

Marry Your Customer

Creating Trusted, Loyal Relationships

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Ok, we admit, the title isn't "exactly" what we are asking you to do – but not far off, at least in principle. This isn't a guide on office politics and what to do if you are romantically inclined with someone you are selling to or serve as a customer. So what exactly do we mean by **Marry Your Customer**? What we are talking about is how you can serve your customers in such a way as though it was like being married to them – understanding exactly what they want and being able to deliver it to build a Trusted and Loyal Relationship for a long time into the future. As you continue to read, I think you will understand how powerful the analogy really can be for you and your organization.

Let's start with the personal side of the analysis. Put yourself in this situation. Say you are trying to build a "Trusted, Loyal Relationship" with someone. That someone could be a spouse, significant other, boyfriend, girlfriend, child, friend, or a host of

other people with whom you would desire to have this type of relationship. Take a minute and visualize who this might be and fix it clearly in your mind as you continue to read. What does it look like? We will use the analogy of a "boyfriend/girlfriend" and ultimately a "spouse" as our example to illustrate the point but you can substitute any of the other people you might be thinking about as well to understand how this works. As with any good story, let's start at the beginning. Let's look at when you were first dating and then continue all the way to getting married.

If you are looking to have a long lasting relationship you would want to have it built on Trust and Loyalty, correct? If you agree, then an initial step would be building some level of trust with the other person. We all know that Trust is not a given and has to be "earned," regardless of the relationship. If Trust is one of your first goals, then how should you go about building that Trust? One of the ways would be by keeping "Promises" (implicitly or explicitly) to your boyfriend/girlfriend along the way. For instance, you might Promise something simple, like meeting them on time. Or you might Promise them something more complicated, like planning a trip. Either way, you have made a Promise that could lead to Trust.

Now for the \$64,000 question - do you keep your Promises? If you do, congratulations, you will be developing some level of Trust with the other person. If you don't show up when you're expected to, or you don't come through with the vacation plan you Promised, you're liable to end up with a very unpleasant discussion or much worse. If the relationship is relatively new, you shouldn't be surprised if the unmet expectation causes the relationship to end. But for the sake of discussion, let's say you generally keep your Promises and the relationship is moving forward nicely.

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Sooner or later, in spite of your best intentions, the inevitable happens – you break a Promise. Ouch, someone isn't happy. Now the key question is, "at what stage of the relationship were you in when you broke your Promise and how big was the Promise?" If you developed a high level of Trust and the mistake is minimal, there will be little to no impact to the relationship – forgiveness comes easy with Trusted Relationships. On the other hand, if you are early on in the relationship, you probably haven't developed a high level of Trust and even a minor mistake could create some distrust. If you broke a significant Promise, then it is unlikely the relationship will continue.

Notice there is a correlation between the degree of trust, length of relationship, and tolerance for mistakes. Trust, relationship, and tolerance for mistakes correlate whether we're talking about a marriage relationship or a business relationship. And regardless of which type of relationship we might discuss, without trust, in the long run, there can be no relationship or opportunity to build Loyalty – just like with your customers.

If this is the first time you didn't keep a relatively small Promise and your boyfriend/girlfriend understands, they will give you "a second chance" and allow you to continue building Trust in the relationship. As you continue the cycle of making and keeping your Promises, Trust continues to be "earned" and built over time. Exhibiting this behavior over a period of time will build deeper Trust and eventually a "Trusted, Loyal Relationship." This is how Loyalty is built and "earned" and is the ultimate goal of any relationship. If you are successful at building Trust and Loyalty, you might decide to move to the ultimate stage of Loyalty – marriage.

Let's stop and examine where we are in relation to Customer Loyalty by asking a few key questions. First, "Is what we have described above in our personal relationship

analogy any different from what you would want to develop with your best customers?" "Is this not the exact same process you would go through in 'courting' a customer who you wanted as a Loyal Customer?" "Does it make sense that keeping your Promises to your best Customers you could 'earn' their Trust and ultimately 'earn' their Loyalty?" Our experience shows this is EXACTLY the same process and is why we suggest you think about "Marrying your Customer" in the same way you would "Marry your Fiancée." The principles are similar and the desired outcome is the same – Trusted, Loyal Relationships.

With Promises as our foundation, let's examine exactly how this works for a customer. If your ultimate goal is to create a loyal relationship with a particular customer, it is critical to start by understanding the Promises that are of real value to them. Keeping Promises the customer doesn't value doesn't build Trusted and Loyal Relationships. It is only when you keep Promises they value that you begin to build trust. Once you have a better understanding of the Promises your customer (or personal relationship) values and wants you to keep, the second stage is all about execution. One thing we hear over and over again from the customers we interview is, "If they could just keep three of the Promises they made me, but keep them 100% of the time, I would trust them and be more loyal to them than if they Promise me 15 things some of the time." If there is one word to remember in all of this it is "consistency." You have to be consistent about keeping the Promises that are important to your customers to build Trust and Loyalty – anything less will teach them you can't keep your word and your Promises.

There is one over arching piece of advice we can give you from our years of experience working with customers. It is, **"If you can't keep a Promise your customer values or don't think you can keep it, don't ever Promise it – you will end up doing more**

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damage to you and your company's reputation than if you did nothing."

Customers will always remember what you Promise and measure you on it. They will always assume you can actually deliver on it if you Promise it. If you can't, don't Promise it. If you do Promise it and don't keep your Promise, they will not believe you can deliver on **any** of your Promises and your ability to build Trust will be significantly damaged. If you take nothing else away from this article, take this paragraph and paste it on everyone's wall. "Don't Promise anything unless you know absolutely, positively you can deliver on that Promise."

We would like to leave you with a couple of thoughts to summarize the key points. To have a successful Marriage with your Customer you have to invest the time to understand the Promises they value. This is

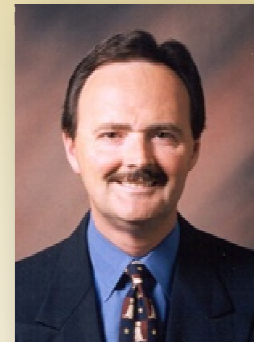
the only way you can truly understand what is needed to build a Trusted and Loyal Relationship. Then determine if you can deliver on the Promises they desire. If you can, then you build Trust and Loyalty with them. If you can't deliver on all their valued Promises, have an open discussion on why you can't and see if there is some common ground to compromise. Either way, do it now and don't wait until you realize it is too late. Marriage takes work, time and commitment – as well as adapting to change – whether it is to your spouse or to your Customer. The most loyal relationships we see between the customer and an organization are all built on delivering the Promises the customer values – as close to 100% of the time as possible. This is what builds a happy and prosperous relationship for both parties. So in the end, Marry your Customer and you will have a great future together.

About the Author

Blaine Millet is the President and a co-founder of [Customer Experiences Inc.](http://CustomerExperiencesInc.com), an organization focused on Strategy and building Loyalty with your customers and stakeholders. He is also the co-author of the leading edge book, "[Creating and Delivering Totally Awesome Customer Experiences](#)." CEI is all about Execution and is focused on the relentless pursuit of helping others achieve unsurpassed levels of Profitability, Customer Loyalty, Employee Loyalty, and Differentiation.

Blaine has worked with companies from the Fortune 50 to start-ups, including the Big 5 and IBM. He has held various roles in leadership, management, sales as well as being an individual contributor. His consulting background has been focused on strategy, customer experiences and process improvements. He also holds an MBA in marketing and finance.

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