

A couple of years ago I met a bright young businesswoman who was just starting her business. I think she has a great business idea, and her and I share the same thinking on customer service. It is appropriate, therefore that Janet's business ([www.thesilentcustomer.com](http://www.thesilentcustomer.com)) provides the inspiration for this issue's title.

## *Silent Customers*

The Silent Customer concept is based on the premise that in the majority of cases our unhappy customers are silent – we hear nothing of their unhappiness, and only 'hear' the silence in our business when they don't return for repeat business. I was thinking of this idea in the last month, after two separate incidents.

Firstly, my wife had a disagreement with so-called Customer Service at Renault, over a warranty issue (where they wriggled and squirmed to avoid liability). As it turned out, my wife was less than silent in her disagreement, and we are now passionate advocates of NOT buying a Renault car (and now I have told over 1500 people with this newsletter). But Renault will never hear from us again.

Secondly, and far more clearly an indicator of the silent customer, I had a chat with a client about an accountant they had used, who had severely underperformed. That client is now exploring other providers, and we talked about what had gone wrong, and what she needed in the future. The key thing is that the accountant has NO IDEA she is unhappy, he will just lose the business.

At Painless Business, we often work with clients on thinking through the experience their customers have when buying – something I believe has been important to my own success in business. There are several things a service provider needs to know, to avoid those silent customers going off to new pastures:

**Knowing Why This Is an Issue:** - everyone in the team, from salesman to delivery boy, needs to understand the importance of providing consistent, quality experiences to customers. The person at the top needs to know even more than anyone else. Is that you? Most businesses invest time, money, blood, sweat and tears to win customers. Unless you're an undertaker, surely you want repeat business to make that investment worthwhile?

**Knowing What People Want:** - it is vital to know what will keep your customers happy and coming back. Too many businesses second-guess their customers. Smart businesses ask their clients what they want – so that they can provide it. At a higher level, it can help to know what would wow them too – and look for cost-effective, sustainable ways to do that. Then you get noisy customers, singing your praises. And it doesn't need to be a massive cost, especially when compared to the benefit of repeat custom. To avoid a bill of a few hundred pounds, Renault have soured the relationship with a customer who spent thousands.

**Knowing Whether You Deliver:** - once you know what customers want, you need a mechanism to judge whether you are delivering it. Seeing whether any customers come back again is the least desirable measurement. A more proactive approach is to ask your customers (Christine at Tangram does excellent work with customer surveys), or to test it yourself with a mystery shopper (which is the idea behind The Silent Customer, and is a service we provide to our client base).

**Knowing What To Do About It:** - in my experience, once people take the time to review and reflect on the customer experience, listen to the feedback, and involve their team in finding solutions, the path to improvement becomes clear (especially when facilitated by a business coach!). If the answers are not immediately apparent, there are ways to access best practice in your sector, or learn from other professions.

What is your strategy to prevent clients becoming silent customers and going elsewhere?

When will you review what your customers think of you, and your service?

What can you do to ensure you are providing what the customer wants?

Where do you need to start?

As an aside, Celia uses an excellent theory called the Raving Fan Ladder in some of our workshops. Arguably, the Silent Customers we are talking about here are on the lower rungs. Getting people to the top of the ladder, and what those stages are called, could be good material for future newsletters – watch this space!

### *Painless Business News*

Celia's recent presentation on what Business Can Learn from Abba was very well received – and she brought her own level of professionalism and preparedness to my more relaxed approach. Amazingly, someone in the audience was enjoying the talk for a third time – either a real Abba fan, or a Painless groupie? Celia is now taking further bookings for weddings, christenings and Bar Mitzvahs, so if a networking group near you might benefit from a lively presentation, with a serious business lesson, talk to us.

After great feedback from our first Balancing Baby and Business workshop in May, we are now taking bookings for the next one, on 12 October in London (9am to 2pm). One thing to point out: the 'baby' in question could be a teenager, not just a newborn – our tagline is now "whether your baby or your business is new born or grown up". The workshop helps participants establish clarity regarding the roles they play as parents and workers/business owners, and leads them through defining the boundaries you want around your time and energy. Places are limited, so if you want to explore how you can work AND parent more effectively, call 01491 659073 and reserve your seat!

For the last few years I have been doing more and more work with Gerard Burke, helping entrepreneurs develop the future they want for their business and themselves. Until recently, Gerard was the engine behind the BGP at Cranfield, and I am delighted that this month he has announced a new partnership with Cass Business School, and I look forward to working with him more in the future. If you, or someone you know, want access to the best development programme for entrepreneurs in the UK (if not further afield), have a look at [www.yourbusinessyourfuture.co.uk](http://www.yourbusinessyourfuture.co.uk).

### *Book Review*

My recent two week sojourn to France was a welcome opportunity to read some non work-related books. As someone who works with a South African and who has a wide interest in Africa, I found *The Shackled Continent* an enlightening read. The author, Robert Guest, is a writer for The Economist, so he has approached the development challenges in Africa from an economist's perspective. Whilst some of the statistics are alarming (and slightly dated, because the book itself has been out a while), the optimism in me was struck by the suggestions of what could be done. It is the second time in as many months that encouraging entrepreneurship has been advanced as part of the solution to economic woes. If you have any interest in Africa or development, I would recommend it.

## *Painless Puns*

This month some inspiring quotes on issues that repeatedly come up with clients. One way that coaches advocate growing into greater things is to act "as if" you could already do or be the new behaviour you seek. This quote has an interesting angle on that:

*It is good to act as if. It is even better to grow to the point where it is no longer an act.*  
Charles Caleb Colton

We often find coaching clients are over-worked, very stressed and are desperate to find some space to think – sometimes they have a dream to move to the countryside and escape the rat race. That may be the solution, but this seventeenth century quote rings true today:

*When we are unable to find tranquility within ourselves, it is useless to seek it elsewhere.*  
Francois De La Rochefoucauld

I am currently training for a half marathon in October, my first long run since a very long one in 2005. The training process has reminded me of how our mind and body responds so positively to us gently asking more and more of it. In business, the same is true and this quote from Arnie should be on every manager's desk:

*The last three or four reps is what makes the muscle grow. This area of pain divides the champion from someone else who is not a champion. That's what most people lack, having the guts to go on and just say they'll go through the pain no matter what happens.*  
Arnold Schwarzenegger

The fourth person to inspire me this month is my adorable god-daughter Kathleen. You will all know I have an infantile sense of humour, so it may be no surprise that my puns are now being contributed by a four-year-old.

*Why are some people pirates? Because they Arrrrrrr.*

(Say it out loud, with your best Capt Jack Sparrow voice). If you don't get it, ask a four-year-old.

As a coach, I love humorous maxims – a list of statements we should live our life by, interspersed with some that are not that serious. Thanks to Nigel for these:

1. Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night.
2. Don't worry about what people think; they don't do it very often.
3. Not one shred of evidence supports the notion that life is serious.
4. If you look like your passport picture, you probably need the trip.
5. Middle age is when broadness of the mind and narrowness of the waist change places.
6. Never be afraid to try something new. Remember that a lone amateur built the Ark. A large group of professionals built the Titanic.

## *Final Words*

It is very easy to take your customers, and their perception of you, for granted. If they become unhappy, the vast majority will silently melt away and you will never know what you could have done to keep them. Don't let that happen to your business. Engage with your customers, get your staff engaged and consider what you need to do to avoid the silent treatment.

And never, ever, trust Renault.

Warmest regards

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