

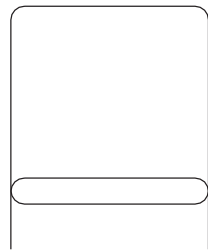
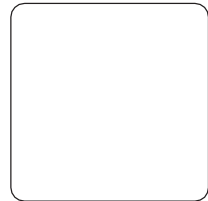
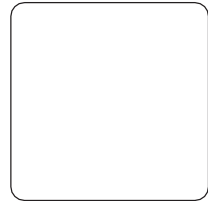
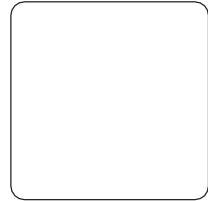
Jean-Pierre Thomassen & Dennis Opstal

Translated by Mischa Hoyinck & Robert Chesal

TOP

SER
VICE

FOR DEMANDING CUSTOMERS



The **6 RULES** of Creating
Exceptional Customer
Experiences

Boom

PREFACE

Increasingly, organizations are faced with demanding customers. This goes for public organizations, but also for health care organizations and commercial businesses. Customers tend to be better informed, more individualistic and highly critical, and less likely to accept bad or mediocre service or being told 'no'. Some industries are used to this type of customer, for example the high-end hospitality industry, and the luxury goods and services industries – 5-star hotels, expensive cars and jewelry. But now, other industries also find themselves dealing with such customers.

This book shows you, the customer service representative, how to deal with these customers when saying 'no' is not an option. Note that this book does not argue that you should be a doormat. Obviously, there are limits to customer centricity, and to what customers can or should expect. However, we do argue that you should roll out the red carpet, to ensure that the growing group of demanding customers receives Top Service, and keeps returning to your organization for more.

We dedicate this book to all those who shed blood, sweat and tears every day to offer their customers Top Service, even when those customers set the bar really high. Enjoy the read! For questions and comments, or to submit an example of Top Service for demanding customers, please contact us on LinkedIn.

Jean-Pierre Thomassen and Dennis Opstal

Reviews

'Smoothly written, clearly designed, and by combining theory with many practical examples, the book comes to life and is anything but a tough read. The authors' enthusiasm for superior service jumps off the page. That's the hardest thing to achieve: getting top service into the DNA of employees, managers, and teams.'

Aftersales Magazine

'A practical book that you can use straight away. Some theory, but mostly lots of tips, examples, and how-to's. An easy-to-read management book for anyone who deals with customers, and relatable enough to appeal to anyone who is a customer. The examples are recognizable and give you a deeper understanding of the person on the other side of the desk. The book's main strength is that it guides readers in how to deal with demanding customers, and how to recognize demanding customers in specific situations.'

Management Tribune

'*Top Service* distinguishes itself from other books on service by focusing explicitly on the employee who has to provide world-class service. But it's also a good read for any service provider who's open to improving their way of working. Easy to read, with lots of practical tips and suggestions. The theory is clearly explained, devoid of academic language and illustrated by many examples.'

Rudy Kor, organizational advisor and management book author

'This book should be standard literature for everybody who works in the automotive industry. Service advisors should learn this book by heart before working in the front office.'

Matthias Stevens, Owner Streamline Consulting/Business Development Manager

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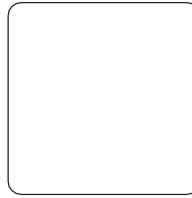
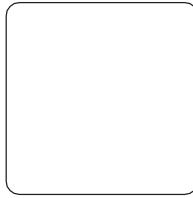
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Introduction

As an employee you deal with customers every day. Sometimes dozens, sometimes hundreds. You receive customers at your counter or reception desk, in your office, on the phone. Maybe you serve them in flight, or when they dine in your restaurant. You might call them customers, guests, clients, or patients; the name they go by depends on your industry. You already know the 'average customer' doesn't exist. Some people are easy to please. They're your undemanding customers, the ones you really can't go wrong with. In some industries, they're common. But no matter what line of work you're in, you'll always encounter at least a few demanding, or even extremely demanding, customers. Those who set the bar high and are proud of it. These are the customers we focus on in this book. We explore the best way to serve them.

Every private organization, public agency and commercial business has them: demanding customers. They expect a lot and their expectations get higher every time they experience better service in other industries. The internet and consumer watchdogs have made customers better informed, more assertive, more aware of their rights and more prepared to exercise them.

While some industries might have few demanding customers,

there are lines of business where demanding customers are already the majority. We're talking about the industries with customers who are used to spending a lot of money, like 5-star hotels, Michelin-star restaurants, beauty salons, exclusive retail shops, art dealers, travel agencies, luxury car dealerships, airlines, accountancy firms and law offices. These organizations set themselves apart by charging high fees for high-quality services and products. If you work for that type of organization, you will have noticed that your customers have expectations that match the fees. Their standards are high, they're critical and demanding.

We know you have to bring your A-game to offer each of these customers a great experience every single day. It's an art. It's you who can make a difference by getting it right with these demanding and critical customers. If you succeed, your service can ensure that potentially dissatisfied or even furious customers go home completely satisfied. Your actions alone can do more than websites, forms, chatbots, customer rooms, procedures, managers, and so on. Customer service reps make a difference! You are your organization's public face. You can amaze the customer, show them a personal touch, leave them with the feeling they're special. You and your co-workers are actually the only ones who can do this. Customers are sensitive. They can tell whether you got up on the wrong side of the bed or not, how happy you are to go to work, how motivated you are to do your job, how much pleasure you take in offering demanding customers excellent service. That's your challenge, every day and with every new customer. And that's where you can make a difference.

Based on our experience, we know what it takes to deal with demanding customers. We've boiled it down to six practical rules which we present to you in this book. We hope

they will motivate you to keep getting better at this art. We know you already do many things right. But just like pro athletes, you need to keep raising the bar. We hope this book gives you insight into your own strengths and the areas where you can still improve. What we hope for most of all, is to inspire you to strive for excellence in your service.

This book is divided into three parts. Part A describes the environment you work in. This starts with the demanding customer. What are their expectations and what makes them tick? Then, we move on to the choices that organizations like yours have made. What kind of service do they offer and what does this mean? And then we return to you, the one who can make a difference, day in and day out. We discuss your motivation and why helping customers in a memorable and special way can give you a lot of job satisfaction.

Part B describes the six rules of excellent customer service. In our view, they come down to an attitude of respect. We discuss those rules one by one. We illustrate each one with practical examples, and, where it's helpful, a roadmap too.

You can only offer your customers great service under the right conditions. Part C describes what kind of setting your employer needs to provide, to enable you to make a difference on a daily basis.

PART A

THE CHALLENGE

2

IT ALL STARTS WITH THE CUSTOMER

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Customers are the reason your organization exists. They're the reason you and your co-workers get paid. Without customers, there are no sales and no jobs. It's that simple. This is why it's important to take the customer journey as your starting point. Customers don't have to do business with your organization because they can go elsewhere. They're the ones who decide whether the experience you're offering them is extraordinary. They—and no one else—can judge whether your service is world-class. It all starts with them.

What are demanding customers? Why is there no such thing as an average customer? What are customer expectations and where do they come from? How does your service affect their experience and behavior? That's what this chapter is all about.

We believe that if you understand customers and why they act the way they do, you'll see why it makes sense to apply the six rules of excellent service.



2.2. DEMANDING CUSTOMERS

All organizations deal with a diversity of customers. This goes for business-to-business and business-to-customer organizations alike. Any organization's customer base can be divided into several groups. The simplest definition of a customer is: anyone who uses your products or services in any way. These are not just the people who already do business with your organization, but also the people who may do so in the future (your suspects and prospects). So if we widen our definition to include them, a customer is anyone who uses, or might someday use, your products or services. Obviously, this could also be an internal customer (a co-worker, business partner, dealer or vendor).

When we look at customer evaluations, we see that even though some customers feel the service was below par, they still give 3-, 4- and 5-star evaluations. They're forgiving, they reason that anyone can make a mistake, or they should have paid closer attention themselves. This shows that in many industries, most customers are easygoing and undemanding. But there's always a group of customers who set the bar really high, who are hard to please and require extra attention. What percentage of all customers are these so-called demanding customers? That varies a lot, depending on the organization you work for. How do you recognize them? Demanding customers have several behavioral characteristics and attitudes, and may display one or more of those described below:

- **Accustomed to Top Service:** customers who have much higher expectations than most. This may be because they (justifiably) attach expectations to the price of a product or service, or because they enjoy first-class service all the time and for them, great service is the norm.

- Attention seeking: customers who are hell-bent on taking up a lot of your time because they feel they deserve it, want reassurance, don't fully understand something about your product or service, are not truly independent, or personally have a great need for attention or information. They keep bending your ear and asking new questions.
- Bullying: people who believe only those who throw a few elbows around get their way. They do whatever they want, disregard the rules and have no respect for authority, you or other customers. They're often suspicious and argumentative. Some feel they should get whatever they demand because they're entitled to it! Still others are complainers and troublemakers, poised to be angry about one thing or another.
- Terrorizing: people with a chip on their shoulder, extremely dissatisfied and emotional, caught up in their own anger and sadness. Their complaints may or may not be unjustified. But in any case, these customers feel they've been wronged and they're furious about it.

Customers who are used to Top Service and have high expectations, expect to be treated like royalty. They set the bar really high, but as long as they get what they expect, they're happy. When something's off, however, they quickly get irritated and rude. They may let you know in no uncertain terms that they're displeased, they don't take kindly to being given the runaround. Before you know it, they're demanding to see the manager. Or if they write in to complain, they only want to deal with the CEO. If they feel they've been wronged, they can turn into real terrorists. These customers can take up a lot of your time and patience, but on the bright side, they also keep you on your toes

and ensure that there's never a dull moment in your job.

How do you recognize these customers? Never by their appearances, only by their behavior. Mind you, there's no such thing as 'the average demanding customer', just like there's no average person, average German, average American, etc. Some behavior might be culture-related, but every customer is different. They each have their own pet peeves and reasons for them, their own wishes, expectations and preferences. If you want to offer Top Service to demanding customers, don't base yourself on misconceptions about 'the average' customer or customer segments, because you'll be basing yourself on prejudice. In the following chapters, you'll discover how you can make a difference based on the N=1 rule: every customer wants to be treated according to their own preferences.



2.3. IT'S ALL ABOUT EXPECTATIONS

Train travelers expect the railway company to make sure the trains run on time. Diners want the restaurant to be able to serve what's on the menu. And if the restaurant is called 'Premium Lobster', they expect fresh lobster. Customers' basic expectations are not very complicated. If you want to serve demanding customers well, you need to know and understand their expectations. Let's start by looking at what these expectations are based on. There are five factors at play.

First of all, there's the organization's positioning. An organization that operates at a high price point creates different expectations than a budget organization. The greater the exclusivity, the higher the customer's expectations. A guest who pays 5000 euros a night at the Jumeirah Hotel in Dubai expects more than

someone who checks into a motel for 85 euros a night. The second factor is previous experiences and precedents. Earlier encounters with your organization or a similar service provider are very influential. Customers are quick to adjust their expectations upwards, so a perfect experience can easily become the norm. Conversely, they are slow to temper their expectations.

The third factor is your organization's communications. What promises does your organization make on its website, in ads and in conversation with customers? Customers expect you to make good on those promises. In 2017, United Airlines was embarrassed by a viral video of law enforcement officers forcibly removing a passenger from one of its planes. Just a few weeks later, the CEO sent all customers a letter in which he acknowledged that the company had broken the promise enshrined in the motto 'Fly the friendly skies.' His apology was necessary because the marketing slogan no longer reflected reality. The airline had told customers they could expect a high standard, and then failed to deliver. This is bound to lead to dissatisfaction and complaints.¹

The fourth factor consists of what others say about your organization. Word of mouth has a powerful influence. Whether it's a recommendation from a friend or an online review from a stranger, it's impact on people's expectations can be great.

The fifth factor is the customer's personal characteristics. Their character, culture, religion, level of education and many other background specifics play a role in expectations.

Combined, these five factors determine each customer's personal expectation level. And clearly, demanding customers have higher expectations than average customers. Gaining insight into a customer's individual factors enables you to proactively cater to their particular expectation level.

The Kano model² below can help you understand customer expectations. This model distinguishes between customer

expectations in terms of dissatisfiers (A), satisfiers (B) and delighters (C) (see Fig. 1).

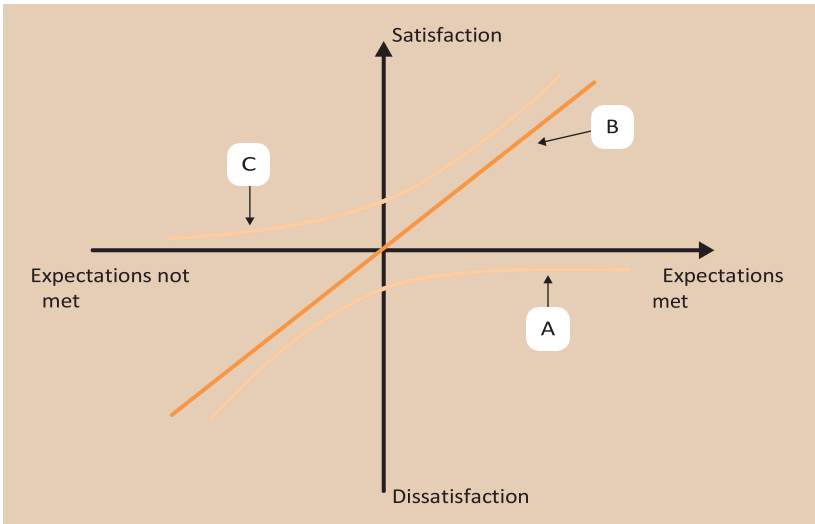


FIGURE 1: Dissatisfiers, Satisfiers and Delighters (Kano model)

Dissatisfiers (A) are basics that simply have to be delivered. They're what customers always expect. When they're delivered, it's no big deal and they have no impact on customer satisfaction. If they're missing, however, they quickly cause dissatisfaction. Examples of the basics that customers take for granted include: in hotels, they expect their room to be clean and the plumbing and A/C to work flawlessly; in restaurants, they expect the glasses to be polished, the food hot, the steak juicy and the wine at the right temperature. And when shopping online stores, they expect to be sent the products they ordered. These things don't make anyone extra satisfied, they're simply the bare minimum.

Satisfiers (B) are things that can have either a negative or a positive impact. If they're not as good as customers expect, they cause dissatisfaction; if they're better than expected, they can spark joy. The better they are,

the happier the customers. For example, only having to wait five minutes for valet service is not bad, but immediate service is much better. Receiving a package sooner than expected increases satisfaction, receiving it later than promised causes dissatisfaction.

The third factor is the *delighters* (C): things that customers don't expect, but appreciate when they get them. They cause pleasant surprise when there, but no dissatisfaction when absent. Customers often don't even notice when they're missing. Think of a free upgrade to a nicer hotel room, a wireless charging point in your new car, or a bag of candy in the box of products you ordered online.

The problem, or rather the challenge, is that the distinction between dissatisfier, satisfier and delighter differs from customer to customer. One customer's delighter is another customer's dissatisfier. Take note, for demanding customers:

- services you provide can more readily become dissatisfiers because these customers place the bar higher;
- satisfiers are more likely to have a negative impact;
- services you provide are less readily experienced as delighters.

Dissatisfiers, satisfiers and delighters

Dissatisfiers

1. All customers expect there to be a bed in their hotel room. A hotel room without beds would leave any guest dissatisfied.
2. Customers expect a taxi driver to know their way around. Drivers who have to stop and study Waze seem unprofessional.

3. Air travelers expect their luggage to arrive unscathed. Damaged suitcases cause dissatisfaction.
4. Car rental customers expect to be given a safe car that runs smoothly and has good tires and brakes. If they break down somewhere without cell phone coverage, they could flip.

Satisfiers

1. The faster luggage hits the belt after landing, the happier the traveler.
2. The shorter the wait in the checkout line, the better.
3. The easier customer service makes things for the online shopper, the more pleased the shopper will be.
4. The more convenient it is to drop off a rental car, the less stress the customer will experience.

Delighters (wow factors)

1. An air traveler gets an unsolicited upgrade to business class.
2. A customer's child gets a piece a candy from the store owner.
3. Hotel guests find a selection of fresh fruit in their room.
4. A rental car customer discovers a little gift in the car.
5. A customer plans to pick up a new model train track tomorrow, but an employee who happens to be in the neighborhood delivers it.
6. A customer gets a call from the maître d' who had said the restaurant was all booked up: "We have a table for you after all."

You should always keep in mind that your customers' expectations are likely to change. What is special today, will be the norm tomorrow. If a customer is checked in to their hotel room within two minutes of arrival, they will expect the same next time. If AAA arrives to give roadside assistance within ten minutes, the customer will consider that the norm.

The same goes for a free upgrade. Customers who get one, might count on getting one the next time, too. If their car has been cleaned and detailed, that might be a nice surprise this time, but they might be dissatisfied if that doesn't happen again on their following visit. Before you know it, a free upgrade or car wash has become a basic, and turns into a dissatisfier if it's not offered.



2.4. THE EXPERIENCE AND MOMENTS OF TRUTH

Everything customers see, hear, feel, taste and smell affects their experience. The customer experience is influenced by many factors: the impression your premises make, how you and your co-workers come across, your behavior, your organization's procedures, products and services. And the customer experience is quite subjective. A ten-minute wait can be awful, or no problem at all. Waiting ten minutes for some freshly cut, chilled melon while relaxing in a comfortable chair in the sun, sipping a drink, is a whole different experience than standing outside an IRS building in the pouring rain while waiting for the office to open. And ten minutes feels a lot longer when you're in a rush than when you've got all the time in the world. In short, customer experience is a personal reality and a personal perception, which means it can differ radically from your own reality, or your organization's.

Actually, every encounter between a customer and your organization is a moment of truth³, a *Moment of Magic*⁴. It's a point in time when your organization can make or break

its relationship with this customer. As a customer service representative, you can solidify the relationship by offering the customer a great experience. But you can also ruin it, by not taking a demanding customer seriously, for instance. If you go to YouTube and search for 'United Breaks Guitars', you'll see how that airline mismanaged a complaint from a customer whose guitar was destroyed by baggage handlers. United learned its lesson the hard way: more than 21 million people have watched this viral video... But let's look at the bright side.

There's a TV consumer watchdog show in the Netherlands that doesn't just report on what goes wrong. It also gives businesses a thumbs up when they provide extra good service. The companies that get a special mention on the show are the ones whose customer service reps go the extra mile for their customers. Thankfully, there are many great examples of heart-warming customer service. Just google 'Ritz Carlton Joshie Giraffe' and see how a lost stuffed animal became world famous.

Every customer service moment is a moment of truth, but there are four moments that stand out. To begin with, there is the first encounter. The first 30 or 40 seconds set the tone, and tell your customers whether things are headed in the right direction. Another key encounter comes at the end of the customer journey. Those final moments stay with the customer longest. Aside from the first and last moments, a third key moment is when a customer has a problem or complaint. We know from research that if you do a great job helping a customer in those situations, they'll end up more satisfied than if they had never had a complaint in the first place. This is called the Service Recovery Paradox, and we'll discuss it in more detail in Chapter 10. And finally, the fourth key customer service moment is when they experience particularly positive or negative emotions. All four of these moments warrant extra attention, because it's especially during these moments that you can make, or break, your organization's relationship with the

customer.

Disney makes a sharp distinction between what it calls on-stage and off-stage worlds. Disney's visitors only ever get to see the on-stage world, the fantasy world that features Mickey and Minnie. They never witness the world behind the scenes, where Mickey is just an ordinary guy or gal named David or Demi. If visitors did see Mickey undisguised, it would shatter the dream. On-stage, Peter Pan flies over a pirate ship with a wooden door with wrought-iron hinges and large rivets. Off-stage—on the inside—there's just a plain white door leading to a hallway and dressing rooms. The off-stage world is the world behind the scenes, where robotized characters are controlled. There are dressing rooms and cafeterias for the cast, and a control room full of screens where security guards monitor camera images from the park. This is where the products and services are prepared. This is where Elsa checks her make-up.

Your organization, too, has such an on-stage world, the stage where it puts on its 'act'. The customer's experience of the moments of truth we mentioned earlier is shaped by everything they perceive in this on-stage world. This is the customers' frame of reference. They don't care about anything off-stage, that's not part of their experience. The product should simply do what it's supposed to do. However, this does not mean that the off-stage world is less important! Anything that goes wrong off-stage, will immediately be noticeable on-stage.



2.5. THE VALUE OF SATISFIED AND LOYAL CUSTOMERS

Customers often unconsciously—and sometimes consciously—compare their experiences with their expectations. If these match, they're simply satisfied. If these exceed their expectations, they're very happy or even excited. If their experiences fall short, they're dissatisfied. This is the outcome

of adding up the dissatisfiers, satisfiers and delighters. For the customer, this is the final judgment of all the factors that affect their satisfaction. Satisfaction is a feeling, a snapshot in the wake of a customer service contact or at the end of the customer journey. But it may ultimately determine how satisfied they feel about their whole relationship with your organization.

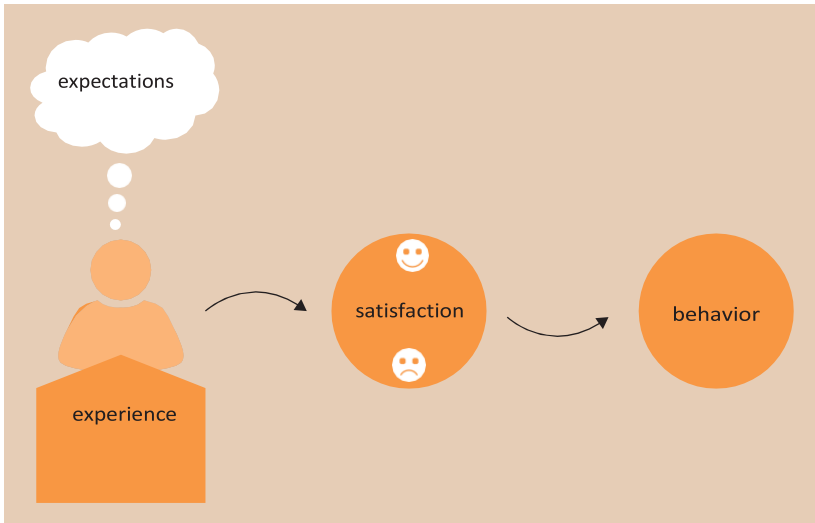


FIGURE 2: What Drives Satisfaction

It goes for demanding customers, too. Their expectations, experiences and satisfaction scores, taken together, determine their behavior. What might be surprising to hear, is that demanding customers can also be turned into loyal customers and great brand ambassadors. They've been known to heap praise, give tips, write positive reviews, and to be cooperative and great to work with. Sound familiar? Customers like that are inspiring. They energize you, unlike nagging, whining, and complaining customers, not to mention the ones who stoop to sabotage and revenge. Various studies show that customers who give your service the highest ratings, from four to five stars,

display much more positive behavior than 'generally satisfied' customers. They are three to five times more likely to become return customers. About 80% to 90% of all recommendations are made by these highly devoted customers. As you can imagine, this doesn't just make you happy, but your whole team and your employer, too. After all, your organization will also see this reflected in their sales figures or other significant metrics.

The Effects of (Dis)Satisfaction

Esteban Kolsky's research shows that 13% (or 1 in every 7 or 8 customers) share their dissatisfaction with 15 people or more. Only 1 in 26 dissatisfied customers tell you, the customer service rep, that they're unhappy.

The number of people who actually make their displeasure known varies depending on the specific study and the year in which it was conducted. According to TARP (Technical Assistance Research Programs – Harvard) 31% of people who experience a problem never tell customer service. These days, complaining is easy, especially on social media.

A truly loyal customer is worth much more than the price of a hotel room, car or plane ticket. Suppose a customer/passenger buys five 500-euro plane tickets per year from the same airline and intends to do so for the next twenty years. This means that—inflation aside—they're likely to spend $20 \times 5 \times 500 = 50,000$ euros. But that's not all. Loyal customers bring in new business by word of mouth. This generates additional sales. At the start of this chapter, we pointed out that customers are the reason you have a job and get paid for it. As you can see, truly happy, loyal customers are a big part of that.



2.6. IN SHORT

Most organizations depend on their customers for survival. Some of those customers are tough, demanding people who are used to Top Service, want lots of attention, can act like bullies, or can even be real 'terrors' when they don't get what they expect. Demanding customers usually have higher expectations than 'easy' customers. These expectations are based on your organization's positioning (e.g. high quality, high cost), the customer's previous experiences, the promises your organization has made, what others say about your organization and the customer's own personality. Demanding customers keep raising the bar higher, meaning they're easily dissatisfied and hard to impress. Still, it's possible to turn such demanding customers into loyal, return customers, who act as brand ambassadors for your organization.

REALITY CHECK

- What percentage of the customers you deal with would you describe as demanding customers?
- How do they behave?
- How high are their expectations?
- How do their expectations differ from those of 'easy' customers'?
- What—to them— are dissatisfiers, satisfiers and delighters?
- In what ways are demanding customers valuable to your organization?

