We all market service, even if we sell mattresses, because there is a service component in every sale.

Service is tricky. There are so many things that can go wrong and so few opportunities for customers to see the hoops we jump through to deliver what we deliver. We need all the help we can get, so when one of the gurus of service marketing, a guy who was into service before service was cool, writes a new book, I read it with both the hope that I can learn something new and the fear that I already have heard it all. Even if you don't specialize in service, Len Berry's *Discovering the Soul of Service* won't disappoint you because it could as easily have been titled *Discovering the Soul of Business*.

This is a passionate book from a scholar and businessperson who is passionate about service. That's important because service can't be delivered and can't be understood without passion. Neither charts nor diagrams, neither plans nor checklists suffice. It's just too hard to deliver service on a consistent basis, using people who vary in their performance both one from another and from day to day depending on their happenstance.

*Discovering the Soul of Service* offers the charts and the passion. In the first chapter, Berry says that "the book is about the overriding importance of humane [sic] values in building a lasting service business. Great service companies build a humane community ... that humanely serves customers and the broader communities in which they live."

This insight is visible through example after example of the things that great service companies do to deliver great service. A front desk clerk at a hotel that doesn't allow pets (because it doesn't want guests inconvenienced by another guest's pet) is greeted by a family with a four-year-old girl carrying a pet rabbit in a cage. When the little girl's father asks the clerk about the pet policy, the clerk has the instinct and the authority to reply that the policy "is only for adults and does not apply to children." Imagine how relieved that little girl must have been.

A woman's husband gets on his plane for Houston without his wallet. The woman goes to the airport and can't convince the airline's gate agents to send the wallet on the next plane out. The woman looks at all the people standing around at the gate and picks out one woman. She walks over to her and asks if she would take the wallet with her to Houston. How did she pick that particular woman? Because that woman was wearing a Container Store tee-shirt and the distraught wife shopped in Container Store and "knew how nice and willing to help all the employees were."

People operating humanely, in a humane culture, have good instincts.

The book is not just inspirational stories; it's also hard-nosed. As Berry says, "No matter how brilliant a company's strategy, it still must be executed. Otherwise the strategy is simply being advertised for competitors to imitate, execute better, and win away the market." Berry points out that his prior research consistently shows that service reliability is the single most important feature customers use to rate us.

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How do we get our companies to reliably execute our service strategies? Berry’s research convinces him that “nothing the sample companies do to support execution is more important than finding the right people to perform the service.” Many service employees are entry-level, low-paid employees. Do we spend sufficient time attracting enough applicants to allow us to pick the ones whose values are consistent with our values? Do we spend enough time exploring whether their values are consistent with our own?

Berry distills a model of service driven by the idea that service involves a promise to customers. Will you be trusted to keep your promise? In Berry’s model, that depends on two factors: how customers perceive your competence (can you keep your promise?) and how they perceive your sense of fairness (will you keep your promise?).

Perceived fairness includes distributive justice (the actual outcome or allocation of benefits of dealing with you) and procedural justice (your procedures and systems for determining outcomes). Berry’s great companies, one of which actually does sell mattresses, are perceived as fair and are trusted, both by their customers and by their own employees.

Berry is a marketer, and he doesn’t negate the importance of branding at great service companies. He offers a detailed example of the branding strategy at one of the greatest of the great companies, Chick-fil-A, whose task is to sell chicken against giants like KFC and McDonald’s. Chick-fil-A shows how creativity can hold its own against size. In the words of Ken Bernhardt, Regent’s professor of marketing at Georgia State University and longtime adviser to marketing’s best, “It isn’t just advertising weight that counts.”

Another interesting marketing point that Berry recalls is that we can rewrite the value equation for customers. He offers the example of an office furniture seller, Miller SQA. Traditional office furniture sellers offer a myriad of styles and options, in effect offering highly customized furniture. Customization is an often-potent strategy, but it’s not the only strategy. Miller SQA built their business by offering fewer options but an easy-to-get-through buying process and quicker delivery times. It’s classic segmentation: it doesn’t appeal to every customer, but it’s very appealing to many of them.

Discovering the Soul of Service is a wonderful book to read. It’s full of good ideas, delivered in the form of real examples that make them come alive. Ideas and their importance sometimes are difficult to convey to our colleagues. Good teachers know that examples are great convincers, and one of the things that makes Berry’s book particularly useful to marketing and management practitioners is that we can use his examples not only to describe good ideas to our colleagues but also to convince them of their effect. On top of that, the book is uplifting, and who couldn’t use a lift these days? This could easily become your favorite book on services and on leading people.

About the Reviewer

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