The Triangle of Service

When the moments of truth go unmanaged, the quality of service regresses to mediocrity.
—Karl Albrecht/Ron Zemke

50,000 MOMENTS OF TRUTH

The metaphor of the moment of truth is a very powerful idea for helping people in service businesses shift their points of view and think about the customer’s experience. SAS president Jan Carlzon’s one-liner, “We have 50,000 moments of truth out there every day,” really hits home. Here is a case in point.

A friend of ours was traveling alone in Japan on an extended vacation. He inquired in his limited Japanese which train he should take to go from Sapporo, where he was at the moment, to Tokyo. The man behind the counter wrote out all the information for him—times, train numbers, and track numbers. He even took the trouble to write it in both English and Japanese, in case our friend should lose his way and later need to show the note to some other Japanese person.

This was a moment of truth, one of many that happened that day. At that instant our friend had an opportunity to form an impression of the train company, or at least of that one employee. He came away thinking, “That was a nice experience. There’s somebody who really takes the trouble to help people.”

But the story goes even a bit further. Pleased and gratified, our friend thanked the information man and walked down the corridor to the waiting area, to sit and wait for the departure time. A half-hour later he saw the information man come bustling through the crowded waiting hall, looking for him. Locating him at last, the man gestured for the return of the paper. He wrote something on it, gave it back, bowed quickly, and hurried back
to his post. He had figured out a faster, more convenient sequence of trains, and came back to correct the note!

Managing service means having as many of the moments of truth as possible come out well. As Donald Porter, director of customer service quality assurance for British Airways, points out:

If you’re a service person, and you get it wrong at your point in the customer’s chain of experience, you are very likely erasing from the customer’s mind all the memories of the good treatment he or she may have had up until you. But if you get it right, you have a chance to undo all the wrongs that may have happened before the customer got to you. You really are the moment of truth.

Each of us has a personal storehouse of memories of the moments of truth in our life experiences. We have experienced lousy moments when it seemed that people or systems or both almost went out of their way to be difficult or unhelpful. And we have had shining moments when we felt appreciated, cared for, cared about, and genuinely valued.

From your point of view as the customer, or the receiver of the service, you experience the moment of truth as intensely personal. You think, “This is me standing here, not some faceless nonentity. I am a person. I have an important stake in this situation, and I want very much to be treated properly.” Most of us will forgive “system” screwups, even to a preposterous degree, if there is someone there who acknowledges our personal needs and makes an effort to set things right. The concept of managing the moments of truth is the very essence of service management.

GETTING HIGH GRADES ON THE CUSTOMER’S REPORT CARD

Every time a service organization performs for a particular customer, the customer makes an assessment of the quality of the service, even if unconsciously. The sum total of the repeated assessments by this customer and the collective assessments by all customers establish in their minds the organization’s image in terms of service quality.

We can think of the customer as carrying around a kind of “report card” in his or her head, which is the basis of a grading system that leads the customer to decide whether to partake of the service again or to go elsewhere. As we shall see later, it is crucially important for us to find out as much as we possibly can about this all-important but invisible report card. We can
only score high grades on the customer’s report card on a consistent basis by knowing what evaluation factors the customer is applying when he or she thinks about our organization and what we offer.

**THE PRINCIPLE OF REGRESSION TO MEDIOCRITY**

Why *don’t* the trains run on time? Why is getting a telephone installed a major adventure? Why do so many people consider “postal service” a contradiction in terms? Why did C. Northcote Parkinson, the originator of the famed Parkinson’s Law, claim, “If there’s anything a public servant hates to do, it’s something for the public”? Why is there so little perception on the part of T. C. Mits (the celebrated man-in-the-street) of quality in service? Why is outstanding service considered so scarce when so many companies presumably thrive or perish on the satisfaction of their customers? We think these questions, and others like them, can be answered in meaningful ways—ways that suggest solutions.

A story shared by Donald Porter of British Airways foretells the answer to the question of why service quality is so frequently low. “When we launched our Customer First campaign,” Porter reports, “we wanted to find out where we were in our market at the time. What did our customers think of us, compared to other airline companies? We conducted a market research study to try to find out.

“Our study aimed at answering two questions: first, what factors did people really consider most important in their flying experiences; and second, how did British Airways stack up against the other airlines on those factors?

“After some extensive interviewing and data analysis, we discovered some very interesting facts. Of all the statements made by the air travelers we interviewed, four factors stood out from all the rest as being critically important. What took us aback was the fact that two of the four factors came more or less as a surprise to us—we hadn’t really considered them consciously before.”

According to BA’s findings, says Porter, travelers seemed to be responding to four key factors as they moved through the chain of experience:

1. Care and concern—“We knew about this one.”
2. Spontaneity—“We hadn’t thought much about this one.”
3. Problem solving—"We were conscious of this one."
4. Recovery—"We hadn’t thought about this one at all."

"‘Care and concern’ are fairly clear, I think," says Porter. "We weren’t surprised to find this a key factor, although I think we’d have to confess that we couldn’t claim a very high level of performance on it.

"‘Spontaneity’ made us stop and scratch our heads a bit. Customers were saying, ‘We want to know that your frontline people are authorized to think. When a problem comes up that doesn’t fit the procedure book, can the service person use some discretion—find a way to jockey the system on the customer’s behalf? Or does he or she simply shrug shoulders and brush the customer off?

"‘Problem solving’ was pretty clear, we felt. Customers thought our people should be skilled at working out the intricacies of problematical travel schedules, handling complicated logistics, and in general getting them on their way.

"The fourth factor sort of threw us. It had never really occurred to us in any concrete way. ‘Recovery’ was the term we coined to describe a very frequently repeated concern: if something goes wrong, as it often does, will anybody make a special effort to set it right? Will someone go out of his or her way to make amends to the customer? Does anybody make an effort to offset the negative effects of a screwup? Does anyone even know how to deliver a simple apology?

"We were struck by a rather chilling thought: if two of these four primary evaluation factors were things we had never consciously considered, what were the chances that our people in the service areas were paying attention to them? For the first time, we were really beginning to understand and come to terms with the real motivational factors that are embedded in our customer’s nervous system."

Porter’s commentary offers a great deal to think about. The market research project also came up with some other interesting findings. When the interviewers asked air travelers to rate British Airways in comparison to other airlines they had personally dealt with, they found some interesting statistics. About 20 percent of the respondents considered British Airways superior to other airlines they had used. About 15 percent considered British Airways inferior to others. The remainder expressed no strong opinions one way or the other.
The initial reaction of company management to the figures was guardedly optimistic. One executive offered the interpretation that “it seems like 85 percent of the people interviewed think we’re OK.” But as the implications of the data began to soak in, the attitude changed to one of mild concern. Another observer volunteered, “There is another interpretation that one could make. It seems that 65 percent of the respondents don’t see any important difference between us and the other airlines. That doesn’t strike me as very good news.”

This, indeed, was bad news, when considered in the light of a clear and specific directive from Colin Marshall, chief executive of British Airways. “I want British Airways to be the best airline in the world,” he said, “and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make it that.” With 65 percent of the people apparently evaluating the company as just so-so in quality of service, there seemed to be quite a distance to go.

From many of our everyday experiences, as well as from the British Airways case, we can draw a fairly mundane conclusion, one that we believe can be stated as an out-and-out principle of service management:

WHEN THE MOMENTS OF TRUTH GO UNMANAGED, THE QUALITY OF SERVICE REGRESSES TO MEDIOCRITY.

“Just a moment,” you might say. “Isn’t it a little harsh to define an average level of service—neither poor nor outstanding—as ‘mediocre?’ Isn’t just ‘okay’ okay?”

Perhaps so, but consider that to survive and prosper in a service industry requires differentiation. An effective service company must show evidence that it really does have something special to offer. Especially in industries where customers don’t readily see important differences in the choices of service offered them, “average” really equates to “mediocre,” at least in the mind of the customer.

Porter contributes another observation on this point. “We had heard a great deal about SAS’s ‘punctuality’ reputation. SAS made quite a noise with their adverts, telling business travelers how punctual they were. Yet, when we did our market study, we didn’t find a great deal of concern about on-time takeoff.

“It seemed to us that the on-time factor had lost its significance once most of the airlines improved on it. Our customers were saying, in effect, ‘Look, don’t talk to us about taking off on time. We expect you to take off on time. Don’t look for a standing ovation
just because you get the thing off the ground on the published schedule.’ ”

The message here, we think, is that customer expectations are progressive. If you’re accustomed to telephone service in the United States, not only will you be horrified at the “average” level of service in New Delhi but you will also tend to disapprove of shortfalls in the American level of service as well, even though it is better than just about any other in the world. As customers, we tend to expect at least the level we’ve become used to.

Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman point out in *In Search of Excellence* the crucial importance of “staying close to the customer.” By this they mean learning in intimate detail what really counts to your customer; what he or she likes and doesn’t like; what the customer will and won’t buy. Some of the most dismal failures of organizations can be traced to losing contact with the customer at the very time when the customer’s needs and motivations were changing. To paraphrase those famous last words, “There will always be a market for a good buggy whip.”

**SEEING SERVICE AS A PRODUCT**

In addition to learning to understand the customer better, we need to understand the concept of service itself better. Though a service is obviously different from a physical product, it is still a product. A service product—any incident of doing for others for a fee—can be distinguished from a commodity by one or more, and usually several, of the following service characteristics:

1. A service is produced at the instant of delivery; it can’t be created in advance or held in readiness.
2. A service cannot be centrally produced, inspected, stock-piled, or warehoused. It is usually delivered wherever the customer is, by people who are beyond the immediate influence of management.
3. The “product” cannot be demonstrated, nor can a sample be sent for customer approval in advance of the service; the provider can show various examples, but the customer’s own haircut, for example, does not yet exist and cannot be shown.
4. The person receiving the service has nothing tangible; the value of the service depends on his or her personal experience.
5. The experience cannot be sold or passed on to a third party.
6. If improperly performed, a service cannot be "recalled." If it cannot be repeated, then reparations or apologies are the only means of recourse for customer satisfaction.
7. Quality assurance must happen before production, rather than after production, as would be the case in a manufacturing situation.
8. Delivery of the service usually requires human interaction to some degree; buyer and seller come into contact in some relatively personal way to create the service.
9. The receiver's expectations of the service are integral to his or her satisfaction with the outcome. Quality of service is largely a subjective matter.
10. The more people the customer must encounter during the delivery of the service, the less likely it is that he or she will be satisfied with the service.

Note please that we are not suggesting that every service can or should possess every one of these ten characteristics—or even that these are the only characteristics a service can have. Just the same, these characteristics paint a picture of a very special kind of transaction between buyer and seller: the transaction we call service. The more we understand this transaction, the higher the grades we can earn on the customer's report card.

THE CYCLE OF SERVICE

One of the obvious places to start in thinking about the quality of an organization's service is to take inventory of the moments of truth in that particular business. Think about your own business. What are the various points of contact at which the customer passes judgement on your enterprise? How many opportunities do you have to score points?

To help your thinking process, visualize your organization as dealing with the customer in terms of a cycle of service, a repeatable sequence of events in which various people try to meet the customer's needs and expectations at each point. The cycle begins at the very first point of contact between the customer and your organization. It may be the instant at which the customer sees your advertisement, gets a call from your sales person, or initiates a telephone inquiry. Or it may be any other happening that starts
the process of doing business. It ends, only temporarily, when
the customer considers the service complete, and it begins anew
when he or she decides to come back for more.

To help you discover the critical moments of truth in your
dealings with your customers, try drawing a diagram of your partic-
ular service cycle. Divide the cycle into the smallest possible incre-
ments or episodes that make any sense conceptually. Then begin
to identify the various moments of truth going on throughout
the cycle. Try to associate particular moments of truth with specific
stages of the customer’s experience.

The service cycle will be unique for your particular business.
It may vary from one customer to another, from one version of
your service to another, and from one situation to another. At
any moment, each customer who is doing business with you is
somewhere in his or her uniquely personal cycle. Of course, cus-
tomers don’t usually think of their experiences consciously in
terms of a cycle; they generally pay attention to whatever concrete
needs they have at a particular moment. But it pays for you to
think about this cycle in very specific stages, because it is the
very substance of your business.

During a seminar with a group of health care administrators,
we asked the participants to diagram the cycle of service that
ensues when a patient is wheeled off for, and eventually brought
back from, a series of medical tests. After several minutes of discuss-
ion about the place of various orderlies, nurses, doctors, and
lab technicians in the cycle, the task was completed. As they sat
admiring their handiwork, one of the administrators aloud—as
much to himself as to the group—“My God! No one is in charge.”
His insight proved to be a valuable one that we have since seen
revalidated in other professional service organizations. His expla-
nation went approximately like this:

Our hospital is organized and managed by professional speciality—
by functions like nursing, housekeeping, security, pharmacy, and
so on. As a result, no single person or group is really accountable
for the overall success and quality of the patient’s experience. The
orderlies are accountable for a part of the experience, the nurses
for another, the lab technicians for another, and so on. There are
a lot of people accountable for a part of a service cycle, but no
one has personal accountability for an entire cycle of service.

The generalization of this insight is that when you are organized
along functional lines as opposed to product or service cycle lines,
no one is responsible for ensuring that the cycle of service goes off effectively. In the abstract, of course, the chief executive of the organization is accountable, and everyone who comes in contact with the customer—in this example the patient—is responsible. But the simple fact remains that when no one is specifically accountable for the cycle of service, from beginning to end, the customer’s experience with the organization is going unmanaged. When the customer’s experience—the moments of truth—goes unmanaged, mediocrity prevails.

THREE FEATURES OUTSTANDING SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS HAVE IN COMMON

Three important characteristics differentiate outstanding service organizations from mediocre ones. We shall have a great deal to say about these factors in succeeding chapters, so we shall touch on them only briefly here.

A well-conceived strategy for service. The outstanding organizations have discovered, invented, or evolved a unifying idea about what they do. This service concept, or service strategy as we shall call it in later discussions, directs the attention of the people in the organization toward the real priorities of the customer. This guiding concept finds its way into all that people do. It becomes a rallying cry, a kind of gospel, and the nucleus of the message to be transmitted to the customer.

Customer-oriented frontline people. By some means the managers of such organizations have encouraged and helped the people who deliver the service to keep their attention fastened on the needs of the customer. The effective frontline person is able to maintain an “otherworldly” focus of attention by tuning in to the customer’s current situation, frame of mind, and need. This leads to a level of responsiveness, attentiveness, and willingness to help that marks the service as superior in the customer’s mind and makes him or her want to tell others about it and come back for more.

Customer-friendly systems. The delivery system that backs up the service people is truly designed for the convenience of the customer rather than the convenience of the organization. The physical facilities, policies, procedures, methods, and communication processes all say to the customer, “This apparatus is here to meet your needs.”

These three factors—a clear service strategy, customer-ori-
Presented frontline people, and customer-friendly systems—are all relatively simple in concept and fairly easy to understand. Yet making them a reality is almost always a monumental task, especially in large organizations. Most of the remainder of this book deals with what we have found out about implementing service management by trying to actively manage these three critical factors.

**THE TRIANGLE OF SERVICE**

The obvious question facing us at this point in our discussion is, How shall we approach the *management of service*? What can the leaders of a service enterprise do that will directly or indirectly maximize the quality of the customer’s experience at the many moments of truth? Is there now a perspective, some sort of framework, or a paradigm for thinking about the task of managing for outstanding service? Just as we need a model such as the cycle of service to understand the perspective of the customer, we need a company-oriented model to help managers think about what they need to do.

It is useful, we believe, to think of the company and the customer as intimately engaged in a triangular sort of relationship, like that shown in Figure 3–1. This *service triangle*, as we call it, represents the three elements of service strategy, people, and systems as more or less revolving around the customer in a creative interplay.

This triangle model is radically different from the standard organization charts we have traditionally used to think about business operations. It represents a *process* rather than a structure, and it forces us to include the customer in our conception of the business.

In the following chapters we will share what we know so far about each of these four key elements: customer, strategy, people, and systems. We’ll devote a chapter to each element, but at this point let’s make sure the big picture is reasonably clear.

If we are really going to practice what we preach about developing a customer-driven organization, it makes sense to start with the customer as our basis for defining the business. Of course, the company exists to serve the customer. That is supposedly understood. But let’s go further and say that the *organization exists to serve the needs of the people who are serving the customer*. We must organize and manage for service, not just preach about it.

Once we have a clear conception of the motivational structure of the customer, we need to develop some kind of workable model...
for service. We need to agree upon a basic business strategy that will serve to differentiate our company from our competitors in the mind and in the experience of our customers. In many cases, and probably most, it is a very challenging task to formulate a nontrivial philosophy of service that can really make a difference. Advertising slogans won’t do it. The service strategy must mean something concrete and valuable to the customer, something he or she is willing to pay for.

Armed with an understanding of the customer’s buying motivations and a concept for service that will position our company advantageously in the marketplace, we must then explore the interplay between the strategy, the people of our organization, and the systems that are available to them to get the job done.

It is instructive to some extent to take each of the parts of the service triangle more or less literally, and to explore some of the obvious interactions. Each of the lines in the diagram can represent an important dimension of impact. For example, the line connecting the customer and the service strategy can be taken to represent the critical importance of building the service strategy around the core needs and motives of the customer. This is no place for guesswork. We need to find out, if we don’t really know, what goes on in our customer’s mind when he or she thinks about our kind of service.
Conversely, the line that flows from the service strategy to the customer represents the process of communicating the strategy to our market. It is not nearly enough that we give good service, or that our service is uniquely better in some way; the customer has to know that fact for it to do us any good.

The line connecting the customer and the people of the organization explains itself. It is the crucial point of contact, the continuing interplay that accounts for most of the moments of truth. It is this interplay that presents the greatest opportunity for gain or loss, and for creative effort.

Another very interesting line on the service triangle figure connects the customer to the systems that presumably help to deliver the service. These systems can include abstract procedural systems as well as physical hardware. Many negative moments of truth in the business world arise because of system peculiarities and malfunctions. When the customer's interest is treated as an afterthought in the design of service delivery systems, the situation is virtually programmed for mediocrity and dissatisfaction.

Restaurant tables that are awkward or uncomfortable, cramped airline seats that jam people in like cattle, forms that don't make sense and are impossible to fill out, illogical or confusing building layouts, and administrative processes that burden the customer with tasks that could be handled by service employees all make it more difficult for the people to provide service effectively.

The three outer lines of the service triangle tell their own individual stories as well. For example, think about the interplay between the people and the systems. How often have you seen highly motivated people prevented from giving the quality of service they really wanted to give because of nonsensical administrative procedures, illogical task assignments, regressive work rules, or poor physical facilities? In situations like these, the service concept is nothing more than normal procedure.

Frontline people are usually much better prepared than their managers to find ways to improve the systems they use every day. The big question is, Do their managers realize that fact, and are they willing to invite the people to contribute what they know?

The line connecting the service strategy with the systems suggests that the design and deployment of the physical and administrative systems should follow logically from the definition of the service strategy. This seems obvious, but given the inertial resistance to change found in most large organizations, it sometimes seems like a utopian precept.
And finally, what about the line that flows between the service strategy and the people? That line suggests that the people who deliver the service need to have the benefit of a clearly defined philosophy from management. Without some sense of focus, clarity, and priority, it is difficult for them to keep their attention on service quality. The moments of truth tend to deteriorate and regress to mediocrity.

We will explore the elements and implications of the service triangle in more depth in later chapters. At this point it is important to begin thinking about the interplay of the key components of service, and to think about getting them to work in harmony. Let’s think about the companywide approach to service.

WHY HAVE A CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT?

If a company that is supposed to be operating in a service industry has a department called the “customer service department,” what are all the other departments supposed to be doing? Might it be that having a customer service department signals to the other people in the company that the customer is being properly looked after, and that they need not concern themselves with the matter? Shouldn’t the entire organization be one large customer service department—at least figuratively speaking?

Think about some of the service organizations you have dealt with as a customer yourself. How do the people treat you when you have some kind of special need or peculiar problem? Do they take the initiative to help you solve it, or at least steer you far enough in the right direction? Or do they simply brush you off and mumble something about contacting “customer service”?

This type of behavior at the moments of truth is all too common, and it quickly establishes a process of regression to mediocrity. The prevailing point of view is, “I have my job to do. It’s somebody else’s job to take care of this customer’s problem.” This particular point bears some very careful thought. We can’t say, of course, that a service employee must drop whatever he or she is doing at the moment and work the customer’s problem through to completion. But the perception of service quality at the moment of truth revolves around the customer’s sense of having been helped and appreciated. A skillful employee can do this in many creative ways and in the normal flow of work.

Jan Carlzon very often said to his frontline people, “SAS is you. In the mind of the customer, you are the company at that particular moment of truth. I want you to respond to the real
need of the customer, and not use some standardized procedure for getting rid of him.”

This is the same message stressed by Walt Disney when he created Disneyland, the “magic kingdom.” Disneyland is all about fantasy. The customer is transported into a magical fairy tale, where all things are wonderful and all things are possible. Disney wanted every park employee to understand the meaning of this experience for the customers. He drilled the message into every single one of them: “You are Disneyland.”

This point of view contends that everybody in the company who ever comes into contact with a customer, even accidentally, is potentially in a service role. The administrative person walking down the corridor of the hospital can smile and say hello to the patient who is coming in or going out. The maintenance person in the hotel can greet the guest in the elevator, and stop to give directions to the meeting rooms. The person in the gift shop at the airport can tell a passenger how to go about finding a lost item, or how to page someone.

In too many situations, at too many moments of truth, a “non-service” person turns a cold shoulder to a customer who needs help. This is the nature of the regression process. It takes many small moments of truth, handled in mediocre ways, to create a standard of mediocrity. The challenge to managers is to make sure that doesn’t happen.

One of the most common symptoms of mediocrity in service is when the customer finds it necessary to run through an organizational maze to get his or her needs met. “That’s not in this department,” is an all too common answer. “You’ll have to call Housekeeping (or Patient Records, or Maintenance, or Residential Services, and so forth).” If you are forcing your customer to learn your organization to have a problem solved, you may want to reevaluate your corporate conception of service.

Before the break-up of AT&T, the old “Ma Bell” structure was famous for this customer runaround process. A person would call up the company with the need to have a telephone installed, or a service change, and end up dealing with three or more departments. In each case calling the department a second time got a completely different person, who had no prior knowledge of the order at all. Current indications are that dealing with the new AT&T will be at least as confusing as it was with the old telephone company for a fairly long time.

Banks often operate this way. Many branch banks are so compartmentalized and regimented in an attempt to eliminate all evi-
dence of human judgement and initiative that very few people can steer a customer through the maze on their own. It is very common practice in dealing with banks to deal with people who know only one microscopic function, and who cannot offer a bit of help with any other.

None of these things occur out of malice. Service people don’t get up in the morning and plan to abuse customers. What happens in so many of these situations is that nobody “owns” the responsibility for the solution to the customer’s problem, and nobody sees the difference between carrying out job tasks and meeting customer needs. Service people can become so robotized in their actions that they greet any customer request with a standardized response, even if the response is only marginally effective.

It also helps to invite the “nonservice” people in the company to think of themselves as really being in service roles. Administrative people, accountants, computer specialists, engineers, contracts people, and staff people of various kinds tend to think of themselves as somehow removed from the din of battle. All too often they look upon service people as the ones who deal with *hoi polloi*. They are sometimes tempted to think of themselves as “above” the level of service roles. A strong and determined chief executive can disabuse them of this elitist viewpoint, and get them to thinking of service as a highly valued role.

When Robert Townsend took over as head of Avis Corporation and instituted its famous “We Try Harder” campaign, he decided that a bit of time behind the counter was therapeutic for every manager in the company. He issued a decree that even vice presidents were expected to do duty face-to-face with the customer.

He wanted all key people in the company to have first-hand knowledge of the needs and experiences of people who were using rental cars. He also wanted to dispel the connotation that the really important people were back at headquarters. The message, according to Townsend, was that the survival and prosperity of the company were in the hands of the people at the rental counters and in the maintenance shops, and that was where the action was.

Elitist attitudes and factional interests die hard in most organizations. Sometimes the accounting people act as if they think the organization exists so they can keep books on it. Some engineering people act as if the organization exists to support their intellectual hobbies. Some physicians act as if the hospital exists to cater to their overfed egos. It takes a very strong management to get the
people in these various camps to see themselves as supporting the people and processes that deliver the quality of experience the customer considers important.

**ORGANIZATIONAL SCHIZOPHRENIA: CONFLICTING PRIORITIES**

If managing the moments of truth is the essence of service management, then the essential process in managing the moments of truth is building a *service-minded culture* in the organization. If the moments of truth go unmanaged and service quality regresses to mediocrity, there is usually a concomitant poverty of spirit among the people in the company overall. A “don’t-give-a-damn” attitude creeps into the nooks and crannies of the collective psyche.

It becomes decidedly not “in” to act as if one cares about his or her job, or about performance or achievement, or about the satisfaction of the customer. Pride goes out the window, and the collective attention turns inward to the mundane and the trivial. Unless the leadership and inspiration are present, mediocrity tends to reinforce itself.

An even worse state of affairs, which exists in many large service organizations, is a sort of schizophrenic double standard. Top managers may talk about customer satisfaction, quality of service, and the like, and yet their day-to-day actions may be reinforcing something quite different—all too often, attention and obedience to themselves. This pattern of “asking for A and rewarding B” tends to create confusion, loss of motivation, and even cynicism among frontline people.

Outstanding service requires focused energy. Slogans will not do it. Posters will not do it. Inspirational memos will not do it. It will happen when the managers of organization step up to their responsibilities as leaders and articulate a concept of service which the people can find believable, feasible, worthwhile, and rewarding. The organizational climate must be ready and the management commitment must be present for service management to take root and thrive.

**SERVICE MANAGEMENT: OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?**

In briefing hundreds of managers in a number of countries on the service management concept, and particularly in the United
States, we have frequently had to field the question, "So what's new? This is just the same old 'customer satisfaction' stuff that we've known about for years. Isn't service management just putting old wine in new bottles?"

Perhaps, but let's take a closer look at the bottles. In the United States we have long paid lip service to customer satisfaction. We have been fond of saying, "The customer is always right," "The customer comes first," and all the rest. And yet there has not been until now a clear-cut model for thinking about the management of service. American managers have tended to leave the matter of customer satisfaction to the customer service department. They typically assume that someone is taking proper care of the customer, unless the number of complaints begins to get too high. Then it becomes time for corrective action.

The service triangle provides a much needed conceptual framework for thinking about the quality of service, and for figuring out how to manage the moments of truth. Except for some special considerations about changing the culture of organizations, the rest of the theory is, admittedly, pretty much congruent with what is already known about customer service. But from our point of view as students of management, we believe the valuable contribution offered by the Scandinavian experience is the reconceptualization of service as a top-management concern.