

Be mindful of your customers

Remember that your customers are:

- The most important people in your business.
- Not dependent on you — you are dependent on them.
- Not interruptions of your work — they are the purpose of it.
- Doing you a favor when they call — you are not doing them favors by serving them.
- Part of your business — not outsiders.
- Not cold statistics — they are flesh-and-blood human beings with feelings and emotions like your own.

Stop running in place — make the leap from good to great

by **Connie Brubaker**

In 1984, I was faced with two Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants that had been mortgaged to the hilt for required upgrades, a vacant restaurant that still had notes due, stacks of unpaid bills and, to top it off, a competing chicken restaurant moving into town.



Connie's Comments

For the first time in the five years since my husband and I bought the restaurants, the incredible sales growth we had accepted as the norm had disappeared. In fact, our numbers were down. My sleepless nights were spent trying to figure out ways to honor our creditors, retain all our employees and create a marketing plan that would grow the business.

Suddenly, business wasn't fun any more.

During that very frustrating time, I often felt like I was stuck on some kind of cosmic treadmill. No matter what we tried, we just couldn't seem to get any kind of traction. I knew where I wanted us to be, but despite all our efforts, we were stuck in neutral.

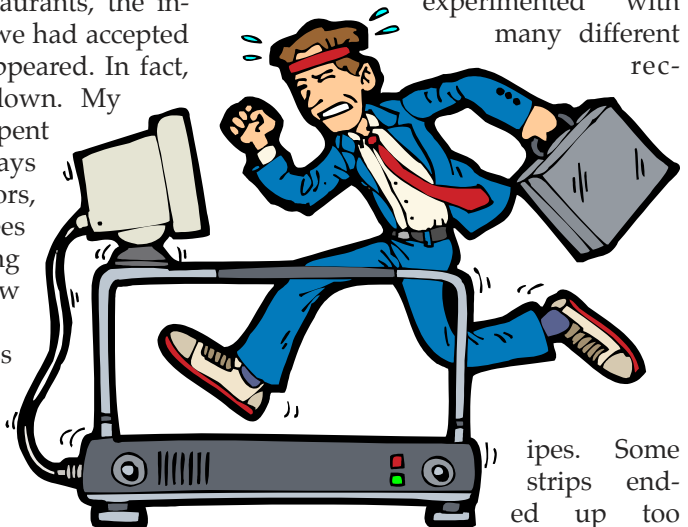
One of the most frustrating things was the fact that I knew, despite our struggles, that we were a good busi-

ness. But I wanted us to be a *great* business, and we just couldn't seem to make the leap.

Finally, I figured out where to find the solution: our customers. In all the worrying and wrangling, I'd lost sight of the fact that the key to success is listening to your customers and giving them what they want. Great companies understand that paradigm of service.

So that's what I did. I asked questions, I observed ordering behavior, I did some research. The answers led me, maybe not surprisingly, back into the kitchen

Once there, I started working on a new product: a boneless chicken strip. I experimented with many different recipes.



Some strips ended up too doughy, some too tough, some too salty, some too bland. But finally I found the right combination.

Our customers were thrilled with the new tasty, easy-to-eat product. And they didn't just say so — they proved it. They came often (and told friends!)

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In this issue of SOLUTIONS:

- How good companies become great companies
- Keeping the customer first
- Sam Walton: Who's the real boss?



"We need to cut down on productivity, quality and customer service to save money. Any questions?"

NEED A SPEAKER? Connie Brubaker is a certified Integrity Systems® business consultant and professional speaker who focuses on sales, customer service and leadership. Her speeches include **Leadership Matters: Motivating Your Employees to Success**; **The Emotional Side of Selling: Discovering What's Holding You Back**; **The Magnolia: a Southern Woman Shares Her Struggles and Triumphs**; and **Turn Storytelling into Storyselling: Using Stories to Make a Connection**.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"There is only one boss: the customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else."

— Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton

Great companies face facts, embrace change

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and our sales were back on course. Within 90 days, the competition that had caused me so many sleepless nights was out of business.

It took KFC another eight years to recognize the power of these tasty treats. But when they were finally introduced, their first year sales totaled 1 BILLION dollars. (By the way, I was eventually recognized at the KFC National Conference for my creation.)

The lesson I learned was that when times are tough, you can't stick your head in the sand and hope for the best. Business as usual won't work — and the companies that understand that are the ones that not only endure, but triumph. Years ago, competing grocery chains Kroger and A&P were faced with cus-

tomers demands for larger stores, more variety, spacious parking and multiple checkout lanes. While A&P dragged its corporate heels, Kroger acted on those demands — and became the largest grocery chain in America by 1999.

Good-to-great companies face facts head-on and act. And despite the short-term challenges that may result from those decisions, they persevere. They understand the advice of Admiral Jim Stockdale, a POW in North Vietnam. His guiding words: face the harshness of your current reality, but never lose faith that you will ultimately prevail.

What separates great people — and great companies — from the norm isn't the absence of difficulties, but how they deal with the inevitable difficulties that life throws their way.