

IS YOUR CONTACT CENTER A POWERFUL BRAND EXPERIENCE?

THE STORY OF THE TALKING KANGAROO
AND THE WISE BARTENDER

BY SETH GODIN

Illustrations by Hal Mayforth

Guy walks into a bar. Orders a martini with peanuts instead of olives in it. The bartender says, "I'm sorry, but due to unusually heavy call volume, I'm unable to make your drink. The wait may be as long as...six...minutes." ■ It's kind of a sad story, actually. ■ A business spends millions developing a world-class product. Then it invests millions more on a talented sales force and tens of millions of dollars on marketing. It interrupts countless prospects, sending them FedEx packages and running ads on television, billboards, and the sides of buses. ■ Then, after getting everything right, **the phone rings. >>>**

Photo by John Abbott



SETH GODIN literally wrote the book on permission marketing. The author of six worldwide best sellers, he is our most important guide to marketing in a new era. Now Godin argues that savvy marketers are capitalizing on the latest contact center technology to brand the customer experience in ways never before possible. ■

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June 2005

It rings! The prospect has responded to the investment of time and money by taking the first step toward becoming a customer. She's gone from uninterested target of incessant marketing to slightly interested prospect.

At that moment, the prospect moves into a different space. She's walked out of her zone and into yours. In that moment, the prospect chooses to *pay attention*. Make no mistake—she is paying. She's paying you with her most valuable asset: time.

Sounds good so far. Where's the sad part?

In many organizations, marketing and sales are seen as investments. They're activities that directly lead to revenue and profits. Contact centers, though, are too often seen as costs. The goal appears to be cost reduction. Minimize time spent on the call. Minimize the cost of each interaction. Minimize the training and hourly wages of the operators. After all, if everything stays the same, cutting these costs leads to dramatic improvements in the bottom line.

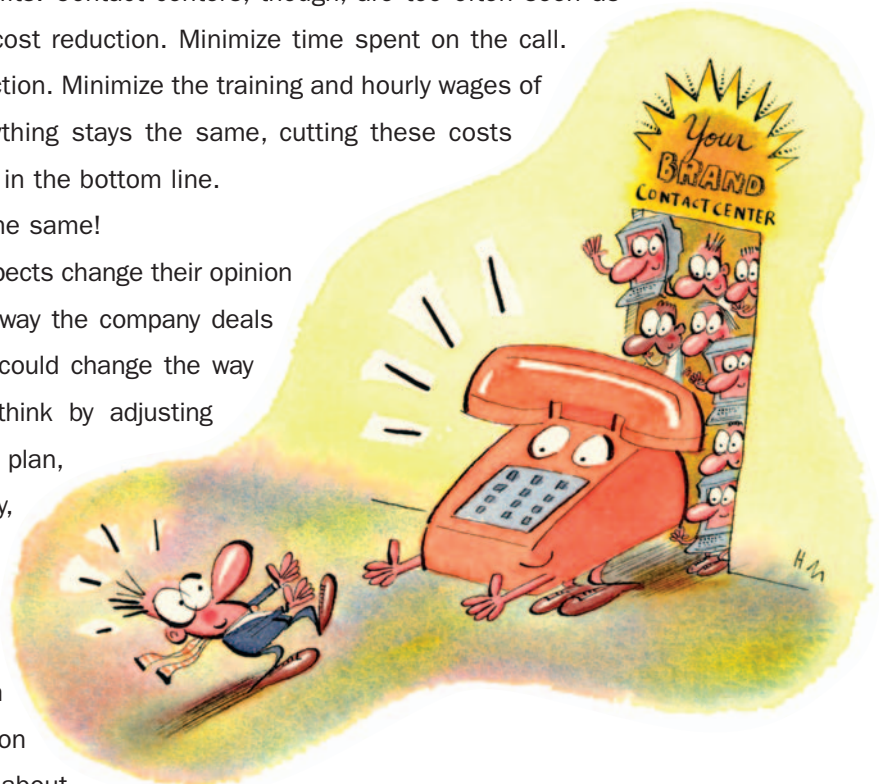
But everything doesn't stay the same!

More than 90 percent of prospects change their opinion about a company based on the way the company deals with them on the phone. If you could change the way 90 percent of your prospects think by adjusting your advertising or your media plan, you'd do it in a heartbeat. Why, then, are we so stingy when it comes to the phone?

I think I know the reason for this stinginess. It has to do with the padlock you've got hanging on your locker in the gym. The thing about padlocks is that they're not very satisfying to open.

If you cut corners when opening a padlock—if you go too fast, if you skip a number, if you're careless—the lock doesn't open. If, on the other hand, you get everything right, the lock opens. No fanfare, no over-the-top results, just an open lock.

Corporate culture treats a contact center a little like that padlock. We don't spend a lot of time brainstorming or investing in a search for breakthrough thinking for a contact center. >



The logical outcome of this cultural misconception is to try to make the contact center cheaper.

Big mistake.


A contact center isn't a metaphor for a group of phones in a building. A contact center is a living, breathing (albeit virtual) *place*, a place that your prospects and your customers visit. While they are inside your contact center, an entirely different reality exists. Interactions that could never be accomplished anywhere else can occur inside a contact center. And when you do things properly, your brand earns the right to get the benefit of the doubt—even when things don't go right.

Did you know that millions of Americans have spent more on their car stereo than the stereo they have at home? What would drive rational people to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on a dealer-installed radio when they'd never imagine buying something similar for their home? Easy: In the moment you're buying a car, all of your defense mechanisms are gone. After all, you volunteered to buy that car. You trust the process. The salesman, at least at that moment, is a co-conspirator. When he suggests the stereo that will make your purchase really special, the easy answer is "yes!" It's a purchase you would never have made the day before or have even considered the day after. But in that moment, because you the customer have chosen to be in the buying space, you're ready, willing, and able to buy.

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This opportunity happens every single day in your contact center. When someone calls in for tech support, he's raising his hand, asking you to talk to him, to sell him a solution. When someone calls in with a question about your catalog, she's begging you to tell her a story, to give her a way to feel good about spending money on something she doesn't actually need.

It's easy to forget the power of audio—and that power doubles when the audio that's delivered goes to someone who's asking for it. Audio (that voice at the other end of the telephone) can deliver a personalized (and personal) interaction that is unmatched by almost any other medium. When a sympathetic contact center operator takes an extra 10 seconds to ask me why I'm sniffing, or comments on the sounds of a happy toddler in the background, it strikes a chord that a magazine ad never could.

As a result, investments in—call it Contact Center Media—can pay huge dividends. It's not unusual to spend \$50 per 1,000 people for an ad that will reach only one out of the thousand 

people you're paying for—which means it's costing you about \$50 to show that ad to just one person. Wouldn't it make more sense to invest an extra dollar to improve an interaction that you *know* is happening right now?

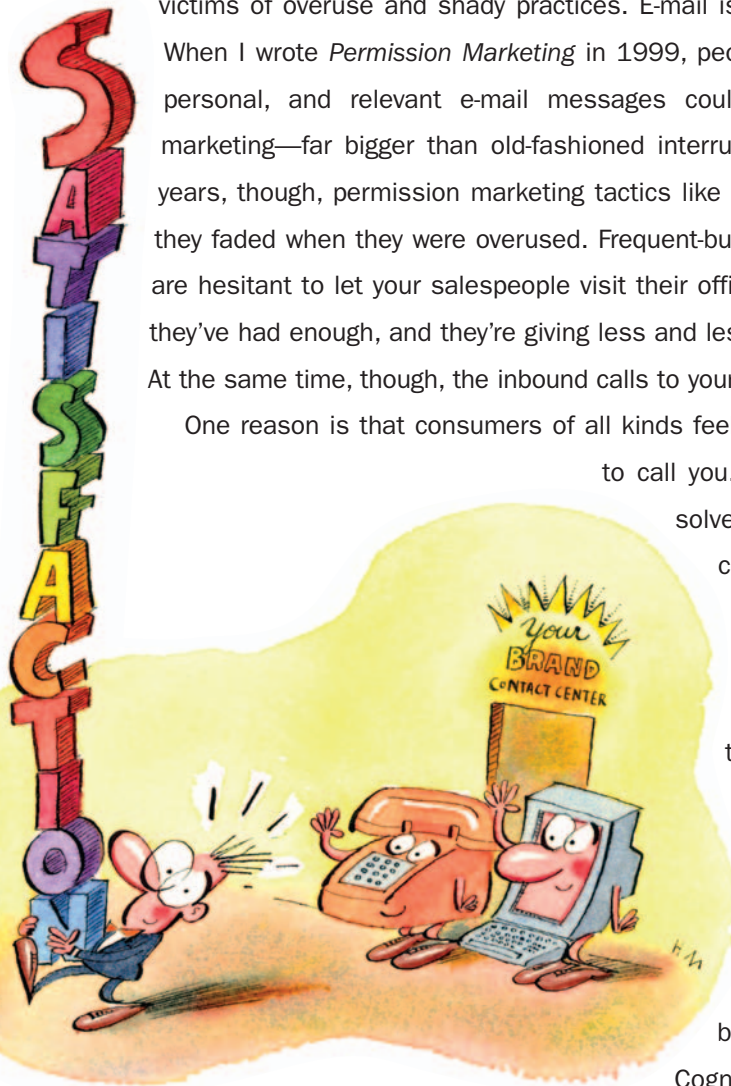
Most of the tools of true permission marketing are starting to fade in their efficacy, victims of overuse and shady practices. E-mail isn't nearly as effective as it used to be. When I wrote *Permission Marketing* in 1999, people scoffed at my idea that anticipated, personal, and relevant e-mail messages could have a huge impact on a brand's marketing—far bigger than old-fashioned interruption ads ever could. Within just a few years, though, permission marketing tactics like this became the rage—so much so that they faded when they were overused. Frequent-buyer clubs are no longer a novelty. People are hesitant to let your salespeople visit their offices. Consumers have made it clear that they've had enough, and they're giving less and less permission for you to contact them. At the same time, though, the inbound calls to your offices show no sign of slowing down.

One reason is that consumers of all kinds feel in control when they pick up the phone to call you. They have a problem and they want it solved. They can determine where they're calling from and when they call. They can decide when they've heard enough and when to ask for more. The challenge your organization faces is to be there when they ask for you.

The way a consumer feels about a brand and a shopping experience has significant effects on the product experience itself. Coffee just tastes better at Starbucks, even if it was brewed at the diner down the street.

Cognitive dissonance is one of the most powerful forces affecting the customer experience, and my interaction with your contact center can create a powerful incentive for me to love (or just plain hate) the product when I eventually use it.

So how do you turn a contact center from a cost-constrained liability into a revenue-generating asset? ➤



Here are five fire starters to help you and your team work your way through the key issues:


1. Realize that people call you because they have some sort of pain or need. They either want to fix something they've already purchased or they want to make a purchase that will increase their happiness or decrease their pain. Once you embrace that fact, you can have goal-oriented interactions with the clear intent to identify and then solve their pain. This positive first impression is critical and isn't that difficult to accomplish.

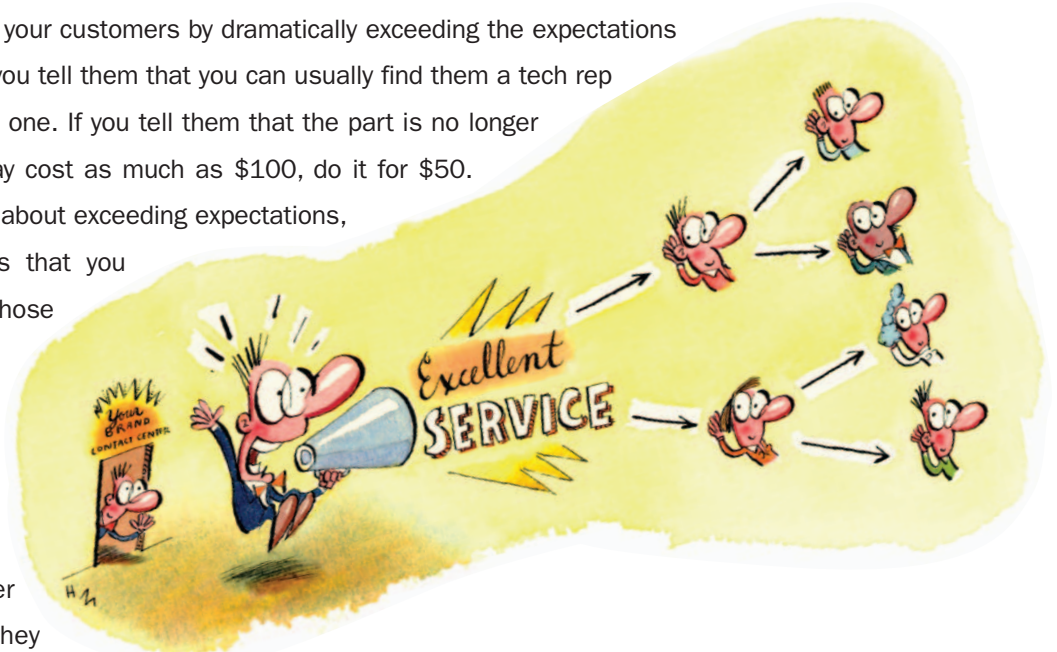
2. Make a promise. Directly address the person's pain and promise to alleviate it. You may not be able to do it on the terms that the prospect had in mind, but you can do it. You really have no other choice—if you can't solve their pain, you've lost them anyway.

3. Thrill them! Delight your customers by dramatically exceeding the expectations you've set for them. If you tell them that you can usually find them a tech rep in five minutes, do it in one. If you tell them that the part is no longer under warranty and may cost as much as \$100, do it for \$50. Delighting people is all about exceeding expectations, and the good news is that you get a shot at setting those expectations.

4. Once thrilled, use the moment to gain permission to teach. Teach them about other goods or services they

might buy from you. Teach them about the benefits of letting a salesperson visit them at their factory. Teach them about why they should opt in to get updates from your sales team. At this moment they are *paying* attention. This attention is yours to use...or to lose.

5. Finish with feedback. Reward the caller with the opportunity to tell someone else in your organization how the call went. Not only can this create enormous psychic satisfaction for 



the customer, but if the call went well, you're training the caller in how to tell his or her friends. Even if it went poorly, you've got one more chance to save the day.

Stop for a second and imagine the difference between you and your competition if you adopted a posture like this one. Think about how your prospects and customers would react if you treated them like this. What sort of word of mouth would it generate? What about incremental orders from existing customers?

Your contact center is either a cost center or a profit center. The choice, it seems, is completely up to you.

So far, we've talked about the customer experience as if your efforts were limited to the satisfaction of just one person at a time. Just you and the caller. That used to be true, but no longer. Today, thanks to the digitally augmented word of mouth I call an ideavirus, every one of your contact center staff is indirectly influencing 10, 30, or 10,000 potential customers every time he or she interacts with just one. I learned this from experience. When I wrote *Unleashing the Ideavirus*, I gave the e-book version away free online. Within months, friends had given friends 2 million copies of the book.

“Isn't this thinking just for consumer goods? Surely it doesn't apply to Federal Express or General Electric or Caterpillar. After all, these big guys are dealing with rational, intelligent, hard-nosed businesspeople.”

Take the case of a customer named Maddox and his experience with the contact center at one of the top online travel agencies. Here's an ordinary customer wrestling his way through a small scuffle with a travel company. Instead of hassling for 10 minutes and walking away, though, he built a Web site about it. His site on the incident begins:

*I hate this travel site. I saw one of their commercials the other day that reminded me of how much they *\$#%. The new commercial features a chorus of blue, zombie-like *&%@&\$# singing along with an announcer who talks about how supposedly low the airfare is on their service. A woman in the commercial considers going to Orlando, and the chorus pipes in, "DON'T THINK TWICE!" Then, she decisively says, "I'm going to Orlando!" At one point in the commercial, a character says, "but who will feed my fish?" Suddenly the chorus booms in, "DON'T THINK!"*

*Yeah, that's exactly what we need: more consumers thinking less. Don't think, just spend! Tell you what *&%@&\$#, I'll think all I want. Take your stupid jingle, spontaneous consumerism, and >*

creepy blue zombies and shove it. My beef stems from a \$94 dispute I had with them that will become the most expensive \$94 they will ever make.


The site goes on to outline how the company not only failed to follow the steps I outlined above but also did very little to help satisfy him. The result? A Web site that claims to have been viewed more than half a million times. One angry customer, 500,000 pieces of word of mouth.

Could this happen to you? It happened to Nike. It happened to Apple. It happens to great brands every day. It happens for three simple reasons:

- 1. You set your customers' expectations too high—you make it impossible to thrill them.**
- 2. You don't keep your promises.** Making a promise is a key first step to addressing and then solving your prospect's pain. But if you make that promise and fail to keep it, it's far worse than never making it at all. Yes, as I said earlier, you must promise to solve my problem. But then you better do it.
- 3. You don't invest in people who can be empowered to treat your customers the way they'd like to be treated.** If you rely on scripts instead of training and don't ask for feedback, you're never going to get better.

And of course, all three failures contribute to your inability to get permission to follow up. No one will invite you to follow up when you fail in these ways.

Isn't this thinking just for consumer goods? Surely it doesn't apply to Federal Express or General Electric or Caterpillar. After all, these big guys are dealing with rational, intelligent, hard-nosed businesspeople.

Actually, in my experience, sooner or later there's always a human at the end of the chain. It's a human who decides how many units Wal-Mart should order, and a human who decides to stop supporting Dell machines and has the entire organization switch to Gateway. In fact, because it's not their money, the quality of the experience is probably the single most important factor that corporate buyers consider when choosing a product or service. 

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One of my favorite examples brings this home. Apple Computer has decided to move their contact center people into their retail stores. That's right, a corporate Mac user can grab his PowerBook, drive over to the store, and talk to the "operator" right there at the Genius Bar. The end result? Dramatically enhanced retention, a measurable impact in users switching from Windows to the Mac OS, and high satisfaction for the "geniuses" behind the bar. By freeing the contact center staff to have meaningful person-to-person interactions, Apple has hit a home run.

Is it efficient? Well, if efficiency is a cost-based metric (calls handled per hour), then of course not. But if efficiency is an investment-based marketing measure (increase in profit due to money spent), then there is absolutely no comparison. Great contact centers generate remarkable results.

So this talking kangaroo walks into a bar. He says "ouch."

Never mind, start again.

So this guy walks into a bar. Bartender greets him with a big smile. The guy orders a martini. Bartender quickly makes the drink, puts a free bowl of pretzels on the counter, introduces the guy to three other regulars in the bar, including a lovely divorcée. The pretzels are homemade. The divorcée is charming.

Guy comes back the next night. Everyone is glad to see him. Everyone remembers his name. Bartender gives him a roast beef sandwich on weck. "On the house," he says.

Two days later, the guy comes back with three friends. They all buy dinner and drinks. Total tab: \$90. Now he's a regular.

At the bar we encountered at the beginning of our story (the one with unusually heavy call volume), they're still saving money on staffing, but nobody goes there anymore. The call volume is no longer unusually heavy. They have cost-reduced their way to failure.

Here's my challenge to you. Right now, before you put this down, pick up the phone and call yourself. Ask a few simple questions about your company's products or services. Measure how long it takes. More important, though, measure how it makes you feel. Be honest. Are you delighted?

If you had a sales force that treated prospects the way your contact center does, would you be pleased? ■

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