top that I would tell the story for years. There were no special gifts waiting for me in my room. The elevator didn’t have my favorite song playing. There wasn’t even any bathroom origami. All they did was their jobs. And they did them extremely well, all day and all night long. The doorman smiled. The people at the front desk were professional and delightfully friendly without being overbearing. The design of the interior spaces throughout was beautiful. The room was clean. The bed was great. The James just got everything right.

I’ve since stayed at The James many times and I have yet to see them miss a beat. I’ve asked other guests there what impressed them about the hotel and every person had pretty much the same response, “It’s just a great hotel.” There was the occasional story of, for example, a desk clerk who helped a hotel guest work out a complicated travel challenge. But, for the most part, everyone I spoke with about their experience at The James just tended to agree that it was a rock solid hotel that did a great job time after time. They’ll be back. And so will I.

Happy Birthday. Our Price Is Low.

Think about the companies that we read about in all of the popular business books as being examples of “wow factor” masters. These are the companies that the motivational speakers point to as inspirations for us all. Look at the covers of the business magazines and make a list of who’s been there in the past few years.

Start with the grand champion of them all – Southwest Airlines. I write about Southwest Airlines and often hold them up as fabulous example of a Category of One company. Their record of customer satisfaction and loyalty, profit, and performance dependability speaks for itself. It’s the dependability part of the mix that is their foundation. The rest is icing on the cake.

While working with a group of financial services managers, I asked them for examples of companies that they felt had achieved Category of One status through clear differentiation. Predictably, one of the first stories offered was about Southwest Airlines. A woman said that she and her friend recently took a trip to celebrate the friend’s fiftieth birthday. As they boarded the plane, the flight attendant asked her if this was a fun trip for her or a business trip. She whispered that it was her friend’s birthday.

About an hour into the flight, the flight attendant announced on the public address system that today was a very special occasion as it was the birthday of one of the passengers. He proceeded to hand out “birthday peanuts” and then said that he was going to dim the lights in the cabin. “We can’t have candles on an airplane,” he said. “But if each of you would reach up and turn on your flight attendant call button, we can make the inside of this plane look like a birthday cake full of candles.” He then lead them in a rousing rendition of “Happy Birthday” and the entire plane erupted in cheers and applause.

Great story. I just get goosebumps. Now that’s a “wow factor” if there ever was one. But there’s more to the story. I asked the woman why she and her friend had chosen Southwest Airlines in the first place. She said “Mostly price. And we didn’t want to be delayed. Southwest seems to be on time more than the other airlines.”

Here’s the point. Southwest Airlines takes care of the customers’ basic expectations in terms of value, quality, and consistency. Then, and only then, will the birthday celebration make any difference at all. If the coffee at Starbucks isn’t consistently what the customer wants, then who cares about the oh-so-hip music playing in the store? If I have to wait in line for what seems like forever every time I go to the bank, then the fact that someone runs out with an umbrella to help me in when it’s raining doesn’t impress me much.

All of the “wow factor” tricks in the world will never be more important than this one foundational plea from every customer on the planet: Just do your job! THEN you can impress me with really cool gestures and above-and-beyond feats of service.

What Tiebreakers Look Like

My own approach to tiebreakers is to establish a foundation of rock solid reliability. I know my business, I’m really good at it, and I will deliver value consistently. That foundation gets me even with all of my other competitors who can do the same thing. The big mistake that the non-competitors in my industry make is that they assume that they’re really good when the market has said, “No. You’re really not very good.” The market will tell you if you’re competitive or not. The system works perfectly.

I spend the great majority of my time working on one thing: creating value through quality. I never say “I’m there. It’s good enough.” For me, the product and service that I deliver are never “good enough” so I work on them relentlessly. That’s my primary tiebreaker. Beyond that, I endeavor to create tiebreakers everywhere I can.

Be extremely easy to work with: Tiebreaker
Return calls and emails immediately: Tiebreaker
Resolve issues in the favor of the client whenever possible: Tiebreaker
Keep reimburseable expenses as low as possible: Tiebreaker
If I'm not the right fit for a job, recommend a competitor who is: Tiebreaker

And the list goes on.

Let's take a look at some great companies with a wide range of tiebreakers. The idea isn't to necessarily copy them, but to let their ideas inspire your own ideas for how to differentiate from the competition.

Be On Time. Is That A Big Deal?

Go back to the idea of thinking of your customers' basic expectations and picking one to absolutely master. What if you owned it? What if you staked your claim on being the absolute best in the business at one aspect of what customers want? That's "inside the box" thinking at its best and it could very well get you a huge return.

Almost everyone has had the experience of setting up an appointment for a service person to come to their home. It might have been someone from the cable tv company, the phone company, a plumber, or an electrician. You've taken off from work in order to be there to meet this person at the appointed time. In that situation, what's one of the most infuriating things that can possibly happen? They're late. The later they are, the madder you get.

We're talking about the most basic of basic customer expectations. Be on time. Show up when you said you'd show up. Because this is such a common experience it begs the question that there might possibly be an opportunity for competitive advantage here. What if you owned the expectation of showing up on time? What if that was your flag in the sand? What if you even built an entire brand around it? In my town there is a plumbing company that has done just that.

They own being on time. It's their turf. They have staked their brand on their mastery of this one basic customer expectation. They will be there when they said they'd be there or they'll pay the customer five dollars for every minute they're late. Their advertising absolutely hammers you over the head with this one focused, precise differentiator. Obviously, they are also good at plumbing and they've been in business enough years to prove that. But their tiebreaker is being on time.

Is being on time a big deal? Oh yeah. Every homeowner, me included, who has grinded teeth while waiting for a late service person to show up can attest that being on time is a big deal. It's not that being on time should be your tiebreaker, although you could probably do worse than that. It's what it might inspire in you that holds the payoff.

One of my clients is a multinational company that sells industrial and commercial safety equipment and alarm systems all over the world. In the great 2009 recession they asked the question "What if we owned delivery? What if we were absolutely the most reliable vendor in our industry when it came to dependability of delivery? What impact would that have not only on our existing customers, but on the customers of our competitors? Some of those customers may be feeling a little neglected right about now and being the rock solid vendor could very well create some market share opportunities for us.

If You Lose Your Job

In a time of unprecedented layoffs and economic uncertainty, what's it worth if a company can remove a significant potential financial worry from your life? How powerful is taking that worry away as a tiebreaker? One company seized the hard reality of a recession and used it to create a powerful and unique differentiator.

In 2009 the fifth largest automaker in the world was Hyundai. They began the year with a 7 percent market share in the United States. Hyundai has worked for years to change the public perception that they are just a little auto company from Korea making inexpensive little cars. In the middle of one of the worst slumps in the history of the car business, they're doing just that.

Starting at the foundation, which is doing your job well, Hyundai started off the year with a bang. Their first luxury sedan, the Genesis, was named North American Car of the Year at the Detroit auto show. Remember that without quality at the basic expectation level, there's no chance to use a tiebreaker because you don't even get to compete. Hyundai also claims to offer America's Best Warranty, which adds substance to their claim to product quality.

In a time of intense uncertainty and financial worry, what's your tiebreaker? For Hyundai it was their Hyundai Assurance program, which lets buyers return their vehicles, at no cost and with no penalty to their credit rating, if they lose their job or income within a year. Did it work? Among all auto manufacturers sales in the U.S. in January of 2009 fell 37 percent, the industry's worst since 1963. Sales of the Hyundai Sonata surged 85 percent.

After the initial success of the Hyundai Assurance program, they upped the ante with Hyundai Assurance Plus. The promotion for the program stated "At Hyundai we think it's easier to find a job when you've got a car. That's why, for a limited time, we've added something extra. If you lose your income, we'll make your payments for 3 months while you get back on your feet. We're all in this together, and we think it'll be a little easier to get through it with a good set of wheels."

Again, as with other tiebreaking strategies, the point isn't the specifics of the Hyundai Assurance program. The future of Hyundai and all auto companies remains filled with uncertainty and anything can happen. The point to be learned from Hyundai is that any of us can and should think in terms of "What is my customer's problem? How can I stop the pain?" In order to differentiate we simply have to move towards outside-in thinking, looking at the reality of the world around us and embracing it and the opportunities each business cycle presents.

Easy To Do Business With

One tiebreaker that wins over and over again is to simply be easier to do business with. Whether it's an easy-to-navigate web site, a bank that's open on Sunday afternoon, or a concrete pipe manufacturer that writes contracts the way the client wants them written, the positive power of the "easy" factor can't be overstated. Relationships are everything and if you're a pain to deal with, you're fired. The customer's perception is that somewhere, somebody wants my business more than you do and I'll go to them in a heartbeat if you make life difficult.

Easy-to-do-business-with tiebreakers are everywhere. Think about these businesses, what their tiebreakers are, and what your version of each tiebreaker would be for your business:

Jack In The Box: Breakfast served any time of day.

Zappo's: Free shipping on orders and returns.

Southwest Airlines: No change fees and a ridiculously easy to use website.

Google: The entire reason the company exists is to make the internet easier to use.

Your neighborhood bartender: Remembers your drink. Asks about your kids. .

W Hotels: Many of them offer free car service, in a joint promotion with Acura, to wherever you're going in the city. Sure beats waiting for a taxi.

iTunes: When I play a song, iTunes shows me a list of similar songs that I might want to buy. I play "All The Time In The World" by the Subdudes, and they suggest I might want to check out The Meters, The Radiators, or The Neville Brothers. It's an optional feature that I can turn off if I like, but personally, I love learning about other music I might be interested in, and they sell me a ton of songs because of that service.

Netflix: They've got a greater selection of independent films than any other movie rental service than I'm aware of.

Mapquest: They make it easier for me to get from here to there.

California Pizza Kitchen: Kid-friendly. I have a three year old and a seven year old. Believe me, being kid-friendly is a monster tie-breaker.

What's Your Version Of That?

Here's where most people get stuck. They look at that list and think, "OK. He's got a fast food restaurant, a movie rental company, some internet companies, a hotel and an airline. What do any of those businesses have to do with mine?" Well, you tell me. If you can't see potential ideas for your own tie-breakers in that list then I submit that you're really not trying. Let's just take a couple of them and play around for a minute.

Jack In The Box offers breakfast any time of day. To me, that means they let the customer do business in a way that works for them, not necessarily in the way that best suits Jack In The Box. For a bank that might mean greatly extended hours. For a consultant like me, it might mean giving each client your home phone number and 24/7 access (try it – you'll be amazed how little they use it. But they love knowing they could.)

iTunes offers gives you options to buy music that they think you might like. If you have a range of products and services that you're not telling your customers about, what favor are you doing them? I am absolutely tickled to death when iTunes shows me a song that I hadn't thought about in twenty years, but that used to be one of my favorites. I get more cool music. They make more sales. Do you make your customers happy by giving them even more of what they want?

Many W Hotels offer a free car service to locations within the city. It's an extra that you weren't counting on, it makes your life easier, and it saves you money. My version of that kind of "extra" is that sometimes I'll offer to fly to a client company's headquarters, at my own expense, to meet with them for the purpose of simply getting to know more about their company. It's an extra, it makes them feel more secure about their contract with me, and it saves them money.

Tiebreaker. My competitors can't understand how I can afford to do it. I can't understand how they can afford not to do it. Sometimes people step over dollars to pick up nickels.

Superstar

A final word about tiebreakers – don't fall into the superstar trap. It's great to have employees that go above and beyond the call of duty for a customer, but don't let the occasional superstar story lull you into thinking that you're ahead of the competition for more than a shining moment or two. The following story describes how what, at first glance, seems to be a story about great service is, in fact, a story about a company with a problem. ***

I remember when I had moved my offices and made arrangements to get telephone service installed. I made an appointment for the phone company installer to be at our offices at 8:00a.m. on Monday morning. 8:00a.m. came and went - no installer. At 9:00a.m., I called (from a public

phone) and was told that the appointment was scheduled, but they didn't know what had happened or why the installer hadn't shown up. At 10:00a.m. I called and never could even get connected with the right department. At 11:00a.m. and was told that I'd have to find out the number of the installation department and call them directly. I'm not the brightest guy in the world, but I could see a definite pattern developing here.

My final call, in desperation, was to the general number of the phone company. I asked to be connected with the installation department. After a few moments on hold, a young man cheerfully answered "Accounts Payable, may I help you?" I took a deep breath, and, as calmly as was humanly possible, asked the young man to try and connect me with installation. He astutely detected that there was some sort of problem and asked me to explain the situation. I gave him a brief rundown of the problem and said that I knew it wasn't his problem and that I wasn't his customer and I asked again to be connected to installation.

The young man said "Sir, you've got me on the phone. That means you're my customer now and it's my problem now. I'm going to give you my name and extension number. If an installer isn't at your office within thirty minutes, I want you to call back ask for me personally. I'm going to take care of this, sir. Don't worry about it another minute."

Now, that's what it means when you say, "Our people make the difference." Just one problem, though. This was one person out of the five or six I had dealt with that morning who was willing to take responsibility. So this particular company would have been able to say, at best, "ONE of our people makes a difference." And that's not nearly good enough.

*** The problem is that there was obviously no training, no coaching, no policy, and no process in place to assure that every employee was motivated and empowered to take responsibility for solving a customer's problem. Think it through! If you want employees who take action like the guy in Accounts Payable then you have to create the culture and the leadership that will support such behavior. You may want to be sure that such action doesn't take place. You may want any customer problem to go to the department where you've determined it belongs. Fine. Just be sure that you've done what you have to do to make it so.

No Matter Who

No doubt your company has received letters or emails from customers about employees who have performed at that "superstar" level. The customer probably wrote about how "Cathy at your Main Street store went above and beyond in her service to me" or something to that effect. That's a great email to get. Of course you love to hear about your employees who did something special for a customer and made a lasting impression.

But you know what kind of letter is infinitely better to receive? The letter that says "I just want you to know that no matter which of your stores I go to, or which employee I deal, whether in person or on the phone, I always get great service. Even your web site is a pleasure to do business with."

Companies sometimes are so proud of their "superstar" performers that they forget this simple truth – superstars don't win games. Teams win games. Michael Jordan was basketball's ultimate superstar, but without Scotty Pippin and the rest of the Chicago Bulls he might never have won championships. I'll trade in all of my superstars for a team of steady, consistent performers any day. That's the ultimate tiebreaker.

And The Good News Is

Perhaps the greatest lesson about tiebreakers is that they're generally made of pretty standard ingredients. What I mean by that is that whatever business you're in, you quite likely have the ability to stand out from your competitors starting almost immediately. Powerful tiebreakers almost always come down to this: consistent execution. And the good news is that you don't need to hire a consultant to tell you that. If you would spend just one week taking note of every business that favorably impresses you and every company where you are a loyal customer, then you'd have all the research you need to begin to create your own powerful tiebreakers. The great investment advisor Peter Lynch used to say that to discover good companies to invest in, start by observing whose parking lots were full. There's a clue. Lots of customers is a good indication that there's some tiebreaking going on.

I'm a big fan of taking field trips to the mall. Your own company may work strictly in the business to business arena, but I'd advise you to pay close attention to what's going on in retail. What happens in the mall, the grocery store, or Target is the same set of dynamics that happens when companies do business with each other. It's the same hierarchy of factors that drive buying behavior.

Work Your Way Up

Whether you're selling hot dogs, website design services, investment advice, or high school band uniforms, there's a hierarchy of factors that you have to climb. As you work your way up this hierarchy, you get closer to the tiebreakers.

It starts at the level of expected factors. These are the things that anyone in a particular business has to do just to get in the game. In the business to business arena these expected factors tend to be such things as being financially sound, having people who are knowledgeable and accessible, and that you offer competitive quality products and services. That's not much different than what people expect from their dry cleaner. Be dependable, have good people, and do a good job cleaning clothes. Okay. If you're covered on all of the expected factors, congratulations. You are now the equivalent of a pound of nails. You're a commodity. You are basically no different than any other minimal competitor.

Moving on up to the next level we get to the truly competitive factors. Here's where we start to get some separation between those who are simply competent and those who are really good at what they do. Looking at business to business, these factors will include expertise – the ability to provide not just products and services, but solutions. Competitive companies will be innovative, collaborative, and have the ability to help their customers improve profitability. Going back to the dry cleaner, they'll do such things as help you figure out how to make that dress last one more season with some alterations, give you advice on how to store sweaters properly, and advise you on how to remove spots when you're traveling.

Then you reach the top level of the hierarchy of buying factors. This is the level of true differentiation. This is where you create tiebreakers. Companies that do business with other companies find that there are three key differentiators. You must establish long term relationships. You must understand your client's goals and be client focused in everything you do. And, finally, the mother of all tiebreakers is to be easy to work with.

You may be doubtful. You may be thinking, "That can't be. Surely 'being easy to work with' isn't the most powerful tiebreaker in the business to business arena." Oh yeah. Without question, being easy to work with is the cherry on top of the hierarchy of

buying factors. All things being equal, being easy to do business with will be the one thing that will get you the win more often than not.

So what about the dry cleaner? We don't even have to change the wording. Establish long term relationships, understand your customer's goals and be customer focused, and be easy to work with. You just saved that money you were going to pay a consultant. There it is. Now comes the hard part. Go do it.

What we're talking about here are really two things, culture and execution. In previous chapters we talked about knowing who you are and the importance of your brand. That's all about culture. If your culture is coming from the right place, then your strategies and tactics will tend to follow quite nicely. That's where we talk about getting beyond commodity and the three rules about the customer. Then we're down to execution. Do what you know you should do. Do it every time. Do it with every customer. That creates customer loyalty. That's how you sustain success.

It's Right On The Coffee Cup

I like to write early in the morning. Right now it's 6:05 a.m. and I've been at it for an hour. Like many people, I have a favorite coffee cup. As I'm writing this chapter about tiebreakers and "wow factors" and sustained success, I just looked at the writing on my cup.

It's a coffee cup from Café Du Monde, "The Original French Market Coffee Stand" in New Orleans. I've been to the Café Du Monde and it's a great place to go early in the morning. Lines of customers waiting for their café au lait and beignets.

On the back side of the coffee cup it says "Café Du Monde, the original French market coffee stand, serving café au lait and hot beignets (French doughnuts) 24 hours a day, year round. This familiar New Orleans landmark has been located in The French Quarter since 1862." You do the math. They've sustained success for a very long time. Having been there, I can tell you that the only "wow factor" is that they serve really good coffee with really good beignets all day and all night. They are pleasant people. They are easy to do business with.

Wow. Do you think maybe there's a lesson there?

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