

# INTRODUCTION



I rarely sleep well when I'm catching an early flight the next morning.

One night I found myself awake at 4 A.M. I posted my favorite battle cry on my Facebook page: "Be the kind of woman who, when your feet hit the floor in the morning, the devil says, 'Oh crap, she's up!'"

By 5:30 A.M., I was at the airport striving to be that woman, but I found it wasn't easy. The attendant handed me a boarding pass without a seat number—a sure sign that my flight had been oversold and I was not a winner of the seat lottery. Sitting at the gate, my next

update said: “I’m headed to Baltimore to do a talk on customer service, and I can’t even get out of my own airport without my blood pressure spiking like the dot-coms in the 80s.”

Floods of sympathetic “likes” and “comments” appeared. Within moments, my update was followed by this answer from the airline: “Overselling flights is standard industry practice.” Was this supposed to make me feel better?

Half an hour later, the gate agent appeared, grim-faced and steely-eyed. I was the first in line, ready to do battle; willing to say or do anything to get on my flight. But as I looked into the gate agent’s face, I caught myself. What I saw was not her, but the people who had put this situation into action. I saw the board room table where the VP of sales told the group, “We have to oversell every flight; we can’t afford not to.” I saw the HR manager who was again refused additional hires and training, knowing that his front lines were under-staffed and stressed. I saw the customer experience manager being outvoted again in favor of saving money. I saw the operations manager who struggled trying to make the systems work more smoothly. And, I saw the final decision maker who made a tough call based on the numbers. The woman in front of me did not make the decision to oversell flights, but it was her job to do battle with me and the four people in line behind me.

Further, it was her first flight of the day. She likely had four or five more flights that were overbooked that day with four or five more people on each flight. It was her job to stand and defend other people's policies, negotiate settlements, calm frayed nerves, restore relationships—and do it well. Could I do that? I doubted it. I pictured her going home that night to her family, tired and brittle from a day of battle, burnout a distinct possibility.

What would be the upside of making this gate agent feel worse about the situation? Any exchange between the two of us now could only be helped by supporting, not persecuting, her. Frontline service providers are often blamed for company policy, lack of training, poor hiring practices and an internal system that makes it hard for customers to do business.

So, I smiled at this customer service warrior and said, "Please do what you can to get me on this flight. Thanks."

She gave me a grateful smile, and I was the first of the waiting group to get a seat assignment. When I did post a review of the situation at the end of the day, it was in full support of the service representative and included pointed enquiries about the company's policies.

Think how differently this story might have ended. What if I had been confrontational with this airline employee, as any number of customers might have chosen to do? Our discus-

sion could have escalated to an ugly scene that 250 other passengers overheard. Some onlookers may have tweeted it, put it on Facebook or related the story to friends and family. I even had a reporter friend who was doing an article on airline policy on overselling flights. She would have loved an interview about a conflict I had with an airline representative. That negative encounter could have reached tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people.

Here's another story that illustrates how many customer-service stories these days do indeed have lives of their own.

In a suburban mall in Oregon in 2013, a 14-year-old girl was shamed out of a chain store when the clerk told her she was "too fat" to shop there and asked her to leave. The story not only went viral on the Internet but was picked up by print media across the country and around the world. We've seen this happen increasingly in the last few years. One employee, one encounter, one customer, but hundreds of thousands of ears hearing the story.

The outrage that this story produced on the Internet is indicative of technology's ability to "get the word out" lightning fast to millions of readers. The millions spent on marketing, presentation, product mix and overheads can be damaged by poor customer service. One negative experience like this young girl had, and you have a public relations crisis on your hands.

This book and its 48 Rules for Strategic Customer Care give

you the guidelines you need to make intelligent investments in customer care—and create and sustain a working culture that’s built on the belief that the customer not only matters, but is the only reason your organization exists.

The kinds of investments I’ll be asking you, the company or team leader, to make—investments not just of money, but of time, attention, and political capital—fall into five specific categories. Superior customer service is a puzzle you and your organization must put together, a puzzle with pieces that include:

1. Good **hiring** practices.
2. Proper **training** on more than just product information.
3. A seamless, customer-friendly **process** for every aspect of a customer’s journey with your company, including well-thought-out policies to ease every step along the way.
4. An employee-friendly process for developing new business **sales opportunities** when they arise.
5. Clearly communicated expectations regarding both sales and **up-serving**, which means looking beyond the customer’s immediate need to the reason behind it.

Each of these five categories is a section of this book, and each section contains Rules for Strategic Customer Care relevant to that section, based on the teachings and principles of our company’s founder, David Sandler.



## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “STRATEGIC CUSTOMER CARE”?**

At Sandler, we believe that customer care is not about putting up a poster, memorizing a script or reciting a slogan. We believe customer care must be strategic. This means both identifying long-term or overall goals for customer care and laying out how those goals will be achieved. Building your business culture around strategic customer care means identifying the tactical, calculated, pragmatic steps that ensure your customers’ good experience in the short term and their loyalty in the long term.

Customer relationships are like marriages: You want to build them for the long term. If they have a good foundation, open communication, mutual respect, and good intentions, they can weather almost any storm. Care for your customers today, in anticipation of the time when the relationship may experience some strain, and your customers will know from experience that they can trust you to make it right.