

THE BEST SERVICE IS NO SERVICE

How to Liberate Your
Customers from Customer
Service, Keep Them Happy,
and Control Costs

Bill Price

David Jaffe

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
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More Praise for

The Best Service Is No Service

“It makes a lot of sense to embrace the notion of ‘best service.’ Not only can companies learn how to listen better to their customers, they can also increase customer satisfaction by figuring out which customer interactions they and their customers want handled by a live person, and which should simply go away or be handled via self-service.”

—Marc Singer, director, McKinsey & Company

“The Best Service Is No Service gives the inside scoop on how to create a ‘no service needed’ company. Companies large and small need to make sure that their products work right in the first place, and that their self-service functions answer what customers want, while listening to the signals constantly streaming in from their customers.”

—Jeff Busgang, general partner, IDG Ventures; co-founder and former president and COO of Upromise

“Customer service experiences for customers are inconsistent at best. The key, as authors Price and Jaffe point out, is to eliminate the reason and situations that prompt customers to contact you! Follow their advice and focus your efforts here to make life easier for your customers, your customer service reps, and your bottom line.”

—Jeanne Bliss, author, chief customer officer, president, CustomerBLISS

“David and Bill have brought some insightful but common-sense approaches to the area of customer service. Their book will be an invaluable guide to any company that has a significant volume of service interactions.”

—Jane S. Hemstritch, non-executive director, Commonwealth Bank of Australia; retired managing director, Accenture, Asia Pacific

“The ‘best service’ ideas and principles on how customer service should work are valuable for any business. They challenge the way that many companies have dealt with customers in the past and show that there is a better way by eliminating defects or mistakes that constantly frustrate customers.”

—John Egan, vice president, Lenovo Group, Shanghai

“Almost every corporate mission statement promises to ‘delight’ customers and ‘exceed their expectations.’ Yet most companies continue to frustrate their customers with shoddy service and dash their expectations with broken promises. This book is the cure for all that. It’s a blend of smart strategies and best practices for leaders who want to make it easy, quick, even fun, for customers to interact with their companies—and even more, to learn from those interactions to make their companies better. Read this book—your customers will be delighted that you did!”

—William C. Taylor, founding editor, Fast Company; coauthor, *Mavericks at Work*

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*To Erika, Rachel, Rebecca, and
Patrick, our children*

INTRODUCTION: WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Providing awesome customer experiences shouldn't be hard. Companies produce cool new products and services for their customers, meeting their expressed demand and often providing a little bit more than the customers wanted. Customers want to use these products and services to enrich their daily lives or achieve their own personal or business success. That's why they purchase the product or service: to use or exploit it. They don't buy goods and services in order to contact the customer care or service department.

We call this the "wake up in the morning test": Do customers wake up in the morning wanting to contact your company for help, or do they wake up simply wanting to use your goods and services? Do we really need to answer this question?

Unfortunately, a whole industry, customer relationship management (CRM), has grown up claiming that customers want "relationships" with companies. We agree that customers want and need to work with companies to obtain goods and services that let them achieve their goals. If the products and services work well, as customers have the right to expect, customers will start to feel some sense of loyalty to that company; they'll return for more and recommend the company to others.¹ However, this is not the same as customers wanting to have a relationship with the company's customer service department. The best customers, for most companies, are those who never call or visit but who get what they want from the product or service

and then come back for more. In other words, companies might seek a relationship (as CRM espouses), but customers don't want a relationship—they would rather not know the service arm at all.

When something doesn't make sense or work correctly, the customer calls the company, sends an e-mail message, launches a chat session, sends a text message, writes a letter, or walks into a branch office—and if the service or care processes work, the company responds and clears up the confusion or solves the problem. Good outcome? Not for us—this is a necessary but not sufficient short-term response, or what we will define as Basic Service. We ask, “Why did the customer need to make this contact at all?” rather than focus on how well the contact was handled.

Although some companies have invested heavily in new processes and technologies for customer service, unfortunately both companies and customers wind up getting into an endless “do” loop: companies add more customer support resources as they grow the business, and customers become frustrated when they encounter the same broken situations. As the demand for service grows, companies add more resources to handle it or try to find smarter or more efficient ways to do so. Some companies have tried to “push” customers to self-service, resorting to such tactics as charging for staffed service or expecting customers to wait for responses by phone or e-mail. It is no wonder that customers have become frustrated and annoyed by the poor service they receive. Customers have every right to be frustrated because companies do not seem to be concerned about why customers needed to interact with them in the first place.

Today these customers can express their upset in damning blogs and by exercising their right as consumers to shop elsewhere. Many authors have described the rising

tides of customer frustration. A 2006 survey found that poor customer service caused nearly half of U.S. consumers to switch at least one service provider over the year.² Some surveys have spotted satisfied customers, but in most cases companies are continuing to use tired practices and old metrics, failing to provide awesome levels of service (or even what we will describe as Better Service). A recent study of U.K. consumers found that 77 percent of them had experienced a problem with their goods and services.³ That is not good enough in anyone's book.

Fortunately, there is a better way, one that we feel compelled to describe in this book as a manifesto:

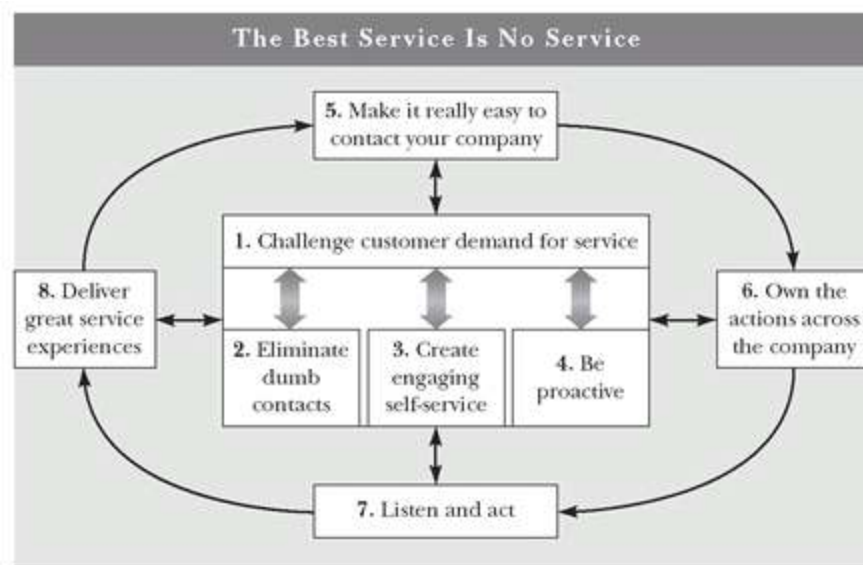
Stop coping with customer demand for service, which simply increases customers' frustration; instead, challenge customer demand for service so that, ideally, everything works perfectly, eliminating defects and confusion so that there is no need at all for customers, or even prospective customers, to contact the company for information or for help.

While challenging demand for service and eliminating what we call dumb contacts, companies will need to put into place self-service that works and to become more proactive to prevent contacts from hitting their customer service centers. This is what we call the Best Service Is No Service. To achieve Best Service will take a sea change in behaviors, processes, and metrics, but the returns are well worth it:

more satisfied customers, reduced operating costs leading to higher profits, and happier employees.

We have been building the seven Principles ideas of *Best Service Is No Service* for many years, frustrated both as consumers and as customer service practitioners. To paraphrase TV network anchorman Howard Beale, played by Peter Finch in the movie *Network*, we're "mad as hell and don't want to take it anymore!" Our goal is to raise the bar for customer service while reducing the need for customer service, no less. After painting the overall picture in Chapter One, "Challenge Customer Demand for Service," we will introduce six Best Service Principles in Chapters Two through Seven, pulling them together in Chapter Eight with new metrics and frameworks for delivering great customer service experiences (the seventh Principle).

Throughout the book we will reference the following at-a-glance Best Service flow diagram that summarizes the main ideas for creating the proactive, listening, ownership culture that delivers great service experiences:



Each chapter covers a new Principle for moving from Basic Service to Best Service:

- **Principle 1: Eliminate dumb contacts.** Apply root-cause improvements that prevent the need for many contacts, once and for all. (Chapter Two)
- **Principle 2: Create engaging self-service.** Because you cannot eliminate all contacts, the next best thing is to enable contact mechanisms like Web, kiosk, short message service (SMS, or text message), or interactive voice response (IVR) self-service. These mechanisms need to enable customers to service their needs and complete their objectives successfully. (Chapter Three)
- **Principle 3: Be proactive.** Alert customers before they need to contact you, practicing preventive maintenance. (Chapter Four)
- **Principle 4: Make it really easy to contact your company.** At first glance this might seem strange for a No Service book, but we will argue that it's far better to open the floodgates to the needs of customers than to dodge the bullet. In doing so, you can ferret through what your customers need, and construct more comprehensive change strategies. (Chapter Five)
- **Principle 5: Own the actions across the company.** It is time to stop blaming the customer service department, which, in the vast majority of the cases, is the messenger and not the cause of customer contacts. (Chapter Six)
- **Principle 6: Listen and act.** Not all contacts will go away or, as we will demonstrate, should go away; customers are terrific sources of new feature and product requests, competitive information, and lots more. (Chapter Seven)

- **Principle 7: Deliver great service experiences.** In addition to listening to and acting on the contacts that will still occur, you need to revamp your performance metrics and implement other new programs in order to deliver great service experiences. (Chapter Eight)



To introduce and describe these critical ideas, we will use a similar structure in Chapters Two through Seven; in each of them, we

- Define the Principle (the core theme or “the idea”) of each chapter.
- Introduce examples outside the world of customer service that demonstrate this Principle.
- Share “bad cases” (disguising the names of the companies) so that you’ll know how *not* to apply the

Principle.

- Highlight “good cases” (identifying the companies’ names) and their results so that you can see that it really is possible to achieve Best Service.
- Propose a framework by which your company can achieve the Principle.
- Wrap up with a short summary.
- Pose multiple-choice questions so that you can test your own company (or those you know).

The assessment in Appendix A will enable you to determine if your company is providing Basic Service, Better Service, or, ultimately, Best Service. We will use this three-category typology to show the difference that companies can make to their customers by fundamentally rethinking how to assess customer contacts and challenge customer demand for support. In Appendix B we present a glossary of customer service terms used in the book.

WHERE DID THESE PRINCIPLES COME FROM?

We have been building these Best Service concepts for a long time, influenced by observing firsthand mistakes being made across a wide range of organizations, coping with demand instead of challenging demand, and listening to frustrations with the sorry state of customer support. We are also cautiously optimistic, for we have seen elements begin to take shape that we will present as the seven Best Service Principles in Chapters Two through Eight.

Briefly, we have spliced stories and our experiences to create Best Service from these and other sources:

- How Tom Peters and Bob Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence* has continued to remind us to be “close to the customer”

- How Toyota has empowered its factory assembly workers to be able to slow or stop the production line if they believe that the vehicle has any quality defects
- How MCI has reduced the size of its Sacramento, California, contact center by issuing invoices in Asian languages and Spanish instead of devoting precious time in the center to translating customers' bills into their native language
- How Amazon has cut its contacts per order year after year by obsessing over *why* its customers have bothered themselves to contact the company, pursuing its mission to "Be Earth's most customer-centric company"
- How customer blogs have increased customer "voice," with companies such as Dell sitting up and taking notice to change processes and create new products

Along the way, we started to explain how Best Service works, in white papers, articles, and industry conference presentations around the world, with such headlines as

"Best Service Means Fewer Painful Calls" (Simon Canning, *The Australian*)

"Don't Improve Contacts, Eliminate Them" (LimeBridge Australia)

"Businesses Should Fix, Not Hide, Problems" (Bill Virgin, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*)

"Listen and You Will Be Prosperous" (Mark Lawson, *Australian Financial Review*)

"The Best Service Is None at All" (Julian Lee, *Australasian Business Intelligence*)

These observations and experiences have influenced our approach to Best Service and inspired us to write this book and accelerate the momentum behind this new and exciting approach. There is still much work to do, however: many

companies experience flat or lower levels of customer satisfaction, but continue simply to cope with customer demand. It's time for Best Service!

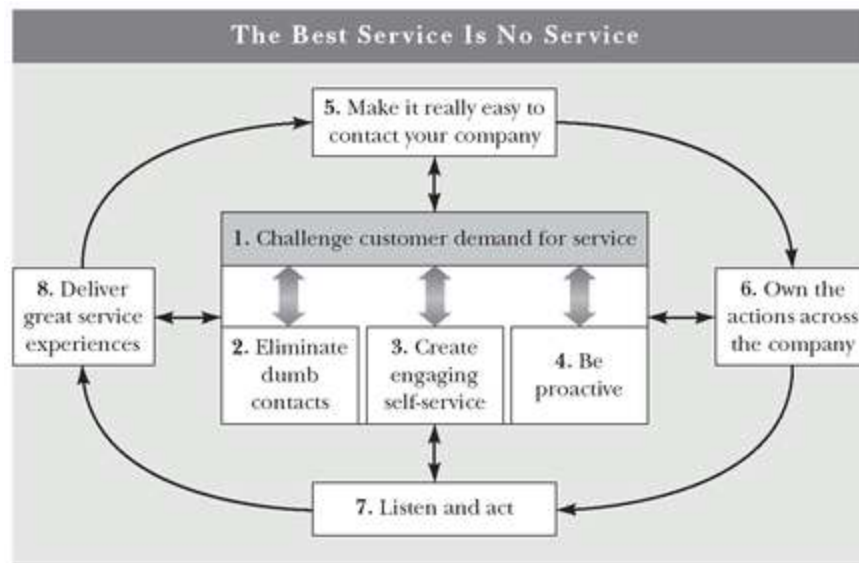
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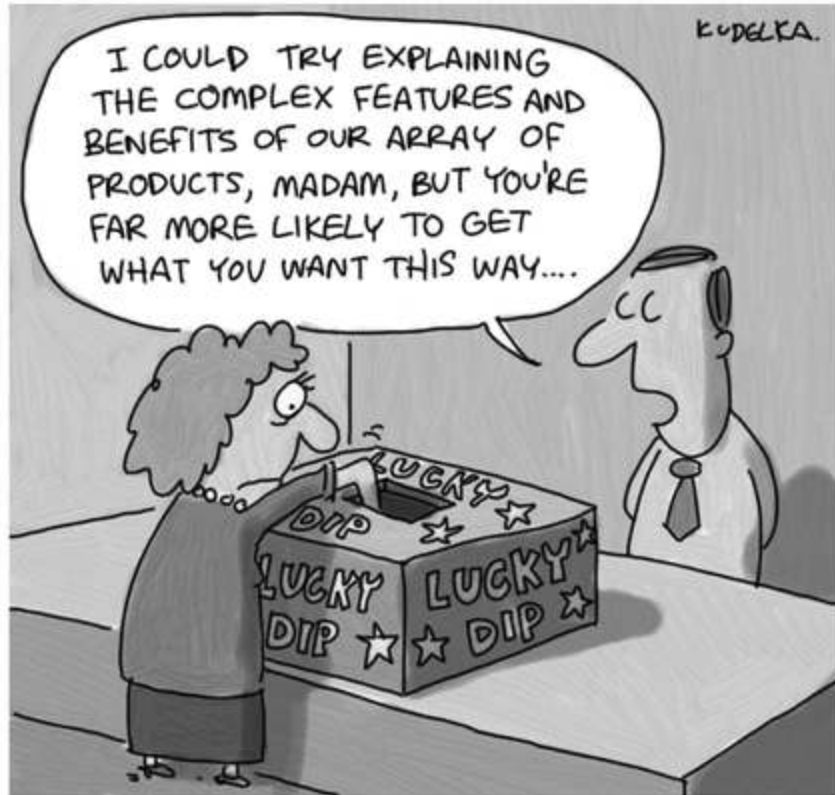
CHALLENGE CUSTOMER DEMAND FOR SERVICE

Instead of Coping with Demand

Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN





THE PROBLEM WITH CUSTOMER SERVICE TODAY

Over the past twenty years, we have enjoyed unprecedented innovation in product design, technologies, and services to make our life easier, but, sadly, we have not often seen customer service improve at the same rate. Although some companies have embraced new technologies and business practices to create what we call Best Service, in many industries customer service is stuck, in others it's broken, and unfortunately it's getting worse. The Best Service companies are raising customer expectations of what is possible, widening the gap.

Before we begin our exploration of the seven Best Practice Principles, in this chapter we will first ask, "Why is service broken?" We'll examine the ways in which companies and government bodies have largely forgotten what the

customer wants and needs, how to service those requirements quickly and completely, and how to challenge the demand in the first place. One of the reasons for this situation is that CEOs and other senior executives are often detached from the day-to-day support operations that touch their customers. Many treat customer service as a necessary evil or as a cost center to be run with interchangeable parts rather than as the heartbeat of the company. Very few treat it as the canary in the coal mine that can provide invaluable feedback about the company's competition, current product faults, future requirements, and much more.

We will then explore how service can be fixed using the seven Best Service Principles to overcome service challenges, and lay out the agenda for the rest of the book. We will provide examples of companies that are getting it right and the benefits they are obtaining.

For those readers who are still unconvinced, we will profile three possible objections to the Best Service Principles and explain why these objections are misplaced. We will then wrap up with reasons why service matters to the company and to the customer.

WHY IS SERVICE BROKEN?

With all the advances in management theory, processes, and technology, customer service should be getting better. However, we find overwhelming evidence that companies continue to subject their customers to more and more "dumb things," experiences and interactions that make no sense to the customer and almost always prompt multiple contacts and perhaps a blog entry as well. Let's look at some examples:

- A leading IT company calculated that it took customers on average five minutes to navigate its interactive voice response (IVR) menus before being put on hold to speak to someone, and it still had trouble routing the customer to the right person.
- A major telecommunications provider forced customers to use a speech recognition IVR system, knowing that 89 percent of their requests would fail.
- An online retailer refused to publish phone numbers on its Web sites.
- A utility forces customers with temporary age or disability concessions to call in and claim them for every bill they receive, even though the concessions have a known expiration date.
- Many companies will not allow someone who is not the official account holder to interact with an account, even when all the person wants to do is pay money into that account for the account holder.
- A large mobile phone company calls its customers to advise them about their account usage, but then forces these customers to identify themselves. “Didn’t you just call me?” the customers ask.
- Many companies send bills for zero amounts or amounts so small that their automated payment systems will not accept the payment (for example, less than \$5.00). The cost of sending the bill and processing the payment using a person-to-person interaction is greater than the revenue received!

We could go on, but you get the idea; you will find many more examples of these dumb things throughout the book.

A news story emerged recently about one company’s poor service, and within twenty-four hours, seven hundred people had recorded their similar bitter experiences on two related Web sites. Customers can now express their frustration publicly in blogs and Internet feedback sites, and they are

strident when they encounter poor service. Here's a small sampling of some of the headlines on just a few of the many sites where customers are ranting:

“What Is the Value of Customer Service? (meaty question)”

“The Customer Service Hall of Shame”

“Tales from seething souls in phone hell”

The “Get Human 500 Database”

Customers are showing their frustration in other ways. A study by the U.K. National Consumer Council found that across all industries, switching levels had increased 52 percent, and people who had switched were happier with the result. The impacts of service failure are significant.^{[1](#)}

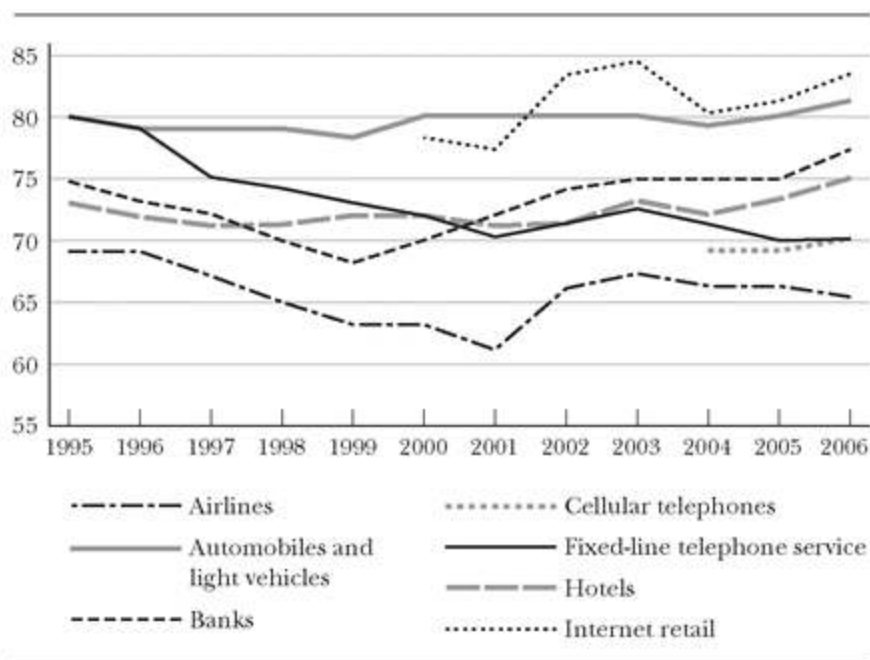
Some consumers yearn for the “good old days” when their local branch manager or the owner of their corner store recognized them by name, knew their preferences, and anticipated their needs when they walked in. Maybe they're right—as companies have become larger and more diverse, senior management has become separated from those interacting with customers. There is increased geographical separation from those who “manage” service and those who deliver it. Contact centers are already farther from the customer than the branch or local office used to be. Headquarters may be at yet another location, and trends such as outsourcing have added another layer of remoteness, separating customer experiences from those who own and manage them.

There is evidence that service is declining, only recently returning to earlier levels, or at best is stuck in the

industries that have high “service intensity”—those where service plays a key part of the total solution for customers, such as airlines, telecommunication companies, online retailers, and financial services (see [Figure 1.1](#)). The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) tracks satisfaction with businesses and brands (not just service).

FIGURE 1.1: ACSI SCORES BY INDUSTRY, 1995-2006

Source: www.theacsi.org



Only the Internet retail industry has improved by 5 percentage points over the past six-plus years; four other service-intensive industries have lost ground. What have the Internet retail industries been doing that others have not? Why can't other service-intensive industries match this improvement? We will explore the lessons that the service leaders, such as Amazon and eBay, have learned and the mechanisms they are applying to get service right and to strive for what we term Best Service. This problem isn't confined to the United States. In the United Kingdom,

consumers are equally unhappy. A study by Accenture found that two-thirds of customers believed that service had not improved in the last five years.²

Articles over the past several years have captured the mood and some of the symptoms of poor customer service and experiences. Some eye-catching headlines tell much of the story:

“You Call This Service?”

“Customers Find Service Put on Hold; Filing Complaints Isn’t Easy, Getting Action Even Tougher”

“Cases of ‘Customer Rage’ Mount as Bad Service Prompts Venting”

“37 Fruitless Calls”

“Bruising the Customers Costs Companies Dear”

“Luxury Goods Without the Luxury Service”

“Companies Find They Can’t Buy Love with Bargains”

“Whatever Happened to Customer Service?”

“Press ‘0’ If You’ve Had Enough”

“1-800-USELESS”

“Does Customer Service Still Exist?”

At the heart of the issue, there are stark data on the amount of contacts customers have to make to get things done. As we pointed out earlier, none of us wakes up the morning wanting to call our utility company to find out why our latest invoice balance doesn’t make sense, nor do we want to contact our bank—no matter how “friendly” it is—to complain that our last check didn’t make it in time to the loan company. Instead, we expect everything to work perfectly and do not want to bother ourselves to call or send an e-mail or text message. Yet companies invest huge

amounts of time and money to handle or “cope” with the demand that they have created. Too few companies ask why their customers need to spend their precious time to ask for help, clear up their confusion, or find out how something is supposed to work.

Let’s consider how often some organizations force us to make contact with them:

- A leading cable TV company requires three contacts for each new connection—why not just one contact?
- Some mobile phone companies handle as many as ten to twelve contacts per subscriber per year, whereas others have only three to four. Why do we need to call mobile providers so often? Shouldn’t we just be making calls and paying bills, preferably online?
- A water utility was averaging two contacts for each fault call. The first call should have been enough to fix the problem. The subsequent calls asked “Why isn’t it fixed yet?” or “When are you coming to fix it?” Not good enough.
- A leading self-service bank averaged one contact per customer per year and nearly two for each new customer. Don’t we sign up for self-service applications like Internet banking so that we don’t have to call? Other banks have half this contact rate, so clearly something is broken.
- A leading insurance company was averaging more than two contacts per claim. The first contact makes sense, setting the claim in motion, but why were subsequent contacts needed?
- “Customers reported making an average of 3.5 contacts in an attempt to resolve their most serious customer-service problem in the past year.”³ Why isn’t this 1.0 contact or, perish the thought, zero

contacts because nothing needs to be resolved in the first place?

We should make it clear that we are not talking about such interactions as placing orders, making payments, or using self-service solutions, such as checking balances, that the customers chose to use. Instead, we are talking about having to call or take the time to write or visit a branch to get something done or to get something fixed. In some industries, these contact rates are much worse: every contact with a technical support area of an Internet provider or computer manufacturer is a sign that something is broken. Ideally, customers should never need to make these contacts.

This book is about questioning why those contacts are necessary, in essence challenging the need for customers to use customer care or technical support lines. The reasons we argue that the Best Service Is No Service is that we know that customers would prefer not to contact companies in the way they are forced to do to get answers or solutions. They would either prefer not to make contact at all or, in many situations, prefer the flexibility and convenience of well-designed self-service that they can use whenever they have the time, or of proactive alerts to them before an issue becomes serious.

HOW DO WE FIX SERVICE?

Let's look at the issues that have prevented significant improvements in service. Here we identify seven reasons that service isn't getting better and seven responses, the Best Service Principles, to address these reasons:

1. Companies keep handling issues that are not adding value for them or for customers, so instead we need

to eliminate dumb contacts.

2. Self-service is insufficient or broken, so we need to create engaging self-service that customers want and will use.
3. Service is reactive, so instead we need to exploit opportunities for proactive service with alerts.
4. Companies have made themselves hard to contact, so instead we need to make it easy to obtain service.
5. The customer service department gets blamed for others' mistakes, so instead we need to assign ownership across the whole company.
6. Companies can't listen properly, so instead we need to learn to listen and act on what customers are telling us.
7. The customer service industry is stuck with outdated practices and metrics that produce poor experiences, so instead we need to design and deliver great experiences for customers.

PRINCIPLE 1: ELIMINATE DUMB CONTACTS

Customer demand for service equals the volume of requests that customers make of companies when they need help, are confused, or have to change something. In most companies, demand is a given—lots of time and effort go into forecasting demand based on past demand, measured in thirty-minute increments across a range of contact channels. Then companies work hard at matching their resources to this demand: putting people on the right shifts at the right time, finding partners if needed, and so forth. These companies are so busy trying to manage the demand and their “service supply” that few, if any, question why the demand is there in the first place. For example, how many companies report that they have made themselves easier to deal with by reducing the demand for contact? How many