The Customer Rules

A summary in easy English

A summary of the book **The Customer Rules: The 39 Essential Rules for Delivering Sensational Service**
by **Lee Cockerell** (Profile Books, 2013)

This is a summary of his ideas, not the book itself.
To read the book, read the book.

CHAPTER 1

Who Wrote the Book

Lee Cockerell worked all his life with customers.

He started as a cook in the army. Then he worked in restaurants and in hotels. He worked for Hilton and for Marriott.

After that he worked for Disney. For ten years he was the boss of Walt Disney World in Florida. Forty thousand people worked for him. There were four parks, many hotels and thirty thousand rooms.

So he knows this job very well.

One day he asked his granddaughter a question. She was twelve years old.

“What is the most important rule for good service?” he said.

She did not think about it for one second.

“Be nice,” she said.

He wrote a book of thirty-nine rules. But he says the girl was right, and that everything in his book is only those two words, explained.

CHAPTER 2

Service Is Not a Department

In many companies there is a “customer service department”. It is a room with some people and some telephones.

Cockerell says this is a mistake.

Customer service is not a department. It is not one group of people. It is everybody’s job, every day.

The person who cleans the floor is doing customer service. The person who answers the phone is doing customer service. The person in the kitchen, the person who drives the van, the boss in the office — all of them.

Why? Because the customer does not see your departments. The customer sees one company.

If the coffee is good and the toilet is dirty, the customer does not say “the cleaning department is bad”. The customer says “*this place* is bad”.

Everybody who works here is in customer service.

CHAPTER 3

It Starts at the Top

Cockerell says that service follows the law of gravity: it falls from the top to the bottom.

This means something simple. The people who work for you will treat your customers in the same way that you treat them.

If you shout at your staff, they will be cold with your customers. If you do not listen to your staff, they will not listen to your customers. If you are rude to them on Monday, they will be rude to somebody on Tuesday.

It is not fair, but it is true, and it happens every time.

So if you want your customers to be happy, first look at the people who work for you. Are they happy? Do they have what they need? Does anybody say thank you to them?

A manager who is kind to the staff does not have to teach them to be kind to customers. They have already seen it.

People copy the boss. Always.

CHAPTER 4

Do the Small Things

This is the part that most people do not want to hear, because it is not exciting.

Great service is not one big beautiful idea. It is one hundred small things, done correctly, every day, when nobody is watching.

Is the floor clean? Is the door open at the right time? Is the music too loud? Does the light in the toilet work? Do you answer the phone before it rings five times? Is your shirt clean?

None of these things is interesting. That is exactly why they are important: most companies get bored with them and stop doing them.

Cockerell says: do not get bored with the basics. The basics are the job.

He also says that details matter more than people think. A customer cannot see your plans or your hard work. A customer can see a dirty table.

Nobody gets tired of the basics except the people who work there.

CHAPTER 5

Think of Somebody You Love

Here is a test you can use every day.

When you do not know what to do with a customer, stop and ask yourself one question: *what would my mother do?*

Or: how would I want somebody to treat my mother, in this shop, today?

It sounds very simple. It works because it is simple. It takes one second, and you always know the answer.

If an old woman is waiting and there is nowhere to sit, and you think about your own grandmother, you find a chair. Nobody has to write that in a rule book.

Cockerell says: treat every customer like a person you love. And treat every customer like a regular customer, even the ones you will never see again.

How would I want somebody to treat my mother here?

CHAPTER 6

Listen

Most companies say they listen to their customers. Most of them do not.

Listening is not asking people to fill in a form. Listening is hearing the thing that the customer is actually saying, especially when it is not comfortable.

Complaints are not a problem. A complaint is a gift. The customer is telling you something for free, and most unhappy customers never tell you anything: they just go away and never come back.

Cockerell also says: find out the whole truth about your own company. Not the nice version. Go and stand in your own queue. Phone your own telephone number and wait. Eat in your own restaurant.

What you find will not always be pleasant. That is the point of doing it.

The customer who complains is doing you a favour.

CHAPTER 7

Never Argue

This is one of the hardest rules, and one of the most important.

Never argue with a customer. Never.

You can win the argument. It is not difficult: often the customer is wrong, and you know the facts, and you can prove it in one minute.

And then you have won the argument and lost the customer, and that customer will tell ten other people what happened.

Cockerell says you win customers one at a time, but you lose them a thousand at a time, because angry people talk.

He also says: do not say no. Find another way to say it. If you cannot do the thing the customer wants, say what you *can* do.

And be flexible. A rule that helps nobody is not a good rule. If the rule is hurting the customer and helping no

one, bend it.

You can win the argument or keep the customer. Choose.

CHAPTER 8

Say Sorry Properly

Everybody makes mistakes. The difference between companies is what happens next.

Cockerell says that “I am sorry” is necessary, but it is not enough. *How* you say it matters as much as saying it.

A good apology has some clear parts.

Say exactly what went wrong. Do not give a general sorry. The customer must know that you understand what happened.

Take responsibility. Do not explain for five minutes. Do not blame the computer or another department.

Keep it short and clear.

Say what you will do so that it does not happen again.

Give something back if you can: a free coffee, a new one, money back.

And mean it. People know immediately when you do not. If you are saying the words and thinking “this is not my fault”, they can hear it in your voice.

Sorry is cheap to say and expensive not to say.

CHAPTER 9

Do Not Try Too Hard

The last rule is a surprise, after a whole book about trying harder.

You can also try too much.

Think of a shop where somebody follows you and asks four times if you need help, when you only want to look. Think of a restaurant where the waiter comes to your table every five minutes while you are talking to your friend.

That is not service. That is a person who cannot read a face.

Cockerell gives a simple sign to watch for. When people are looking down — at the food, at the menu, at each other — they do not need you. When they lift their head and look around the room, they do.

So do not stand over people. But do keep your eyes open, because customers almost never complain that you tried too hard, and they do complain when you

ignore them.

Heads down: leave them. Heads up: go.

CHAPTER 10

The Whole Book in One Line

Cockerell wrote thirty-nine rules. They are about hiring good people, training them, keeping promises, being quick, being reliable, giving people the power to solve a problem, and many other things.

But he says himself that a twelve-year-old girl gave the real answer before he started writing.

Be nice.

Everything else in the book is only that, explained slowly.

This was a summary. It is not the book, and it is much shorter than the book. If you want the stories, the examples from Disney and the other thirty-nine rules in full, read *The Customer Rules* by Lee Cockerell.

THE END