



Great Ideas For Customer Experiences **Is the World's Greatest Gas Station Dead?**

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In *Raving Fans* by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles, the Area Manager ends the book with the quote, "let's just close our eyes and spend a few minutes visualizing our customers using our products." That quote is at the heart of what companies are after these days as they build and shape their brands – how to design experiences that enable customers to maximize the value embedded in products and service.

In the 12 years since *Raving Fans* was published, a lot has changed in how companies visualize their relationship with customers. For example, through the Internet and related technologies, companies are shifting more work to customers. Airlines, retail stores, gas stations, and banks, just to name a few, have adopted self-service technologies that speed customers in their transactions and give them greater control. In 1993, Blanchard and Bowles' World's Greatest Gas Station wrapped its experience with full service. In 2005, the World's Greatest Airline wraps its experience with online ticketing, online check-in, and kiosk baggage check to give customers more of what they are looking for in today's world: time, control, and convenience.

There is a paradigm shift underway in today's economy. In the past, customers expected companies to do a lot of the work for them. Now, companies are expecting customers to do more of the work themselves—and when the experience is designed effectively customers are responding enthusiastically. When Southwest Airlines implemented its e-commerce strategy – southwest.com – in the 1990's, customers were set up for success. With regards to *vision*, various promotional channels communicated to customers an attractive, novel goal – book your own tickets. For *access*, the web site itself provided the tool and a simple interface for completing transactions. The *incentive* to perform was the double Rapid Reward credit, which enabled customers to earn free flights twice as fast. Finally, *expertise* was provided by step-by-step booking instructions available on the site. In 2005, Southwest airlines reported that 65% of its revenue was generated by southwest.com. The customer conditioning was so successful that Southwest was able to eliminate the Rapid Rewards incentive without negatively impacting the site's revenue percentage.

It is interesting that the company recognized as being one of the best places to work for employees appears to be one of the best places to work for customers as well. That's a key part of the paradigm shift. Recognizing that do-it-yourself customers are like company employees. These customers need a performance environment that sets them up for success just as employees are. By creating more favorable conditions for customer performance and success, companies can kick-start the value chain of satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and customer lifetime value.

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