

# WILLIE'S WAY



**6** Secrets for  
Wooing, Wowing, and  
Winning Customers  
and Their Loyalty

PHILLIP VAN HOOSER



## Secret #1



# Acknowledge Your Customers Immediately

My name is William Watson. My friends call me Willie. I'd appreciate it if you'd call me Willie, too.

—Willie Watson



Looking back, little did I know that as I begrudgingly made my way to the taxi cab waiting outside that South Carolina airport that my personal standard for measuring those who provide service to others would soon change. I was about to meet the man who would initiate that change and establish the new standard. But how could I have known? As far as I was concerned, this was just another cab ride. One of many. I expected the service experience to be more of the same.

Willie Watson, on the other hand, viewed this encounter far differently. Willie knew that if the service—and the attitude with which he offered it—were





impressive enough, this encounter could be special. And if the encounter was special enough, the possibility existed that a positive economic benefit could result. Make no mistake about it. Willie Watson was a nice guy. But he was also an entrepreneur, a businessman. In Willie's business, better tips and additional business opportunities spelled the difference between profit and loss on a day-by-day, fare-by-fare basis.

Willie, therefore, had the upper hand in this service encounter. Even before the encounter took place, he knew what he needed to do to build a positive experience for the customer. He saw customers like me come and go every day. Over time, he had learned the importance of establishing a personal connection with his customers early on, in order to set the stage for the positive service experience to follow.

But Willie also knew that his window of opportunity was limited. If his passenger was able to make it to the back seat of his cab without that initial positive connection being made, there was a real possibility that the passenger might soon be engaged in a telephone conversation, have his faced buried in a newspaper, or even fall asleep, any of which would mean the opportunity for personal connection was lost, possibly forever.

Willie was unwilling to take that risk. He recognized that the first few seconds of any business encounter often set the stage, positively or negatively, for all that could follow. Rather than wishing and hoping, Willie was engaged in planning and acting. He put his plans into action by



## Acknowledge Your Customers Immediately

27

acknowledging me before I had even made it to his cab. (“Hey, buddy. Need a ride? I’ve been sittin’ here waitin’ for ya.”) He then personalized the relationship even further once we were both inside the cab (“My name is William Watson. My friends call me Willie. I’d appreciate it if you’d call me Willie, too.”)

With two master strokes, he accomplished what many who labor in service-related jobs never learn. First, he effortlessly broke down the invisible barrier between two strangers, the one in which one party waits uncomfortably for the other to speak or act. Second, he offered me the opportunity—the invitation—to be included in that elite group of individuals he calls his “friends.” And he accomplished both with two well-planned and well-executed statements.

You may be wondering if the focused actions that Willie embraced are available only to entrepreneurial cab drivers, or if these techniques could benefit other professional service providers as well. The good news is that the techniques are available to anyone willing to learn and practice them. The sad news is that too few people ever do.

Consider some additional examples—good and bad—of other service providers and how their approach to servicing their customers might compare to Willie’s.

### What Is a Customer?

Several years ago my wife Susan and I were on vacation driving up the United States’ eastern seaboard. Our trip

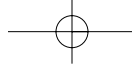


took us all the way to the state of Maine in search of picturesque coastlines, fresh lobster, and a break from the stifling, late summer heat and humidity of our native South. As is our vacation custom, there were very few firmly established items on our travel agenda. But on one stop we had both agreed. We were determined to visit the anchor store for L.L.Bean, located in Freeport, Maine.

New Englanders have known about L.L.Bean for decades. But for many other North Americans, our knowledge has been limited to L.L.Bean's mail-order catalogs. Personally, I had enjoyed their merchandise for years. Their sterling reputation for quality products and service—albeit almost always long distance service—was nothing short of legendary. But the hook for me was the claim the store made that they never closed. I had to see for myself.

Susan and I arrived at the L.L.Bean retail store shortly after 1:00 A.M. As one might imagine, there were few customers and only a smattering of staff to be found in the wee hours of the morning. Nevertheless, Susan was soon lost to me in her dogged pursuit of all things Gore-Tex, flannel, and fleece. Her absence allowed me the opportunity to wander the premises, exploring on my own.

As I sauntered up one aisle and down another, I eventually found myself in a back corner of the building. There I noticed something stenciled on the wall for all to see. As I drew closer and began to read, I soon found myself wondering if it had been placed there for the benefit of customers—or as a constant, very visible reminder to all L.L.Bean employees. It read:

**Acknowledge Your Customers Immediately**

29

*At L.L.Bean a Customer Is . . .*

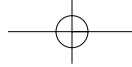
- The most important person to us, whether in person, by phone, or mail.
- Not dependent on us, but us on them.
- Not an interruption of our work, but our purpose for doing it.
- Human like us, with feelings, emotions, and biases.
- Not someone to argue or match wits with.

The simple, straightforward message grabbed me. I thought it a good working example to share in my future customer training programs. So right there I took out my pen and began scribbling the words from the wall on a piece of scrap paper. Soon I was totally immersed in this solitary activity when someone suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. The physical touch startled me and caused me to jump. I had assumed I was all alone. I whirled and found myself face-to-face with a young store clerk who, seconds earlier, I didn't know existed.

"Excuse me, sir. I didn't mean to frighten you," he said sincerely. "I was just curious if there is a problem I can help you with?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied nervously, still working to regain my composure. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, sir, I couldn't help but notice that you were focused on our customer commitment statement," he said, pointing in the direction of the wall. "I just wanted to offer my assistance if you were experiencing any sort of problem."



I resisted the temptation to say what I was thinking. *You mean a problem other than almost causing me a heart attack?*

As I began to realize the sincerity of his motive, I moved from being startled to being thrilled.

*Here is someone who gets it! He really gets it! Serving the needs of customers has become real to him.*

Don't be fooled. One cannot determine a company's or an individual's true commitment to servicing its customers simply by some fancy, well-scripted proclamation printed on glossy paper, etched in granite, or even stenciled on a wall for all to see.

Willie Watson didn't have his service commitment monogrammed on his shirt. Willie didn't hire a public relations company to craft and promote his "service creed." No, Willie earned his service stripes the old-fashioned way by seeking out and servicing individual customers—whenever, wherever, and in whatever manner he could.

A true commitment to service is always mirrored in the actions of isolated professionals. Someone once said, "Character is what's on display when no one is watching." No one was watching Willie during our ride from the airport to the hotel. No one was watching this third shift L.L.Bean sales clerk. No one, that is, but me—the customer. And both of them responded marvelously. They met and exceeded my expectations.

Keep in mind the customer is always watching. It's either the customer you are interacting with presently or the one who is trying to determine if he or she wants to



## Acknowledge Your Customers Immediately 31

interact with you in the future. Do a good job and the customer will likely return again and again. Be indifferent to the customer who is watching, and the outcome most likely will mean opportunities lost.

### Opportunities Lost

Too often, unfortunately, instead of the customer being acknowledged and appreciated immediately by the service provider, the customer is ignored and taken for granted. The business consequences of such shortsighted actions can be devastating.

Susan and I work together. She laughingly tells people that after 20 years of marriage, our personal and professional relationships still work because I travel and am gone much of the time.

A few years ago, I was home for a stretch of several days. During that time, I was doing my best to try to lighten her load a bit, while at the same time earning some much-needed bonus points.

“Susan, how can I help you this morning? Do you need me to run any errands for you?” I asked.

“Well, I need to run by the bank and make a deposit, but it’s really easier to do it myself,” she responded.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I countered. “I will be happy to go to the bank for you. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Hesitant at first, as if unsure of my overall ability to complete this simple task, Susan finally entrusted to me