



Transformation Managed with Inspiration

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# Winning Your Customers Over

## *Creating the Middle Game Right in Customer Service*

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### **Customer service as a team game with the Opening Middle and End phases**

If we were to treat customer service as a team game, there would be an Opening Game, a Middle Game and an End game. The aim is to play the customer service game well in all phases, from opening to end. However, it often doesn't happen like that. Let me explain.

I was in a well known coffee shop this week. I was meeting a colleague for lunch. We were given a warm greeting when we arrived. We were then lead to a small, rectangular table, designed for two people. For some reason, neither my colleague nor I felt comfortable on this table. It seemed to be on the small size for us.

We noticed that there was a larger, square table with 4 chairs around it. This table was vacant. We already had been served coffee. So we asked the young waitress whether we could swap tables and take our coffee with us. We thought that it was a reasonable request as we noticed that there was a similar table with just two people at it. The waitress nervously hesitated. She said that she would ask her manager. After a few minutes, her manager came and said that we could swap tables. This might seem to be an insignificant event to you, but to me it was a classic case of lack of empowerment. The employee did not feel empowered to make a simple decision that would make us happy as customers. It is notable that, not too far from this café, there is The Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where employees are given discretion to spend up to RM2,000 to keep a customer happy!

A key contrast between these two brands – the Ritz-Carlton and the café – is that employees at the hotel are trained to focus on making the customer happy during the whole of their stay – from beginning to end. In contrast, the employees at the café seemed more focused on what is good for the café. After all, we were taking up a table that could have been occupied by 4 people.

At the completion of our meal, we were ready to take the bill. We tried to attract the attention of the table staff, but, for some reason, they didn't seem to be watching the customers. I'm not sure what they were looking at, but they certainly were not attentive to customer needs – and the opportunity to sell more food and drink to them. After trying to catch the attention of the table staff and me repeating "Excuse me!" in than louder-than-normal, volume, I finally caught the eye of one of the table attendants. All we wanted was the bill!

As we left the café, they played a strong Closing Game – they give us warm smiles, eye contact and a warm farewell. Unfortunately, by this time, the customer service game had been lost. We walked out of the café thinking that there are lots of places that sell similar coffee and food. We walked out no intention of coming back to this cafe in a hurry.

This got me thinking. The staff at this café have been trained in the Opening and Closing Games of customer service – a warm greeting and a warm farewell. Unfortunately, they did not play the middle game very well. They could not deal with a simple request for a table change and they were not attentive to me. This lack of attentiveness cost them money as they missed opportunities to sell us more coffee as our cups ran dry, or to up-sell us to their delicious desserts. Yes, the Middle Game of customer service can increase

**Lack of empowerment and attentiveness in the middle game can cost missed opportunities to up-sell**

sales. And a Middle Game played well will help win your company the ultimate prize - loyal customers who come back and tell others about you.

**It is the middle game of customer service – the delivery of the promise – that will determine whether the customer loyalty prize is won**

So why did the staff in the café play the Middle Game so poorly when they played the Opening and Closing Games so well? I believe that the reason can be summarized in 3 words - “poor service management.” To be more specific, my guess is that management of this chain focuses on training staff to play a good Opening Service Game and a good Closing Service Game. But they forgot that it’s the Middle Game of customer service that will win you the match and have your customers wanting to come back. Staff somehow had missed the importance of being attentive to customer needs. Management of this café chain is either not training staff, not rewarding staff or not coaching staff to give customers what they want during their customer experience. I spoke to a colleague about my experience and he have said that he had a similar experiences at the same café chain in different shopping centre.

So how do we play a strong Middle Game in customer service? It’s simple. Focus on the few things *that matter to your customers* during their experience with you. Going back to the café, this might include:

- 1. Be friendly:** engage and talk to customers rather than just serve them;
- 2. Be quick:** serve customers promptly and fill their orders quickly;
- 3. Look and listen:** keep scanning the café for customers who have finished their meals or drinks. Ask them whether they would like another drink – or dessert.

Just a handful of **Middle Game behaviours** will have a major impact this company’s bottom line!

The same principles apply to every business. In the business-to-business market, many companies play a strong Opening Game through their sales representatives. Customers buy based on good sales techniques and promises made by the salespeople. It is the Middle Game of customer service – the delivery on the promise – that will determine whether the customer loyalty prize will be won. For example, my company, TMI is in the consulting and training business. Our aim is to provide a solution to a client business needs that might include workshops, training and workplace-based initiatives. The Opening Game is to listen to the customer and to develop a solution that meets the customer’s business needs. The Middle Game involves delivery on the promise, responsiveness to

customer requests and attention to detail. When a project comes to an end, we hold Client Reviews. This is the End Game. And, we know that by being strong in all aspects of the customer service game, we will win the prize of customer loyalty and positive word of mouth.

As the saying goes, you don't have to be good at everything, just passionate about the few things that count. Focus your organisation on the few things that count in during all phases of the customer experience with you. Play a strong Opening, Middle and End Game and prosper.

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