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## TAKE YOUR CUSTOMER TO AN IMPOSSIBLE PLACE

To achieve the kind of customer relationships that separate you from the pack, you must understand the power of taking your customers to an impossible place.

To help you do this, I will tell you a number of stories over the next few pages. The reason is that if I expect you to take your customer to an impossible place, I must take you, the reader (no doubt an analytically astute intellect), to a place you might consider impossible: a place of images, feelings, and impressions. Stories are often the best way to do this. So let's begin with two unorthodox tales.

### **Organization Bob**

My home is 35 miles away from San Francisco International Airport, and I travel frequently. One day several years ago, I called the local taxi company and requested a cab. The company sent me a fellow named Bob because he happened to be in the neighborhood—and there my story begins.

Is there any service that is more commodity-like than taxi service? We crawl into a cab, we go from point A to point Z, we pay, and thus ends a purely economic transaction. We don't expect the experience to be anything other than bland and forgettable.

But there came Bob, wheeling into the driveway. He took my bags from me and carefully placed them in the trunk. He courteously held the door open for me, standing next to it in dignified, chauffeur-style until I got in, then offered me the daily paper. Once I became one of his regular clients, I began to understand that, whether we are part of a one-person start-up or a \$2-billion enterprise, we can all learn important lessons from Organization Bob.

Woody Allen once remarked that 80 percent of success in life is showing up. Whenever Bob picked me up, he arrived, on time, at my home or at the airport, regardless of traffic or weather conditions. (A couple times his cab broke down; he still managed to show up on time.) When you're dealing with airports, such dependability is priceless. More often than not, Bob would be the one on time and I would keep him waiting. Sometimes, after completing an exhausting itinerary, when I would see Bob patiently waiting in "our" cab right outside the airport building late at night in our designated spot, even when I'd suffered unforeseen delays, I experienced a heart-warming "high" second only to reuniting with my family.

Bob was always available to his select corps of clients, whether it be 6 a.m. on Saturday or midnight on Tuesday. Unlike other drivers who worked a set schedule, he adjusted his work hours around the needs of each customer. After the company got him a new vehicle (which he was quite proud of), I complained that the back seat was so stiff that my head (I'm 6-foot-6) brushed the ceiling. Bob promptly drove the cab back to the shop and had the technicians install an older, more comfortable back seat. His reasoning was simple: I was a valued customer, he wanted to keep my business, and, from his perspective, my complaint probably represented the concerns of other, less vocal clients. He recognized a valued customer's "complaint" as a strategic opportunity, and he adjusted the vehicle (part of his "organization") accordingly.

Bob consistently impressed me with his business savvy. As a "retired" individual who had held a number of managerial and start-up positions during his career, he could talk intelligently about finance, investment, and marketing. In fact, he occasionally helped broker business deals by introducing certain of his customers to each

other. For example, he once connected two of his clients—one a consultant to a major Russian bank, the other an executive in the telecommunications field—because he thought their business goals were a natural fit. As a well-read Renaissance man, he could intelligently discuss current events, art, politics, history, and travel. In all cases, I learned something from our conversations (sometimes I took notes in the cab), and the one-hour ride to the airport often zoomed by. There were times I simply wanted to nod out, use the cellphone, or look out the window. Bob’s “customer antennae” were acute. He shut up. He adapted to the environment that I, the customer, chose, rather than asking me to adapt to his.

Bob viewed himself as a businessman, not a “cab driver.” He did not slip into the role of powerless, oppressed employee of the cab company. Bob regarded himself as the head of a private business that happened to lease a means of production called a vehicle. As far as he was concerned, he was part of the fast-growing outsourcing marketplace. He “outsourced” to the cab company the mundane work of administration, maintenance, insurance, accounting, and licenses and fees. As he pointed out, “My fixed expenses are \$30,000 annually. Everything beyond that is what I make of it.”

As the CEO of Organization Bob, Bob was an active niche-creator rather than a passive recipient of orders. Early on, he targeted the airport-bound business traveler as his preferred customer base. He then slowly and carefully selected the customers he wanted to work with. A week after my first ride with Bob, my wife came back from our home mailbox wearing a curious frown. Somebody had sent us a box of See’s chocolates. Yes, it was a gift from Bob, with a signed note that read, “Thank you for your business. I appreciate it.” I was amazed. When was the last time you received a gift from a cab driver?

Bob has been known to shock customers by “firing” them if their behaviors and values do not mesh with his. One such individual—a hard-driving, arrogant CEO—literally begged not to be fired and promised he would do better. In fact, I have to confess that Bob ultimately fired *me*. Once too often I absentmindedly left debris and food in his cab. I was stunned, and angry, but I had to grudgingly respect the dedication Bob brought to his business.

By providing his chosen customers a seemingly impossible level of service, Bob built an enduring business for himself. Even as other drivers tried to get into the lucrative airport business by lowering their fees, Bob charged a premium price and still cornered much of

the business. He rarely does local runs because his appointment book contains from five to eight airport runs per day, around which he leisurely runs his personal life.

You do the math. He leases the cab at about \$100 daily. Each one-way run, depending on point of origin, yields a \$70–100 fee including tips (which tend to be generous). This man makes a nice six-figure annual income doing what he likes. “At the end of the day, I’ve made money driving with friends,” Bob says.

Last year I gave him a call. “Why haven’t other drivers copied you?” I asked. “Many have tried,” he replied, “but they lack the dedication.” (I suspect many of them also lack his Renaissance expertise.) When I asked if it had become an issue that his fees were nearly the same as those of limos and town cars, Bob told me that several of his newer clients had defected from limo companies. He said that the wife of one of his clients told her husband that for what he’s paying Bob, he ought to hire a town car. The client told her, “I could take a limo, but then I couldn’t take Bob.” There it is: Bob not only drives his customers back and forth from the airport with absolute attentiveness to their needs; he also drives them to an experience that the average person who hails a cab would consider impossible.

## Schooling for Success

In the late 1990s, something provocative was emerging in Guatemala. Like any entrepreneur, Maria Elisa Alvarado, a practicing clinical and school psychologist in Guatemala City, saw a gap in the marketplace that she could fill. She believed that her country’s middle- and upper-class parents would be willing to pay for a private school that systematically developed critical skills in their children’s very formative years. With three fellow psychologists, she took the lead in launching Colegio Pequenitos. I’ve been to the central Guatemala City campus of Pequenitos (there are two other campuses), and I can say I would have sent my own kids there without a second’s hesitation.

The grounds and facilities are extraordinary, with immaculate gardens, plenty of space for outside activities and play, large classrooms, big stocks of papers and crayons, boards and games everywhere, and a very impressive computer facility. Alvarado makes sure that Pequenitos selects and cultivates its teachers with equal care and attention. Nearly half the faculty have advanced degrees in psychology