

Looking Carefully at Trust

by Janelle Barlow, TMI USA



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Janelle Barlow's keen sense of diverse ideas and approaches to leadership has been shaped by working extensively in Asia, Europe, and, of course, the United States. Janelle speaks on the subjects of branded customer service, complaint handling, strategic planning, stress management, and innovation. An elected member of the Board of Directors of the National Speaker's Association, she has earned the designation of Certified Speaking Professional. She is co-author with Claus Møller of the best-selling business book, *A Complaint Is a Gift*. She is also co-author of *Emotional Value, Creating Strong Bonds with Your Customers*. Her newest book, *Smart Videoconferencing, New Habits for Your Virtual Meetings* was released in 2002. Her book, *The Stress Manager* is used in the popular TMI course by the same name. She has also written three exercise books on innovation, *Mind Flexors, I, II, and III*. Her Ph.D. is from the University of California, Berkeley. A licensed clinical marriage and family therapist, she has two master's degrees, one of which is in psychology.

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No company owns the brand position on "trust." Michael Edwardson with the University of New South Wales made that strong statement at a recent SOCAP Conference (Society for Consumer Affairs Professionals) in Sydney, Australia. That is, there is no one company whose brand identity is known for "trusting our customers," say as Macintosh is renowned for its design, or Southwest Airlines is noted for its very funny flight attendants, or McDonald's is recognized for its speed and consistency.

Yet we all acknowledge that trust is a requirement for genuine long-lasting relationships. If you don't trust someone and they don't trust you, you probably don't have a close relationship. Trust is critical between friends. It's essential in marriages or close relationships. It's also good in business endeavors.

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Lack of trust manifests itself in large and small ways. With issues of significant ramification, it is reasonable that organizations protect themselves by verifying facts. Trust should not mean that we can walk into a bank, attest to financial conditions about ourselves, and expect clerks, loan officers, or managers to take our word on faith.

Customers don't expect complete trust, and in fact, feel more secure knowing that critical information is checked. We like it that we have to show some proof of identification to be able to withdraw money from our accounts. Otherwise, it would mean that anyone could claim to be us and steal our money.

Where businesses can make a difference, however, is on less essential, but personal issues of trust.

To wit: This past month I was in the United Kingdom and stayed at a Marriott Hotel at Heathrow Airport for two nights. This was definitely not my first stay at a Marriott; I carry their loyalty card and have spent hundreds of nights in their hotels.

I visited the lobby shop to buy a Diet Coke, and unfortunately, inadvertently brought Euros with me instead of English pounds. The woman in the lobby shop refused my Euros because

all I had was coins and no bills. I also did not bring my identification card that the hotel issues with the room number printed on it. As a result, she would not allow me to charge one bottle of Coke to my room. "Policy, you know."

The hotel is large, and rather than return to my room to get the I.D., I went to the nearby front desk reception area and asked for a reissue of the room identification. I indicated that their charge policy at the lobby shop seemed a bit extreme to me. The man representing the Marriott told me that "I wouldn't believe how many people cheat by giving their wrong room numbers at the gift shop."

This engaged me, as by implication, I was possibly one of those people who would cheat to get a Diet Coke. In his presentation to SOCAP, Michael Edwardson also talked about customer satisfaction. He maintains that as an indicator of what customers like, satisfaction is meaningless, since according to Dr. Edwardson, we have taught customers to say they are satisfied. It simply means that they aren't dissatisfied. When they are dissatisfied, they are negatively engaged. That is, they feel personally insulted, embarrassed, or angry.

I was engaged/miffed and slightly embarrassed by the implication of my thieving tendencies. So I pointed out the danger of a policy that attempts to protect the security of guests by giving them room keys that have no room numbers written on them. All of this flies in the face of requiring that you carry your hotel I.D. with you, which clearly has the room number written on it. Marriott front desk clerk to me: "You should carry your room I.D. with you at all times."

This is a security system that is reinforced by not saying the room numbers out loud when guests check in so no one can learn where they are staying. Furthermore, every time someone checks into a room, the key codes are changed, so last week's guests can't get into your room. And customers appreciate this. I gave up in the face of the implication of being someone the Hotel doesn't trust not to cheat about Diet Cokes and a policy that clearly runs right into a security system. The latter issue is more important to me. But because the Hotel doesn't trust me not to cheat when charging small items at the Lobby shop, my security is compromised by being forced to carry something with my hotel room number clearly written on it. This, incidentally, is the Hotel's problem. They have to figure out a way to protect themselves and not insult me about a small personal trust issue. They failed.

In fact the hotel would do better on trust issues to come up with a system that rewards repeat guests, such as notifying all outlets when a Marriott loyalty cardholder is staying in the hotel. Or they could mark their room keys with a sign indicating I am a frequent Marriott guest. At a minimum, the lobby shop clerk could have called the front desk, exchanged some information about me, and gotten approval to charge the diet Coke. After all, I assume that is what the cafe did when I charged my lunch to my room. They didn't even ask to see my identity card, so they must have checked with the front desk.

Every business should look closely at the issue of trust. Decisions need to be made when trust can be assumed (small things), and when trust must be verified (big things). And when the customer says, "What's the matter? Don't you trust me?" it's a signal that the customer thinks you have stepped over the boundary on trust. Embarrassment is a mistake not easily forgiven by customers or guests of any business!

Remember, it's a matter of building strong relationships. You may be my friend and ask something of me that requires checking, it will probably be okay for our friendship if you check. However, if I demand to go through your luggage when you leave my house after a visit to see what you might have filched from my house, we no longer have a relationship.

With businesses, most customers think that all the words about relationship building and trust are basically meaningless. With careful thought that could be changed.

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