

# Keeping Track to Bring Them Back

*Tracking Customer Roles, Goals, and Preferences*

Even if you hired a platoon of statisticians to pore through your customer data, they'd never uncover a single style of “good service” that can please every customer. Good service requires custom fitting. This is one principle on which true customer service virtuosos—successful barkeeps, booksellers, shopkeepers, and maitre d's—agree.

So, to succeed far beyond a Mom and Pop scale, or even to run a Mom and Pop that continues to thrive when Mom and Pop are chillin' in Cancun, you need to ensure that all of your employees are able to provide individualized service—no matter how briefly they've been part of your team and no matter how poor their memories are.

The solution is to develop a tracking system that captures each customer's likes and dislikes, as well as what each customer personally values and is hoping for when doing business with you. After each customer interaction, your staff will use this system to *note* the idiosyncratic personal values and preferences of the customer and then *share* that information, however or wherever it is helpful within your company.

A commitment to systematic noting and sharing will separate you from that wonderful dry-cleaning business on the corner (the one that lost most of its customers when the owner fell ill). It will allow you to avoid the fate of the popular, lively restaurant in LA that never quite succeeded when it tried to open other locations.

## Principles of Noting and Sharing

What follow are our key principles for building a successful system for the notation and sharing within your company of customer information.

***Principle 1: Keep Your Systems Simple.*** Don't track too much stuff, and keep what you *do* track right at the fingertips of your frontline staff. Simplicity is what makes a preference-tracking system sustainable. If you obsessively gather gobs of data on every customer for hypothetical purposes, you're going to obscure the preferences you need ready access to. You'll also dilute the energy of your staff, who will lose track of the original goal: relating warmly to customers as individuals and making them feel important. This "Keep-Your-Systems-Simple" (KYSS) approach is almost always the best one, even in very complex customer contexts.

### Setting Up the Ritz

Years ago, to begin building the customer service systems at The Ritz-Carlton, the staff were given notepads to write down guest preferences and concerns that they noticed or were alerted to. A guest who had recently sobered up wanted the mini-bar emptied prior to his arrival. One very allergic woman felt comfortable in her room only if she had ten boxes of tissues placed there. If housekeeping noticed that a solo guest turned down his bed on the left or on the right, this would be duly noted as the side to turn down in the evening. These were requests staff at The Ritz-

Carlton wanted to honor on each subsequent visit *without* being asked—in whichever Ritz properties throughout the world these guests next visited.

In their initial, groundbreaking system, the Ritz-Carlton team gave themselves the goal of notating just five preferences—and then satisfying at least three of them. The result was a *transformative* impact on the guest experience, as has been well documented in the business press, for example in this traveler interview by Gary Heil and his co-authors from their book *One Size Fits One*:

*The hypoallergenic pillows we requested during our last stay are on the bed, all fluffed up—and we forgot to ask this time. There are numerous extra towels (and we remember we had called room service for extras during our last visit). The cookies on the tray are all chocolate chip, our favorite kind—and the oatmeal ones we received last time but didn't eat are mysteriously missing. When we checked in, the concierge asked us if we wanted tickets to the symphony as we had requested last time.*

*We begin to realize that The Ritz-Carlton has taken every bit of information it learned about us from our last visit and indexed it in a database. Before our arrival, the hotel staff, from room service staff to the chambermaid, customized our room with the extra touches they knew we would want or need. They seem to know us as individuals and they seem to care genuinely whether our stay is enjoyable.<sup>1</sup>*

The impetus for the Ritz's simple tracking system, Leonardo explains, came from an early finding: "We're always asking customers for their expectations and desires from our properties. The most common answer we heard—and even to this day hear—is 'We want it to be like home.' But when we probed guests for the unexpressed need beneath this not-quite-convincing answer, it turns out it's not *their* home they want. It's the dream of

a childhood home that they're looking for—you know, the home where everything is taken care of for you.”

At home as a typical adult, you are in control, but only on a self-serve basis. In your childhood home (optimally), it was a different sort of experience. Food appeared at mealtimes. You didn't have to worry about shopping for personal items. When light bulbs blew out, new ones replaced them. When you left, your parents were genuinely saddened by your departure, and they looked forward to seeing you again. Most of all, your personal preferences in all of these matters were well known and “magically” taken into consideration.

Once the Ritz-Carlton management team recognized that this was what their customers were seeking, they were able to develop a better and more customized service model. In Leonardo's newest hotel brands, in fact, they are extending this concept by pre-interviewing guests to see if they can help reduce uncertainties that *precede* the customer's arrival—transportation and other logistical issues, for instance—to ensure they feel cared for from the moment they arrive in the city. A bit like Mom might do if she knew you were on your way back to town.

***Principle 2: If It's Important to Your Customer, It Belongs in Your System.***

In the independent music and film industries where his company operates, Micah makes a point of using software to allow his staff to capture information in specific categories, such as which genre of music and instrument a customer plays, as well as unique details of nearly any sort in which the customer shows interest or appears to take pride in. This latter, general category may include a big movie the client has worked on, a treasured industry award he has received, and so on. Or, it might be more important to use this space to note that his wife is ill and that he hates being called on the phone in the morning. We call these data points *Roles, Goals, and Preferences*.

Even in the tiniest of companies, roles, goals, and preferences

should be tracked consistently. When Micah first started his business ventures, his “empire” consisted entirely of himself taking phone orders and processing them—in the leaky basement of a starter home. Micah could have personally stayed on top of the roles, goals, and preferences of each of his (few!) early customers. But after hearing the first employee he hired struggle to chat with a big musical client (“Who’s your drummer again?”), he became an early advocate and developer of automated systems to track roles, goals, and preferences. Without these systems, his employees wouldn’t have been able to deliver the “Mom’s house” experience as his company grew.

Startups often use off-the-shelf software to manage customer preferences. Be careful: Some such programs do not carry forward notations from individual project records into the customer’s permanent record. Leaving a customer’s preferences languishing as notations in a single project’s record is no better than a scribble in a restaurant’s reservation book. (That “classic” method means that unless the restaurant goes through all the reservations ever made, it’s going to miss the 2005 entry where the gent now being seated mentioned his shellfish allergy.) Put durable information about each customer in that customer’s *permanent* database record. And make sure that preference data is easily visible from within any project he does with you moving forward.

What types of items should go in your tracking system? Track whatever is most important to the customer. Customers’ roles, goals, and preferences are quite diverse, and no amount of market research can predict them perfectly. Here are some items that we recommend you keep at your fingertips:

► **Information on any missteps on past projects/visits/transactions with a particular customer.**

► **Information on any problems that have already occurred on this visit, or that seem to be unfolding at that moment.** As we have already discussed, a customer who has already received poor service on this visit shouldn’t, later on in the visit, receive oblivious,

chirpy greetings from other staff members (“Are you enjoying your time with us so far?”), requiring the customer to educate the staff over and over (“Actually, it’s been problematic”) in response.

► **Product/service preferences, whether stated by the customer or observed, which you should try to accommodate without being asked.**

► **Anything your customer filled out earlier on a comment card or electronic survey.** These forms contain not just statistical data but feelings expressed by a real, live customer. In addition to responding to such feedback personally and promptly (see Chapter 6), include this information in the customer’s tracking file so that you can keep it in mind when working with the customer in the future.

► **Any personal ties to your establishment, such as a shared history, friends the customer has who work at your establishment, etc.** Some of your customers will perceive your business in especially emotional, personal terms. Encourage this. For example, if a customer explains that she first visited your drugstore with her dad as a child thirty years ago, be enthusiastic about that. Then write it down. As another example, some of your customers may express special attachment to a particularly charismatic member of your team. Record those feelings, and cue that employee to be sure to make contact with the customer. The employee’s personal contact will enhance loyalty far more than a discount.

► **The number of projects/purchases/visits.** Make sure your tracking system identifies unusually valuable customers clearly.

► **Especially challenging customers.** Never write notes about challenging customers except in a tactful code. Any such warning must be reviewed by someone in an ownership position before being shared, even in your internal, password-protected computer system. Among the reasons for this caution: Many “intractably” difficult customers are actually misunderstood customers responding to a specific situation; the next time you encounter them they may be as easy as the day is long.

So while service establishments often do have codes that alert staff to troublesome customers, it's crucial to keep such negative notations secret, and only maintain them with the approval of senior staff. (Speaking more broadly, there is emotional value in reframing how you talk, and type, about customers. Using less judgmental language toward customers in your own notations and discussions will actually help soften your feelings. For example, try: *demanding* rather than *difficult*, *has discriminating tastes* in place of *impossible to please*, and even *very time-focused* instead of *impatient*.)

► **Personal facts: spouse, pets, kids, etc.** If included, such details need to be accurately dated. (For example: Pets noted five years ago are, sadly, not safe to inquire about. Husband you haven't heard mentioned in a few years? Probably ditto.) Use a software system that automatically time-stamps entries.

*Privacy training and systems security are critical parts of any professional setup.* And for added peace of mind, *assume* your files are a lot less private than you think. We consulted with one company that was still reeling from an IT initiative designed to allow customers direct account access. The initiative's goal had been to cut staffing costs by increasing customer self-service. Unfortunately, in the new system it was possible for customers to be inadvertently greeted online with their personal tracking files—which in one mortifying instance included very embarrassing comments, written in quite plain English! This kind of self-inflicted privacy breach is not uncommon. And demanding customers are particularly unforgiving. So figure out a useful code, swear all parties to secrecy, and stick to the code.

**Principle 3: The Information You Gather Needs to be Available in Real Time.** Years ago, Leonardo's team committed to making information about guests available throughout each location in an appropriate way that made guests feel good. Of course, the most basic guest information is the guest's name, which is noted carefully upon arrival, and then used—graciously and with correct pronunciation—throughout the

property, a technique that truly feels like magic to customers. (Discreet radio communication plus an attentive staff makes this “magic trick” possible.) See if there are ways to adapt this magic to your own business in creative ways.

For example, perhaps you run a managed health care facility rather than a hotel. Most of us know from personal experience how unsettling it feels when a nurse comes through the doors into the waiting room and calls like an auctioneer to everybody in the room: “Julia Jones!?” Talk about starting off on the wrong foot with your customers! Considering the hidden benefits of positive word of mouth from satisfied and loyal customers—and the hidden costs of alienating such a customer—it’s well worth finding a better way. (In health care fields, those hidden costs can be astronomical, due to the increased risk of a lawsuit from a dissatisfied patient.)

Once you’re committed to treating your patients like royalty from your first words, how would you do it? You could begin by training your receptionists to write down each arriving patient’s type of clothing or other politely identifiable features. (Julia Jones, 45, red blouse, blue slacks, blond.) These notes could then be carried along with the patient’s medical paperwork to the nurse who leads the patients in. Armed with these notes, the nurse can then find Julia and give her a warm, personable welcome when she’s ready to bring her back for treatment.

***Principle 4: Preferences Change; Assumptions Are Tricky.*** Preference tracking can run amuck. One of our favorite chefs, Patrick O’Connell of The Inn at Little Washington, tells this story:

Recently I stayed at a New York hotel that prides itself on customized service. The first morning, I had breakfast in the hotel restaurant, and I ordered tea. The next day, the waiter brought me tea as soon as I sat down. Unfortunately, that day I wanted coffee.<sup>2</sup>

Missteps like this shouldn't stop you from using your preference tracking system as a starting point. If that same restaurant had greeted Patrick with a cordial "Good morning, Mr. O'Connell. Will you be having tea again? Would you like it again today with the Turbinado sugar?" that could have been splendid. (*Note: Preferences we've ascribed to Chef O'Connell's taste buds are for illustrative purposes only.*)

**Principle 5: Moods Change: Track Them.** There is an additional human metric we encourage you to track: *changes in your customer's level of enjoyment over the course of your customer's interaction with you.* The Inn at Little Washington's O'Connell is the architect of one of the simpler and more effective customer happiness tracking systems we've experienced. At his Virginia countryside restaurant, each server discreetly notes the level of guest happiness at the beginning of a meal, rating it from 1 to 10. (So discreetly, in fact, that we never see them assessing us or logging their conclusions—no matter how often we conduct delicious "research" in Patrick's dining room.) The goal is to bring the mood of the guests up to at least 9 before they hit the road for the ride home. Of course, how you track this in your own business will depend on how long delivery takes for your particular product or service and how complex other demands are on your staff's attention.

**Principle 6: Don't Blow It with a Wooden Delivery.** Information you cull from tracking needs to be used naturally and in a way that seems effortless to customers. As an example, Dale Carnegie's insight that one's own name is "the sweetest sound" has been endlessly quoted. He's right, too—but *mispronounce* that name, and "the sweetest sound" goes sour. (Trust guys named Leonardo Inghilleri and Micah Solomon on this one.) By the same token, don't ruin a great thing by inserting a customer's name or other personal information into the interaction in an artificial, fill-in-the-blank manner.

Have you ever called a help desk and had the person answer, "Good morning, thank you for calling XYZ, how may I help you?" and as

soon as you give your name it's inserted into everything, without emotion, without passion, clearly running through a script that appears on the screen? You feel like you could shout out that your house is on fire, and you'd get the exact same vocal response from this mechanized, allegedly personalized service. There's no point gathering customer information if you're going to use it in a canned, robotic fashion.

***Principle 7: Using Technology to Ask for Information? It's a Fine Line between Clever and Creepy.*** *Beware the protective bubble.* Everyone has what we call a "protective bubble" around himself, to a greater or lesser extent. Teaching your staff to recognize this and probe only gently, retreating as cued, is one of the keys to attentive service that we will discuss in detail in Chapter 7. But in electronic interactions you lose the human failsafe of direct verbal and nonverbal feedback. And as customers well know, electronic databases have the power to track *everything* in a way humans never would.

People respond skeptically when asked to help populate Internet databases. It's not like when you request information face-to-face: Personally ask somebody where he was born, and there is a high chance he'll answer openly. At worst you'll get a "Why do you want to know?" and thus a chance to retract the question or explain the reason for it. But if you require potential customers to divulge information on your company website, you'll never know whether the requirement drove them away. You won't realize that they thought your electronic persona was rude or that they didn't trust the website version of you. Inexplicably, you simply won't get signups.

The simplest solution is to remove all potentially intrusive questions from your Internet forms. An alternative is to make those questions optional, and fully explain your reasons for asking. Even customer-centered companies sometimes violate this rule; they may then experience a loss of market share or a drop in customer quality that they are never able to trace back to its origin.

In the physical realm, but with the "help" of technology, one

family-oriented chain of mall stores crossed this line in their eagerness to use automation, and they may not even have realized it. This company overall has a lot going for it: It serves parents and young children alike, offering a warm and welcoming experience, with great potential to bond with customers. That is, until the last moment—when they encounter an intrusive electronic procedure near the final checkout counter. The checkout kiosk was placarded thus, in huge kiddie-style lettering, the most recent time we visited the store:

***Input your***

***•Name***

***•Address***

***•Email address***

***•Gender***

***and***

***•Date of birth***

***in our Kiddie Carousel system and sign up to receive special offers.***

On every screen was cheery animation coaxing things along, complete with letters made out of colorful stars and buttons to simulate a child's handwriting:

***When is your birthday, [name of child from previous screen]?***

***•Month?***

***•Day?***

***•Year?***

***Press the pink key after each entry!***

(*Note:* Security experts call date of birth, name, and address the “holy trinity,” which, in combination with the often-breached social security number, lead most commonly to identity theft and other privacy problems. All items in this holy trinity are asked for in the se-

quence of questions above—and they’re being asked of customers who haven’t graduated elementary school.)

The temptation to enter an entire birth date is driven home by photos of a family birthday celebration. A small “adult supervision recommended” disclaimer seemed to have been hastily placed on a card atop the monitor, but was obscured from where you would be most likely to read it. Regardless, disclaimers don’t win back your customer’s loyalty. If customers feel you’re being sneaky, they’ll run the other way.

## Surprises Are Hazardous—Online and Off

Just because you *can* get information doesn’t mean you *should* get it. And just because you’ve gotten information doesn’t make all uses of it appropriate. People don’t always like being surprised—even if the surprise shows them the impressiveness of your service systems. “Permission marketing” expert Seth Godin gives these examples.

If your credit card company called you up and said, “We’ve been looking over your records and we see that you’ve been having an extramarital affair. We’d like to offer you a free coupon for VD testing . . . ,” you’d freak out, and for good reason. If the local authorities start using what’s on the corner surveillance cameras to sell you a new kind of commuter token, you’d be a little annoyed at that as well.<sup>3</sup>

Those are of course hypotheticals from Seth, but what about *this* real-life example from a friend of ours who was staying at a top hotel? She called the front desk to complain about a problem with the service. The front desk clerk fixed the problem but added a mistake of his own: Reading from the output of the electronically monitored minibar in her room, he told her, “I see you enjoy vodka. Would you enjoy one of our new vodkas with your dinner tonight as an apology?” The clerk thought he was being clever, but he came off as basically spying in his

guest's bedroom—not something that's going to warm the cockles of a customer's heart.

Keep in mind that you are gathering information *to serve your customer*. Any other use is at best secondary. And because we are talking about electronic systems, always remember the limitations of working without physical or auditory feedback. Do not require information unless it is an absolutely necessary part of doing business. When you ask for it, ask politely, never using the information in a way that penetrates someone's protective bubble.

### How to Track Customer Preferences on the Internet—Without Intruding

The Internet tempts us to gather too much information. It's so easy to ask customers questions in an automated online interface that the temptation to "pile 'em on" can be very strong. Here are some principles to help you minimize this temptation:

1. If you must gather any sensitive information, explain why it's necessary—clearly and fully.
2. Never require a date of birth unless you must screen underage users. Many people will either exit a website or falsify their birth date online if it is required of them. Pressuring customers to lie to you is the wrong way to begin a journey toward loyalty.
3. Think through every question you ask, first arguing against it as well as you can. For example, play devil's advocate about collecting telephone numbers. Why are you *requiring* your customers to reveal their phone numbers? Why, for that matter, require an email address? (There's probably a reason, but think it through. Think about the potential costs, not just the obvious potential marketing benefits.)
4. If you give people a persuasive *option* of providing private information, your best prospects will often be agreeable. After

that, the problem of sifting out bogus “required” data (999-555-0505 and *lateralligator@getoutofmyface.com.usa.xxxxy*) goes away.

5. Consider the supplemental use of live chat wherever possible and of prominently listed 800/888 numbers. This can keep people from being daunted by lengthy forms (and walking away) when they only wanted a bit of specific information. But don’t let any of this stop you from providing a rapidly-answered email address as well. Note that some who approach your company online don’t want to talk on the phone, no matter how friendly and well trained your “operators standing by” may be. Some are not even able to: The Internet has become an important tool for people with disabilities, including those with limited hearing, as well as for the inevitable stealthy at-work shoppers.

## Fear Not: Don’t Be Deterred from Collecting Information—Thoughtfully

*Don’t be deterred from collecting information—in a sensitive way, for respectful uses. There is little that’s more important to your growth as a company. Indeed, effective tracking of what is important to customers—specific customers, not just customers in the aggregate—is a hallmark of all the excellent organizations we have worked with. It makes it possible for new staff to continue customer relationships built by departing or promoted colleagues as your company grows. It builds high, sustainable levels of customer loyalty.*

It works for us.

We recommend it for you, too.