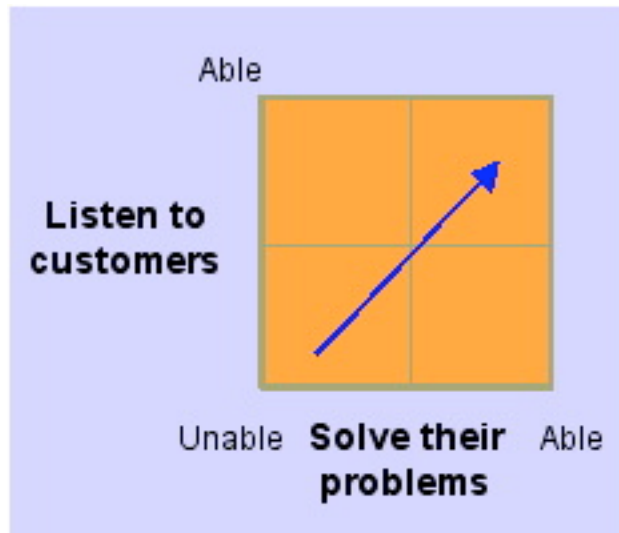




BRUCE KASANOFF

This eBook is available for free at
www.nowpossible.com/less.htm



The most profitable, most sustainable way to run a business is to find a group of customers who have problems that drive them crazy, and can afford to pay for solutions. Then, become obsessed with solving these customers' problems.

Many business professionals forget this simple truth. If you don't believe me, spend an hour in almost any established business. Odds are the firm has become more obsessed with selling than with solving.

This brief eBook reminds you how to solve problems for customers, and in doing so make quite a nice living for yourself. It's not intended to tell you everything, but instead is just long enough to get you energized.

If you like it, please drop me a note.

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About LESS

Yes, customers want your product, but they don't want to spend ten minutes ordering it, six days waiting for it to arrive, two hours assembling it, or 45 minutes on hold with customer support figuring out why it isn't working properly. These moments are all objectionable.

Or perhaps the price of your product includes the cost of providing numerous features in which they have no interest. They are meaningless to your customers.

Go through the portions of your business that you or your team control and eliminate as much as possible that is objectionable or meaningless to your customers. Doing so will have a more positive impact on most businesses than any other initiative I can name.

Vic Mills, a Procter & Gamble employee, accomplished this when he looked for a better way to diaper his grandson and came up with the disposable diaper that people today know as Pampers. By minimizing time spent on what can be an unpleasant task, he freed parents to enjoy more priceless experiences with their babies.

So did Seymour Rubenstein and Rob Barnaby, who developed WordStar, the first commercially available word processor. They launched an idea that has saved billions of hours for people around the world, or that has made it possible for others to soar to new heights. Arthur C. Clarke, the best-selling science fiction author, is reported to have said upon meeting the two that "I am happy to greet the geniuses who made me a born-again writer, having announced my retirement in 1978, I now have six books in the works... all through WordStar."

You don't have to invent a brilliant new product to succeed in the way I suggest. You can create value for customers by stripping away the obstacles that surround your products and services: the unwanted junk mail, the unnecessary – and wasteful – repetition, the unwelcoming attitude of overstressed employees, and the senseless bureaucracy that attempts to take root in nearly every human organization.

Never stop looking for ways to create more value for your customers by giving them less of the things they dislike.

Anticipate More

My conversation with customer service was now stretching past 30 minutes, and I pointed out to the woman on the other end of the phone that if I did as she asked and waited “five to seven days” for her message to reach the other end of the bank, then I would be charged a late fee.

“No problem, she said, “Just call us back when that happens.”

My life didn’t exactly pass before my eyes, but I did see ten more minutes on hold waiting to talk with an operator. Another ten minutes of explaining. Five minutes at a stretch as she put me on hold, figured out what to do, and called her husband to see what he wanted for dinner.

I objected. “Why should I have to call you again to tell you things you already know?”

It didn’t work. She couldn’t understand the point. Later that day I drove to the branch of a smaller, friendlier bank and opened an account.

But this is wonderful news if you need to get a leg up on your competition. Most firms don’t even make an effort to anticipate what the customer will do – or need – next. If you do so, you can become dramatically more responsive in the customer’s eyes.

For example...

If you know something is going to happen a day, week or month from now, accept responsibility to call the customer back rather than making them reach out to you. Interacting with a customer is the best way to get more business from them, if you view things from this perspective.

Look for patterns on your Web site, in phone calls to customer service, in orders you get from customers, and even in returned products. By doing so, you can get a pretty good idea of what is going to happen next, so you can anticipate what a customer is going to need when it does. Better yet, prevent annoying incidents from happening at all.

Whether you have 500 customers or 5 million, you have a lot more information than any single customer. Use this information to his or her advantage and smooth the path ahead. If you know that 50% of customers who order an item come back weeks later and order a specific additional product, save such customers time and tell them about this pattern.

Some Web sites have learned the order in which visitors click on links, and these sites start downloading new content to your computer before you click on the link. To save you time, these sites are guessing what you will click on next. You can use similar thinking across your business to anticipate the customer’s next need.

Cloning People is a Good Idea

Despite what you've heard, cloning people is a *good* idea.

I guarantee that your highest performers will have dozens of ways they save their customers time, confusion and money. Of course, when they save a customer money, it's usually money that would have gone to someone else, not to your company.

Now, take what you learn about your stars, and share it with your other employees. When possible, also use these best practices when you are bringing technology into your customer service and marketing operations.

Let's take Susan, a top salesperson in an upscale clothing store, as an example.

The first thing Susan does when you walk into the store is to let you know she's there to help you, on your terms. Her greeting is friendly, but not overly so. She doesn't want to scare away a hesitant shopper, and knows that to tailor her approach for you, she must first get some sense of your needs.

When she can, Susan looks for non-verbal hints. If you are carrying a letter from the store, she might ask, "Did you come to check out our private sale?" The store has big glass windows, and she sometimes gets hints from the car you drove or the fact that your husband or wife dropped you off. In such cases, she might ask, "How much time do you have?"

Most importantly, Susan listens and waits. When her customer is ready to stop talking and be served, she then takes action, suggesting various outfits and pointing out interesting new options. Along the way, she is constantly looking for both verbal and non-verbal feedback. She never ignores a glance at a watch, or when a customer stops to touch a rack of glove-soft leather jackets. While she might not act immediately on all these inputs, she uses all of them to influence the way she treats a customer.

Finally, Susan is motivated by sustainable success. She understands word of mouth, and knows that great reputations are built through a never-ending series of small actions. She'd rather lose a sale than lose a customer. If she can't sell the customer something that they will be happy with for years to come, she won't sell anything.

You can clone your best people in sales, support, marketing, shipping, billing and many other areas. But don't take your best performers and make them train other employees. They are superstars at serving, not training. Instead, find someone who knows how to interview experts and how to train others. Have this person interview your superstars and put together a process for sharing their knowledge with the rest of your team.

"Don't Do" List



Sometimes you create more value by doing less than by doing more.

A simple way to put this idea into action is to replace your "to do" list with a "don't do" list. Make a list of the things you, your team members, or your company should no longer do.

Here are a few work and personal (yes, this works at home, too) examples, to give you the idea...

At work, make a list of actions you will no longer require customers to take, such as making them tell you their account number three times in a row. List extra steps you need to remove from your employees' path, so they have the time and energy to serve their clients. Detail how much time you want to shave off the process of placing an order with your business.

At home, decide which TV shows you can turn off. Find ways to avoid extra trips to the grocery store or dry cleaners. Steer clear of the same energy-wasting arguments you've had ten times before.

Want to sell more? You can use this approach to help bring in new business. Think about your highest potential customers and imagine what their "don't do" list would look like. Then, instead of presenting offers as just another purchase, frame it as a way to check off another item on that list.

You might even try incorporating "don't do" lists into your communications with customers. It's a powerful idea sure to become more popular the busier we all get.

EZ4U, EZ4 Customers

To make life easier for customers, you first have to make it easier for your employees.

One small, but rapidly growing, advertising agency I know noticed recently that their clients often called at 4:30 pm with emergencies, such as needing to reprint a brochure overnight. Employees were often unable to comply with these requests, because personal and family commitments required they leave work by 6 or 6:30.

So the firm's owner hired a few people to work a second shift. Their job is to handle these emergencies, which they do with pleasure since that's the reason for their employment. Clients are happy, and the stress and frustration employees felt has largely disappeared.

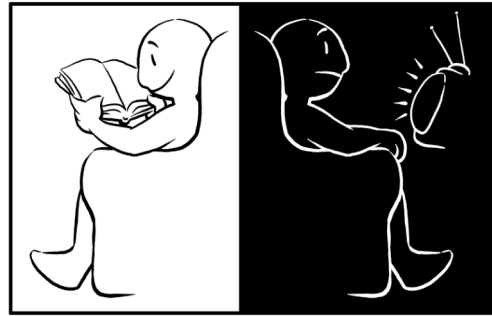
You need to make it both possible and profitable for employees to help customers. That generally means reviewing your operations to find the bottlenecks and disconnects that seemingly transform well-meaning employees into naysayers that refuse to help customers.

One way to do this is to create rules that empower employees to exercise more discretion within certain bounds. For example, you might tell service reps that they can spend up to 20% of the revenue a customer gave you last year to prevent the customer from defecting. But if you force employees to go find a supervisor everytime a problem arises, you delay and frustrate customers while you tremendously increase your costs.

Ask your team members, "What stops you from making life easier for customers?" They won't have any trouble answering. Then remove these roadblocks.

Instead of...

Sometimes to solve challenging problems you need to change your perspective. It often doesn't matter what you change, but rather is more important that you change something, *anything*. For example...



Instead of...

Talking
Making assumptions
Describing problems with words
Typing on a computer
Focusing on costs
Focusing on benefits
Obsessing with one solution
Working alone
Running an errand
Vacationing in Orlando
Working late
Sitting at your desk
Giving yourself ten hours for work

Try this

Listen
Observe details
Draw pictures
Write with a pen and paper
Focus on benefits
Focus on costs
List ten possible solutions
Work with others
Exercise
Vacation in Sweden
Work early; play after work
Take work to a park
Give yourself 45 minutes

Next time you talk with a customer, you might also try to plant this idea in their head. What might they do instead?

By persuading your customer to think about instead, you can demonstrate the value your firm offers by removing a particular burden from their back.

- Instead of spending half an hour at the end of each work day generating the reports required by your competitor's software package, they could be home eating dinner with their family because your software eliminates this step.
- Instead of spending 45 minutes driving to the store to return an item, they could be exercising while your driver saves them the trip and picks up the item at their door.
- Instead of getting 341,000 citations of dubious value from a Web search engine, they could be immensely more comfortable with the ten absolutely reliable and relevant pieces of information your research service provides to the same query.

Less Rigid

Most hotels are extremely rigid. They tell you when to check in (usually after 3 pm) and when to check out (usually around 11 am.) This practice is so commonplace that we take it for granted. But it still can be a tremendous inconvenience for travelers.

A few years ago, Phil Baxter set out to deliver one meaningful innovation to customers of his hotel, the 570-room Four Points by Sheraton in Los Angeles. After participating in a hotel marketing seminar, he set a goal of offering 24-hour check-in.

This was a revolutionary idea. But Phil wanted his customers to be able to check in anytime, and to have the right to stay for a full 24 hours.

“People are more demanding,” he says. “They are used to making their own rules, and they want more control over the experience they have.”

It took about six months to prepare for 24-hour check-in, juggling schedules, rethinking procedures and convincing superiors. He even learned Spanish to do a better job of calming the fears of the housekeeping staff. But it works, and the hotel’s occupancy rate is over 90 percent, at a time when similar hotels average about 66 percent.

Think about your own business. Is there an instance in which your company is so rigid that you are causing your customers aggravation?

Such rigidity pops up in both small and large ways. Has anyone in your firm ever told a customer, “I’m not allowed to call you back.” Some employees may claim, “We’re not able to place outgoing calls.” Remarks like these pour kerosene on the fires of customer frustration.

In today’s world, a receipt often arrives in your email in-basket two seconds after you complete an online order. Customers have no tolerance for mindless rigidity and poorly-designed processes that put employees in the position of acting like heartless robots. If an employee is unable or unwilling to be flexible enough to help a customer, they shouldn’t be there. Either give them the mandate and the tools to help, or encourage them to join a firm with a better future.

If you get the idea I’m emotional about this subject, you’re right. I have never seen a top quality firm that tolerates – in the long run – this sort of rigidity. But as firms grow, and sometimes acquire other firms, it creeps back in. Large financial institutions are constantly drifting in the wrong direction, and must fight hard to avoid becoming government-like.

Then there are “commonly accepted industry practices,” which remind me of the paint color author Tom Wolfe calls “good enough for government green.” Conforming to such practices make a firm not great or good, but merely average:

- Forcing car rental customers to fill up their gas tanks before dropping off the car
- Requiring retail store customers to sign credit card charge forms when phone and online customers have skipped this step for years (this is finally beginning to change)
- Expecting customers to assemble a dossier of information just so they can get the rebate promised them
- Making customers deal with a different department for every aspect of their problem, as in, “Oh, we’re just tech support. You need to talk with Customer Service to get your password changed, then ask them to transfer you to Billing..”
- Charging customers \$100 extra when they need to change their air travel plans
- Using social security numbers to identify customers even though the government says this number should never be used for identification purposes. When I tell this to company representatives, they typically retort, “Then we can’t help you.”

Pay special attention to those practices that are commonplace in your industry. If you can become more flexible in one of these areas, you could acquire a meaningful edge over your competition.

Less What?

Fill in the blank:

I want less _____.

How might your best customers answer this question? The idea would be to have them pick one thing that having less of would make their life immensely better.

This is an effective technique if people then make it their priority to reduce its presence in their life, if they write it down. In **big** letters.

The key question for you, as a marketer, is whether your product or service has anything to do with the one thing they write down. People are much more motivated to solve their biggest problem than anything else. You can wait forever for a call from a customer if you are number four on their priority list.

Your challenge is to first understand how they would answer this question, and then to make your capabilities supportive of their answer.

Here are some possible answers...

assignments
bills
bosses
bureaucracy
clutter
confusion
demands on my time
details
disrespect
fear
financial pressures
frustration
heartache
paper
rejection
repetition
stress
taxes
things to read
work
worries

“Less paper!” answers your customer. So what do you do?

First, take a hard look at how much of that paper comes from your firm, or is caused by your efforts.

- Do you send hard copies of everything? Could you send some documents digitally?
- Can you get the client’s approval to switch to “exception” reporting? That is, instead of telling her about every time you take an action on her behalf, you could notify her only when something *doesn’t* go as planned. In business-to-business settings, when firms often perform complicated services for the same clients everyday, this can save a huge amount of reporting.
- How many times do you ask the customer for information that someone in your firm already possesses? Can you get the information you need internally, instead of from her?
- Can you get answers from third party sources, instead of from your customer? In many cases, firms ask clients for information they don’t have, which forces the client to conduct their own research. Take this work off their hands.

Next, think about whether changes in processes or technologies could eliminate or minimize the need for much of this paper. One of the strongest points of computers is that they are great at doing the sort of mindless, repetitive work people dislike. You could instruct your system to check for the details that concern your client, and then demonstrate to her why she can rest easier (and read less.)

For example, you can set up a software system to constantly check prices or delivery dates. If there’s a chance to give your client a better deal, your system should make it happen.

One of the many reasons why airlines are in such trouble is that they ignore this sort of customer-friendly approach. If you are unlucky enough to book travel on day when the airline’s computer put a high price on your ticket, you might be paying 20% more than the person sitting on your left, who ordered tickets the day before you, and 40% more than the person on your right, who ordered three days later.

For especially large and important customers, make a chart of all the paper you send their way. Actually draw a picture, so you don’t miss anything. Then set out to change your approach and cut out as much of it as possible.

Whatever your customer’s answer, become his or her solution. Whether your customer asks for less paper, stress or bureaucracy, once they have shared their most important priority with you, become just as obsessed with it as they are. This is the best way to bring value to your customers.

Look Back from the Future

This idea is an antidote to the “customer satisfaction” plague that’s sweeping through businesses and deceiving so many managers. By this I mean that many firms use customer satisfaction as a primary measure of their success with customers.

Unfortunately, “satisfaction” is often close to a worthless measure. Satisfied customers defect all the time. And too few managers ask, “Satisfied with what?”

Yes, I’m satisfied with the quality of the basic service you provide, but your capabilities cover the bare minimum of my actual needs.

A better measure is looking back from the future, to judge what the customer might do if presented with a different set of options.

For example, a tire center routinely asks customers how satisfied they were with having their snow tires changed. But they should have asked whether they’d be willing to pay \$15 extra to have someone pick up their car and return it to work after their tires were changed. That could have prevented the center from losing 25% of their customers.

Looking back from the future, you can judge what a competitor might do to make your customer’s life easier. You can estimate how attractive various options might be to your clientele, and how devastating they might be to your business if implemented by others.

The front pages of the Wall Street Journal are filled with stories of companies who didn’t react to their customers’ needs until it was too late. “We should have seen this coming,” says failed executive #2145. Yes, you should have.

Don’t use satisfaction as a measure. That bar is far too low. And never, never allow your employees to coach customers to answer “excellent” when they receive a customer satisfaction survey. You might as well put a gun to the heart of your business.

Imagine how customers feel when told how to answer a question about how they feel about your business. They feel as though you care more about the outcome to you than to them. They see that you are set in your ways and not anxious to hear honest feedback. In the weeks and months ahead, they will be more receptive to options offered by other firms, who have leapfrogged your limited capabilities.

If you don’t believe me, just pick up a copy of the WSJ.

One Less Problem

If your team does their jobs right, a customer has one less problem every time he or she interacts with your business.

Your goal should be to solve at least one problem each time you interact with a customer. In many cases, this is straightforward: the customer comes to you with a problem you are known for being able to solve. Your equipment can run at the faster rate they need, or your shipping service can speed up delivery to avoid allowing critical products to be out of stock.

But many organizations – and many employees – don't think at all about leaving a customer with one less problem. Sadly, in many cases they think of the customer himself as their problem. How many times has a sullen customer service rep put you on hold and you knew – you could feel it in your bones – that they were using the time to shout over the cubicle wall that, “This customer is a real doozy, all full of himself!”

Firms like this need to make sure they don't create a new problem for the customer. There are many ways to create problems:

- Say “it's not my job”
- Argue with the customer
- Create procedures that make sense for the company but not the customer

While customers can be difficult, unreasonable or mistaken, if you start to think of them as the problem, your business starts a downwards spiral. In business, you either solve problems for your customers or you are out of business.

Think beyond the reason that motivated the customer to call you. What other problems could you solve for them? Solving problems is a much more profitable strategy than selling products, although the objectives are the same: you want more of the customer's business.

eBay thrives because it solves basic problems for its customers: either they have too much of something they don't want, or they need something but can't find it elsewhere at a price they can afford. But eBay goes further: their service keeps getting easier to use. For example, if you tell eBay the maximum bid you are willing to make on an item up for auction, the service will track that auction and increase your bid in modest increments only when someone outbids your current offer. This way, you get to bid as necessary without actually spending all day online.

Does everyone on your team think each day about solving problems for your customers? They should.

Repeat Test

Before you can make a customer's life easier, you need to make life easier on your side of the fence. Here's a way to potentially save hours of your time each week, by investing a total of about two minutes.

First thing one morning, take a piece of paper and write a column of numbers representing each hour from the time you wake up until you go to sleep. For me, the list would start 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1 and go all the way back to 1. (So far, you have invested about fifteen seconds.)

For this single day, at the top of every hour stop for ten seconds and consider how happy you are with the way you spent your time. Did you invest it wisely? If the answer is yes, don't write anything.

But if you wouldn't repeat the way you spent the last hour, next to the number representing that hour write a few words that describes what you did. On one of my lists, for example, at 3 o'clock I wrote "got caught in a quagmire with Jack W. again," meaning that it was a waste of my time to meet with him.

Stick with this exercise all day; it takes very little time, just the discipline to stop every hour for a few seconds. But at the end of the day, you'll have a list of activities you wish you avoided. If the list has more than one or two items, you might want to continue the practice for a few more days, weeks or even months.

If you make this a habit, you'll soon start to spot patterns. It will be easier to recognize ways in which you are wasting time and effort, and you'll do a better job of avoiding these.

You can also use this technique across an entire department to see similarities in the things that prevent employees from being able to serve customers.

Running Plays

Many sports teams create “plays,” which they then run in response to the game situation and what the other team does. Businesses can create plays, too, so they are always ready to respond to – or anticipate – what a customer does.

One such play is called Hurry Up, which you run when a customer is in a hurry. When you are running Hurry Up, you have only one focus: to get the customer what they need, as fast as possible.

A great execution of a Hurry Up play reduces the steps necessary to buy a product from say, ten, to one.

Anyone who has ever taken care of young children knows how aggravating it can be to deal with some companies. I say to my son, “Hurry up. Get in the car. We’re in a rush.”

He picks up his *Calvin and Hobbes* book and starts wandering towards his room.

I say the same thing again, only louder. He looks up slowly, as though hearing me for the first time. “We’re going someplace?” he asks.

And so it goes. Tell a salesperson you’re in a hurry, and most still try and sell you something you don’t want, or take a mind-numbingly long time to accept payment. At most web sites, it’s even worse. There’s simply no way to say, “I’m in a hurry,” or “I’m only interested in rock-bottom bargains.”

You can solve this problem by designing plays into your web sites and by establishing procedures that let sales and service people respond perfectly when they recognize a customer’s situation matches one of the plays at their disposal.

Think of a football or basketball play you run as soon as the coach calls it. “Hurry Up” is a play. You see that the customer is pressed for time, so you call *Hurry Up* and suddenly your team is obsessed with getting the customer what he or she needs, fast.

On a web site, the *Hurry Up* play could include the follow features:

- A button the customer can click to indicate they are in a rush
- A system that remembers the customer’s shipping, billing and delivery information so they can order an item with a single click of the mouse
- The temporary elimination of all ads, promotions and other messages that clutter your web page and make it harder for the customer to perform a single task.

It only takes about five or six plays to make a huge difference in the level of service you deliver to customers. The plays you offer will depend on the type of business you operate and the type of customers you serve.

For example, if you serve business customers who are often selling your products to their customers, one play might be *With My Client*. That is, the person is using your support system to serve their client. Perhaps they are looking up a specific design they wish to show their client, or they are looking for the shipment date of a product they already ordered.

In the *With My Client*, you would want to do everything possible to help your customer save their client time and money, and to provide them with better information, faster.

- So give them the option to get beautiful – or highly detailed – pictures.
- Let them choose between detailed specifications or engagingly written product summaries.
- Hide the wholesale prices.
- Even consider private labeling web sites and brochures so that it looks like your system actually belongs to your customer. Make your customer look good, and you'll profit.

Try this...

Try to come up with five or six mindsets that summarize the most important attitudes your customers bring to your firm. Think about whether they often tend to be “in a hurry,” “with a client,” “looking for new ideas,” or “mad beyond belief.”

For example, *Looking For New Ideas* is the exact opposite of *Hurry Up*. This is when people want to wander, to be confronted with the unexpected. At times like these, an efficient approach can actually frustrate customers. Think of the executive who, recognizing that the old approaches no longer work, sets aside an entire afternoon to step out of his routine and explore new ideas. You need to offer tools that help him do this.

Take one of your mindsets and create a play that you could run the second you recognize such a mindset. How would your web site change? What would your sales or customer service people do differently? How would your internal processes change? Are there special offers you could offer in such a situation?

Swimming Pool, Phone Home

Are you proud of your company's ability to respond quickly when a customer has a problem? Maybe this isn't a high enough standard.

Wouldn't it be better to fix the problem before it inconveniences the customer?

Wagner Pools bills itself as America's oldest swimming pool company, but that doesn't mean it's behind the times.

Imagine a hot Friday morning in July, the day before Bob and Julie's big summer party. They expect over forty guests, and both are running crazy trying to wrap up work and get ready for the party. They won't be home until early evening.

There's just one problem. Mid-morning, their pool develops a problem. This alone is unusual, since Wagner pools virtually take care of themselves, continuously monitored by a system based inside the owner's house. They test their own water, distribute chemicals as needed, and even backwash the filter automatically.

Will the rare problem ruin their party? Nope. Wagner also offers a Pool Talk service, and the pool contacted Wagner headquarters via modem to alert them to the problem. A service person came out that afternoon and fixed it. Bob and Julie didn't know about the problem until they arrived home for dinner to find a message from Wagner telling them that the pool is now perfect.

How many times do you fix a customer's problem before they even know about it? If your primary line of defense against problems is receiving a call from the customer, you are already behind the curve.

The best firms make "check ups" and preventative care part of their relationship with the customer. These activities provide a reason to keep in touch with the customer between purchases, and they represent a superb opportunity to let the customer know about your latest innovations.

My Audi dealer recently redesigned their dealership so that it's easier – and more tempting – for customers to wander from the service center to the showroom when dropping off or picking up your car. I'm usually in quite a good mood at these moments, because Audi charges nothing – zero – for service during the first three years after you buy a new car. Since it costs nothing, I'm more likely to bring the car in regularly. In an amazing coincidence, I also am vastly more familiar with Audi's latest models than with those of any other car company. (I also own a Durango, but the path from service to showroom at my Dodge dealer is a narrow, dimly-lit and depressing corridor. Besides, the unexpected charges often leave me feeling poor.)

Two furniture stores from whom we have made purchases will gladly send a designer

out if you call to say you're not happy with the way their furniture is fitting into your home. We did this twice. Once, the designer merely rearranged the room and left with a smile. The other time, we bought three new pieces. In neither case did we shop around for alternatives; by being there for the customer, you eliminate reasons for the customer to look elsewhere.

Working with Hewlett-Packard in the late 1990s, I ran a series of workshops for managers that resulted in the adoption of over 100 innovations designed to make customers' lives easier. One was the idea of hooking printers and copiers up to the Web so that HP could monitor the equipment and head off problems before they disrupted HP's clients.

Watch out for your customers, and they'll watch for you.

Take Responsibility for Change

When I was in college, one of my less traditional courses was called simply “Management.” I say less traditional because we spent much time sitting on the floor, out in the woods, or watching one or more classmates literally run from the room in tears or anger.

On the last day of class, the professor was asking for our comments on the course, trying to discover what, if anything, we had learned during the semester.

When my turn came, I spoke about the time we spent hours engaged in an imaginary community. During this “exercise,” the professor would occasionally appear to change the rules of the community. My comment was that I wished the rules had changed more often, that we got stuck for too long in unproductive situations.

The professor started jumping up and down, and shouting, “Yes, yes, yes!” He slapped his hands on my desk and sort of hugged me. I was just as confused as the rest of the class, but by this point we knew to be patient and wait for his explanation.

Eventually he settled down and said, “This is one of the greatest lessons you can learn. People always look elsewhere for change. They want someone else to change the rules. But in the vast majority of cases, nothing is stopping them from changing things themselves.”

We talked about this for a while. When things got stuck, could I have changed the rules myself? Could I have convinced others it was time for a change? Or could I have done something dramatic that would have changed the flow of the activity?

Absolutely yes.

I didn’t do this simply because I expected change to come from the outside. Ever since this moment, which is the only time my actions caused a fully grown professor at a well-respected university to jump around like a monkey, I have taken this lesson to heart.

You have a much greater power to instigate change than you might think. The only real question is how much you are willing to pay to produce the change you desire. “Payment” is usually due in terms of time, effort and risk... not in monetary form.

Adopting the Less thinking requires a change. Someone needs to light a fire, fan the flames, and help this idea spread. Nothing stops that person from being you, other than the recognition that you can take change into your own hands.

When in Doubt, Give Up

Less isn't just for your customers. It will work for you, too, in both your work and personal lives.

Something's not quite right. Maybe you are slightly ill-at-ease, or you are frustrated without knowing exactly why.

When you are unsure like this, resist the impulse to buy something, or to take on a new service. Instead, try giving up something out of the many things that surround you. Here are some ideas:

- Give up one or more obligations.
- Clean out your closets, garage, office or study.
- Figure out which reports/publications you can ignore and cancel them.
- Look at your schedule and figure out whether you really need to get together with all the people on it.
- Go through your budget - if you have one - and decide whether there's room to cut out some expenses. If you don't have one, scribble down some numbers on the back of an envelope. (It's a start.)
- Take an hour to consider how you go about your business, and see if you can simplify some of the steps you go through to get things done.