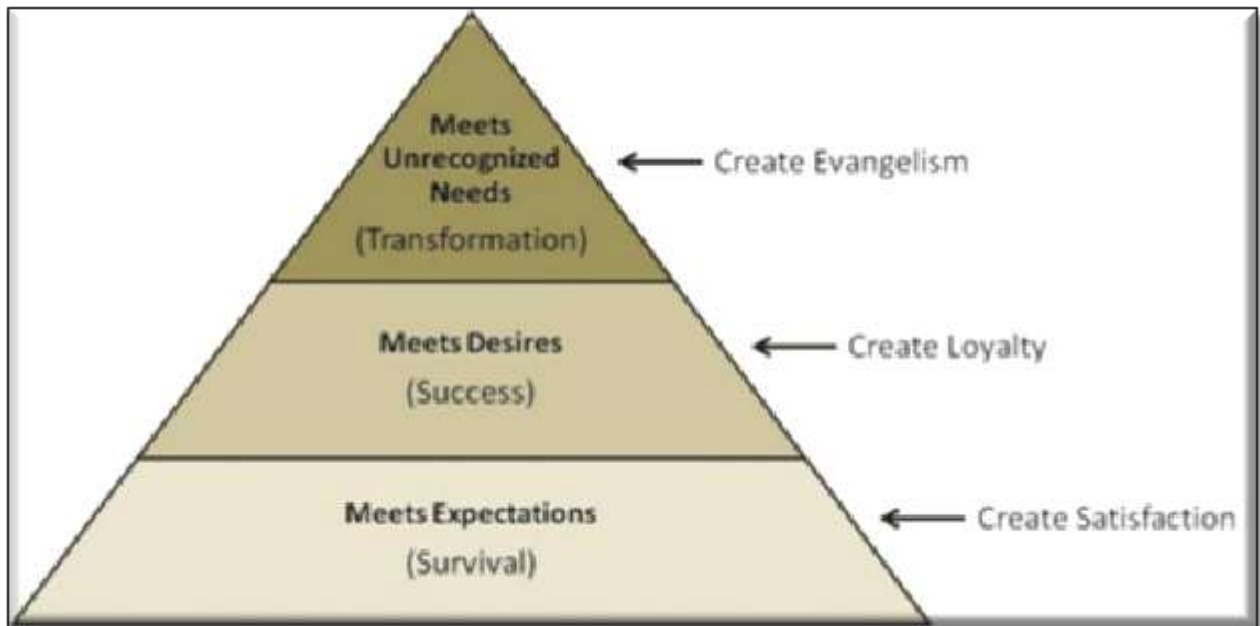


# *Customer Service*

## *4*



# *Recording Studios*

### Introduction Part 1 ...Recording Studios:

***There's a sucker born every minute***, or so PT Barnum was misquoted as saying. To paraphrase what Barnum actually said is this: "Men, women and children do not survive on gravity alone, in their lighter and gayer moods, they need to be entertained ...those of us who do so are working within the plans of the author of our nature".

Barnum's thinking is a powerful statement for anyone who is in the recording studio business for the correct reason. On the whole, the right reason to be here is the audience, the end user. They are the ultimate customer for anyone in the entertainment business. It is the person standing outside your metaphoric circus tent waiting to buy a ticket for the show inside. They are the reason we are here. Without an audience, our jobs as entertainers and/or their service providers would not exist.

A recording studio owner or operator works for a customer who is in the process of constructing a product to deliver to an audience. The greatest challenge in providing customer service to this arena of subjectivity is keeping your eye on what is important to your business. It is a positive customer experience coupled to their complete satisfaction of your end product that is important, regardless of your opinion as to whether the product is meeting the needs of the audience or not. You may argue that you don't want a poor sounding product in the market representing your business. One that was produced in your facility by someone who did not know what they were doing. '*When to fire a customer*' is discussed in a following paper.

Recording studios are the metaphoric circus tents artists perform in. Typically the customer for a recording studio is a company or person making right and proper on

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payment of the invoices you submit for the rental of your studio's space and equipment. It is not uncommon for the customer of a circus tent provider to designate an outside individual to represent the investment they are making in the creation and capture of their artist's dream. It is the investor's artist you are being paid to capture and deliver, an artist who should be working under a contract with the investor, their employer, your client. This designated person, called a director/producer in the music business, then becomes the face of the customer and should be treated as such. This designated purchaser, for all intent and purposes, becomes the client's voice, unless you are directed otherwise by the person responsible for paying the invoices you submit for the rental of your circus tent. Therein lays the reason why you should know your clientele's hierarchy of fiscal responsibility before their very first session in your tent. Appreciate here and now that your client is building a business just as you are. The monies you spent on equipment, they are spending on artist development. The artists, for all practical purposes, are employees of your client as well, otherwise they would be the customer and responsible for the studio charges. It is really simple to understand who the "responsible" party is when money starts to exchange hands to pay for your fees.

### ***Here's an old proverb that applies:***

*"We the willing, led by the unknowing, are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have been doing so much for so long with so little that we are now capable of doing absolutely anything with nothing at all."*

*Found hanging in a Union Pacific Railroad engine*

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One of the biggest challenges facing creative people is their gaining an understanding of exactly who they are crafting their talent for. We as aural arts and science service providers are in the business of delivering to the client an aural product laced with subjective qualities. These assets should be guided and judged by the customer or their representative. This representative may or may not know the best way to perform the job you do daily but they are commanded by mandate, self-induced or otherwise, to direct you. Our challenge as service providers in this event is to produce a product representing the desires of the person charged with directing us regardless if their direction would produce the desired results or not. We face the continuous task of producing positive results in a world of subjectivity. Our contributions may or may not be recognized by the customer. At the conclusion of the project the customer must feel that the ideas creating the favorable results were theirs from inception.

For better or for worse we are tasked with following directions. In reality, some people are exceedingly better at the art of directing than others. Preeminent directors recognize and exploit the skill sets of the talent they are working with then direct them toward the betterment of the project they are assigned to. Unfortunately, this fact of life is more the exception than the rule. A decree that follows a course similar in consistency to Lombard Street in San Francisco CA as it twists and turns its way down through our world of subjective supposition.

Here is an example: *How many record producers does it take to screw in a light bulb?*

*I don't know....what do you think?*

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A national trade school placed an ad showing a recording engineer diligently working his desk. The picture was shot from below the console arm pad looking up at a stalwart engineer staring into the abyss with both hands on the mixing console. The ad copy read: 'Earn More... Work Less'. Needless to say, this bit of unintended humor ended up displayed on the walls of many a lounge in local area recording studios.

Humor has been defined as "...truth with a little curly cue on the end". In reality, this ad was not humorous at all for it missed the mark of truth by light years. The hard reality is that the average annual earning for a recording engineer in the Seattle / Tacoma area in 2011 is the same as it was for a Los Angeles area recording engineer 40 years earlier. Have you been fulfilling your social and financial obligations over the past four decades? If you have met these responsibilities over the past ten years, yet alone forty, you certainly understand the gravity of that statistic. So, the question then becomes: why is it this way and how does one protect their business from these inadequacies? Let's explore:

### Perceived Value:

*Cicero wrote in 44 BC: "...vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labor, not for artistic skill; for in their case the very wage they receive is a pledge of their slavery".*

Cicero must have owned a recording studio. All too often the perceived value of service differs greatly from the person providing the service to the one contracting it. Recording studio operations is a slippery slope in this area when taking customer service into consideration.

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Often, when booking studio time, a customer's desire is only in contracting the manual-labor side of the studios function implying that an artistic quality is not a critical component of recording studio operations. This is a potential area of conflict and is examined in Part 3, a discussion on Conflict Resolution titled '*Don't Take it Personally*'.

A customer's perceived value of your business will generally equate to whom you choose to align your business with. Your peer group is established by the amount of skill and financial commitment you bring into the game of competition.

If you are a home studio operating a modest system built on the constraints of a smaller budget you would not have "time in the saddle" with the more exotic equipment, which requires the better part of a small nation's defense budget to purchase, maintain and keep annually updated. Not by any lack of intellectual process, but merely by budgetary constraints you will not possess the same skill level as someone who operates the exotics daily. Don't take it personally but your time will not be worth as much as the other person who has a higher skill set due to experience, access, assets and exposure. In the eyes of the customer your perceived value is less. You will need to adjust your expectations of your worth or bring more skill and financial commitment into the game to change how the market will perceive you. If there is no game in your town, maybe it is your expectation of access, assets and exposure that are mistaken notions. In the world of professional audio, just because you build it does not mean they will come. There is a long list of extremely successful artists who have opened recording studios. The list of those who have stayed open for more than five years is considerably shorter.

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This is simple, happy business owners/employee's equal happy customers. It is logical to assume that happy clients bring in new customers. This increases the studios revenue stream which allows a budgeted facility owner to purchase the exotic equipment of their desires. Rhyme follows reason that this will provide said studio owner with the "time in the saddle" they desire operating and understanding the exotics. This ups the studios equipment list as well as its operational skill set and perceived value in the customer's eye. The minute you value yourself as "... *just a workman of vulgar means of livelihood performing mere manual labor as a pledge of slavery*", to your hearts desired profession, you lose. You not only lose your clients, but also your sense of self-worth and any possibility of future business growth. Drive yourself and your business to where you want to go. Know where you are now and where you want to be tomorrow.

In an example:

- If you want to build and race unlimited hydroplanes at a championship level, and live in the middle of the desert, you have a further distance to drive to get you to where you want to go than does someone who lives in Ballard, WA.

Remember: *Perception is reality, only the facts are negotiated.*

### **Competition is healthy:**

*"Without adversarial conditions you would only have compliancy."*

**Deepak Chopra**

*"There's no reason to think competition has to be adversarial."*

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**Jay Leno**

*“Competition is not only the basis of protection to the consumer, but is the incentive to progress.”*

**Herbert Hoover**

*“Do your work with your whole heart and you will succeed - there's so little competition.”*

**Elbert Hubbard**

Know your business worth through market research. Obtain a firm understanding of the other businesses you are in competition with for your client's dollar. It will help guide you in “going the extra mile” for your customer. If everything seems equal between you and a competitor, yet the competitor has a larger market share, all is not as equal as it appears, to you and to their clients, who could become yours. Make it an exercise of your business to find out what services your competitors are offering to their clients that you should be offering to yours in an improved upon fashion.

A community's business growth and stimulation is unproductive when competition among local recording studios becomes a war of rates as opposed to one of service, product and merit. The businesses who win a rate war are the ones with the biggest savings account. On the surface the consumer would appear to be the recipient of the spoils from a war of monetary resource survival but in reality, they suffer as well. Let's face it, if you work for less than you normally would receive in trade, can you honestly say that you will perform at 100% of your normal capacity 100% of the time, for better or for worse? No, you can't and the customer loses. You also lose when you perceive yourself as mere manual labor pledged to slavery ...have you ever heard “Attitude is everything”? You just heard it again.



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In a rate war the local area economy suffers as well. Customers globally come to expect an hourly studio rate that is less than practical for studio owners to meet their fiscal obligations ...*well I have to book my studio at \$25 an hour because XYZ Studios down the block is*. This competitive tactic only creates a sense of distress among business owners. They should be working collectively towards a common goal of driving more business into their community by improving the area's diversity in product and services. From guitar picks to fully catered banquet rooms, local recording studios could create a community resource list to provide their clientele an outstanding customer service experience at any level. Customers of every studio in the area should walk away with a smile on their face and a desire to return. You will also build support from other businesses in your community and gain visibility.

Early in motorsports history an independent sprint kart racer named Chuck Balsiger stood as Grand National Champion among factory race teams. Those newly formed factory teams spent a lot of money trying to keep up with him on race day. In a 1966 interview with Hot Rod magazine Chuck was asked if he was troubled by the large rise in factory race teams entering the sport, he commented; "...*heck no, it inspires me to work harder; it helps me to keep coming up with new ideas for next week*". Chuck's attitude is a shining example of healthy competition. It is the act of considering new ways to satisfy your customer's needs while protecting the solvency of your business. It is called a dual end goal. Chuck didn't spend his time studying ways to cheat a victory from his competitors, he spent his time studying ways to out engineer them. This provided a great show for the people who bought tickets to see it.

### Never take your eye off the ball:

Appearing on a regular basis in the human experience of trade is the not so obvious, unbalanced reality of: it's simple to keep focused on your business, but it's not at all easy. Day to day studio operations, coupled to life in general, goes by at a rapid pace. If and when you do make time for monitoring your business's growth and customer's satisfaction rate, it can be like trying to find Waldo in the popular children's book series 'Where's Waldo'. The information you gather, if you gather customer and contact information at all, becomes a plethora of images and colors. The information you seek is named Waldo who is dressed brightly, hiding amidst a sea of visual stimulation. You will find Waldo in the details of the bigger picture.

- What was it you were trying to do with your business in the first place?
- Are you meeting the bench marks you envisioned when you started your business?
- What does your business plan state?

Oh, you don't have a business plan? That's a bad idea. Your business plan is the bigger picture.

Call this an old fashioned idea if you will; when traveling in unfamiliar territory carry paper maps of the area you're traveling through. Do not discount the latest in technology which presents digital 3D images with bright colors, arrows and a friendly voice directing you to places you know are wrong because the paper maps consistently, correctly, tell you so. A well-defined business plan will help keep a business focused in the torrent sea of venture. It is an ocean, full of daily instant decision making which is

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required to keep an enterprise afloat and on course. If you are providing a product or service for trade of any kind, you're in business. Any business will benefit when attention is focused on the ideals established early on representing the foundation of the company. Think of it as a blueprint for the construction of your business.

If you do not require trade for your skills and assets, you should still appreciate the topographic landscape of the market you are disturbing. Undercutting another studio owner's rate, simply because you are not obligated to make a return on your investment, has a negative ripple effect impact on industries far beyond your own.

If your business plan states that

- ...your recording studio will provide a high level of customer service coupled to a reasonable cost for the quality product or service your studio offers to your area ...

... Wouldn't it then be logical to assume that you would spend time and resources doing an initial market research of the recording studios you are in competition with?

Fulfilling the mandate set forth in the business plan exemplified above would require that a pre-planned amount of resources be devoted to the initial research and annual updating of the market information for your area. To return to the racing metaphor: If you were in a car race on a closed course wouldn't you want to see the other cars you were racing against out of your window? It'd be safer for everyone involved.

Not only do you need to research the market in your area, it also needs to become instinctive for you to monitor your customers as well as those who contact your business on inquiry "... so how did you hear about us? What other studios have you

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worked in? How did you enjoy your time with them?” That is a really simple task. The challenging part is logging the information for retrieval at a later time in order to take the temperature of your venture. It may not be easy or fun but the information is essential for successful business growth. This information gathered can then be measured against your business’s projected merits to see if you are meeting the mile posts you set forth in your business plan. It is the lens you focus the health of your business through. The order in which you list your objectives establishes your business’s priorities. Please note the top most component of the business plan example given above. It is Customer Service.

### Studio Conclusion

From the smallest home studio to the world’s most exquisite corporate facility, the largest common denominator is the people that not only come into your business, but run and operate it for you as well. The better the customer experience is, for both parties, the better the chances are for success and sustained growth of your recording studio business.

To recap:

1. Have a good idea of how your business is perceived by others. You can’t see what your bottle looks like from the inside, which is where you live. Assess yourself through the eyes of others.
2. Your competitor is not your enemy. People working intelligently together will always win over those working alone.

3. Put Customer Service on top of your business plan. It is a great way to keep your eye on what is important to the survival of your operation.

### Upcoming:

- Part 2
  - A deeper look into customer service derived from a collection of papers from leading experts in the field of customer service
- Part 3
  - A paper based around Conflict Resolution. Important watch points to ensure a continued excellent customer service experience ...or prevent a bad one from self-destructing.