



## Basic Training

There are no shortcuts on the road to a great experience.

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In the course of this year's Customers First research, no company produced a more polarizing debate than Apple and its Apple Stores. Some people lauded Apple's in-store service desks, called Genius Bars, for spinning an experience out of customers' problems with their iWhatever's. An equal number argued that Genius Bars mask the fact that Apple products don't always get the job done.

The divide cut to the heart of a larger question: Do you have to master the basics before you create meaningful customer experiences? Or can experiences, in effect, ameliorate any underlying troubles in your business? To us, the answer is clear--which is why Apple Stores isn't among our winners. "Are you delivering on the promise of your business?" asks Phil Terry, CEO of experience consultancy Creative Good. "Once you get that right, then you can innovate and do exciting stuff."

Certainly, it can be tempting to ignore the nuts and bolts in the rush to create experiences. "The idea of getting basics in place is about efficiencies," says Lewis Carbone, CEO of Experience Engineering. "That's not indicative of growth. We need a huge shift from 'make and sell' to creating powerful experiences." Hell, let's make it even more tempting: A great experience can bake poor service right in. Think of every velvet-rope nightclub or snooty boutique hotel where the staff lords its cool over you. Why not heed the call? Creating experiences is fun. The hard stuff of satisfying customers isn't.

But building an experience before you've nailed down the business is like throwing a tarp over a patch of quicksand. Delta had to abandon its spin-off Song Airlines this past spring because customers saw through its naked attempt to be JetGreen. Kate Spade uniforms and leather seats couldn't hide the same surly Delta employees.

This half-baked approach is what fosters so much of the robotic service we encounter. "It's a pleasure to serve you at [fill-in-the-blank company] How may I help you?" You can always tell which companies are fresh off a quick-fix experience initiative, because employees recite their lines with all the woodenness of Keanu Reeves in a romantic drama. If a company forces employees to read a script, then it doesn't trust them to delight you.

Consider, then, the flip side. Earlier this year, Trader Joe's opened its first store in New York, and customers mobbed the place at all hours; some had to wait for 20 minutes or more before being allowed to enter. "It's a faux wow," says experience guru James Gilmore. Trader Joe's "is just a better grocery format with some innovation on the margins." He's right, but our expectations are so low now that even consistent competence with a handful of flourishes feels like an experience. You may not be able to pull that off for long, but it's a platform for more.

When Jeanne Bliss, a 25-year veteran of the customer-experience wars and the author of *Chief Customer Officer*, worked at Lands' End at the beginning of her career, she realized, "You've got to do reliability first: 24-hour delivery and answering the phone on the second ring 99.9% of the time. Then you've earned the right to do more." Get the package there on time, and you can add a holiday poem to the box--which is what Lands' End did. Then, because kids often have as much fun with the box as they do with their gift, the company included instructions for turning the cartons into cows, sheep, or horses.

Suddenly, getting a mail-order package is an experience, from the inside out. But Lands' End (and UPS) had to deliver first, and play games second. It knew it would take more than a genius to fix a Christmas present that showed up on

December 28.



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