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REALBUSINESS



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Crowning glory

Dreaming up great ideas is what entrepreneurs do. But that doesn't mean they're above stealing. In this, the second Customer Kings special feature, we hope to bring you a treasure trove of ideas to improve your customer service. Feel free to imitate, rip off, plagiarise and purloin any idea you see within. Everything here is for you to plunder.

The firms sharing their customer-service secrets aren't randomly selected. Far from it. To find these role models, *Real Business* joined forces with Cisco and spent five months soliciting submissions across all sectors in the UK.

We then convened a judging panel to select the best: Simon Nixon founded Moneysupermarket.com and is now enjoying repeat success with his new travel-guide website Simonseeks.com; Tricia Phillips is the *Daily Mirror's* finance editor; I represented *Real Business*; and David Critchley, director of commercial and small business at Cisco UK, completed the line-up.

We looked for originality of ideas, ingenuity of delivery and proof of effectiveness. We wanted innovations that really did make the customer feel like royalty. We elected eight winners and eight highly commended companies, as well as crowning an overall Winner of Winners.

The 16 featured firms are truly the nation's Customer Kings. Each one has done something exceptional to improve the way it interacts with customers. The Winner of Winners, Green Energy UK, stunned us with an entry unlike anything we've seen before – CEO Douglas Stewart will receive a £5,000 prize courtesy of Cisco.

We hope you find the results useful. From quantifying cheerfulness, to lifetime guarantees and "Korean endings" (see page 14), Customer Kings is burgeoning with gems. We've even discovered how to use Twitter (see Urban Coffee, page 17). Now that is a breakthrough.

Charles Orton-Jones, former deputy editor of *Real Business* and PPA Business Journalist of the Year 2006.



Green revolution: Douglas Stewart of Green Energy UK has adopted a truly ground-breaking business strategy

WINNER OF WINNERS

GREEN ENERGY UK

In the end there was no doubt.

Green Energy UK is this year's Customer Kings Winner of Winners. And, wow – what an entry! We said we wanted to find companies that went the extra mile to engage with customers. Green Energy UK goes so far, it's off the radar. In fact, its entry was so extraordinary that we doubted it could actually be true.

Douglas Stewart, Green Energy UK's founder and chief executive, explains: "I am giving away half the firm to my customers. The first 100,000 receive 400 shares each. My financial adviser thinks I'm crazy. But when I started Green Energy, I wanted it to be a transparent firm – not simply run for the customer, but actually led by the customer. The share giveaway is the best way to achieve this."

Just to emphasise: Stewart isn't selling shares. He is handing out equity to anyone who signs up to Green Energy UK's electricity. There is no sleight of hand. Green Energy UK's solar, wind and hydro power is no more expensive than normal. And because the firm is 100 per cent privately funded, it is Stewart who takes the hit.

"We started the firm in 2001, when consumers who wanted to be green were being punished by higher prices. We wanted to turn that on its head, and reward them. We also

wanted to build a responsible business, which was answerable to its customers. My first idea was to create an investment fund for customers, but the compliance was too complicated. The next idea was to give away shares."

Stewart admits the scheme is not easy to run: "Don't do it if you want to keep your hair." Everything is overseen by the FSA, and although the shares are not yet tradeable, Green Energy UK is a regular plc.

And the benefits? "We haven't started advertising and yet we already have 10,000 customers on our books, all through word of mouth. Customers trust us. There is so much corporate greenwash out there,

but our transparent approach is the best way of showing that we are different. We actively encourage our customers – our shareholders – to come to our AGM and quiz us. Who else does that?"

Naturally, Green Energy UK does a dozen other great things too. Take using picture messaging for meter readings, for example, or answering all phone calls within three rings, 24/7 ("You never get a machine, always a human"). It even buys energy from customers with micro-production facilities, such as home solar, wind or biomass turbines ("a growing sector").

Turnover is up 45 per cent to more than £5m and gross profit is upward of £1m – a worthy Winner of Winners.

THE FIRST 100,000 CUSTOMERS GET 400 SHARES EACH

HIGHLY COMMENDED

LINGO24

Until a machine can pass the Turing

Test, we'll rely on human beings to translate between foreign languages, thank you. Or will we?

At Edinburgh-based Lingo24, the man-versus-machine debate gets a little fuzzy. Lingo24's custom-built software harnesses machine learning to ensure that routine sentences are crunched by computers, leaving humans to deal with the really tricky stuff. The result is a translation service that turns documents around in a fraction of the normal time.

Founder Christian Arno and his chief technology officer Andrzej Zydron have developed XTM, a software service that automates the translation process. When a document arrives for translation, it is analysed by XTM, split into chunks and distributed to a number of translators who can work on it simultaneously. XTM recognises sentences that have been translated before and notifies the translator. When complete, proofreaders are brought in. At every stage, the client, the translators and proofreaders can view the ongoing progress.

Lingo24 is using XTM to deliver unrivalled translation services for a significantly lower cost. The software platform allows Lingo24 to leverage the skills of 4,000 professional translators worldwide. Lingo24 has rendered the old model – of one man working on a single document with no assistance – obsolete.

WINNER

TRUE LOVERS KNOT

There are nine million people with hearing problems in the UK. Three quarters of a million people are severely deaf. Two million people have sight problems. And look at the nation's dietary requirements: there are 2.6 million diabetics and two million vegetarians. That's not counting vegans, coeliacs (gluten-intolerant) and the lactose-intolerant.

Those are big numbers. And yet, shamefully, Britain's pubs and restaurants don't really cater for people with a disability. It's a massive missed opportunity - but it's one that has played into the hands of Dorset landlord Antony Marshall.

Marshall is the landlord of True Lovers Knot, a gorgeous old inn just west of the New Forest. For a year or two, it was an ordinary local pub, selling Badger ale and prize-winning Dorset wild-boar sausages. Then Marshall had an epiphany: "I watched a customer have the menu read aloud to him. I remember thinking, 'that's rubbish. I'll order some braille menus'. Turns out not even the Royal National Institute of Blind People do braille menus. I got a braille machine so I could write them.

"Then I started to notice other customers. One old chap couldn't cut his steak. Weak wrists. He said that, at home, he used foam pads on his cutlery. So I bought some. I put in ramps for wheelchair users, widened

the doors and got tables that accommodate wheelchairs - I really went to town."

The True Lovers Knot menu now caters for all dietary requirements. And not just token dishes: "More than 85 per cent of the menu is suitable for coeliacs, and we publish the sugar content for diabetics."

For deaf customers, Marshall went above and beyond. He learned sign language and insisted all staff learn, too. "We purchased special alarms for the inn that vibrate a pad in the pillow."

The result is the UK's most disability-friendly pub: "Ordinary punters wouldn't see it, but everything's there if you need it."

Commercially, the move has been dynamite. "It has really paid off. Any family with a special requirement comes here. And how many families have a deaf member, or diabetic, or someone with poor sight? Most. And they all come here."

Marshall has received more than 80 offers to take over other pubs. "The major chains are waking up to what we've done," he says. His preference is for consulting - a tough gig. "The chains are so shallow! Their eyes just glaze over when I talk to

them. They need to realise that most people just want to enjoy a pub meal and have a couple of pints or a glass of wine, no matter whether they are blind or deaf," says Marshall. Amen to that.

"MAJOR CHAINS ARE WAKING UP TO WHAT WE'VE DONE"

HIGHLY COMMENDED

BASEPOINT

Basepoint is what Customer Kings is all about. Owned by grant-making charity The ACT Foundation, Basepoint provides office space for start-ups, running two dozen centres across the south of England. There are many university-affiliated serviced offices for start-ups, but Basepoint goes further than its rivals to help its customers. Much further.

Basepoint has devised a few tweaks that make many of its tenants eligible for small business relief rates - a 50 per cent saving, adding up to more than £1m.

It has also pioneered an online shopping portal for business services such as IT, training and communications to harness the buying power of all the start-ups, so they can benefit from discounts normally only available to big corporates buying in bulk. And Basepoint is active in promoting networking between its tenants and public-sector bodies, such as local education authorities and councils. Then there's the centres themselves, boasting superfast broadband and plush meeting rooms.

Executive director Brian Andrews says: "We aim to build a community for small to medium-sized businesses that adds value, rather than simply locate businesses under one roof." He's winning: Basepoint's Southampton centre won best workspace at the 2009 Business Centre Association Awards. Andrews is one energetic landlord.



Chief Marshall: Antony Marshall, landlord of True Lovers Knot, has gone above and beyond in order to make his pub disability-friendly

WINNER

GLASSES DIRECT

Reality hasn't been such a fragile concept since Timothy Leary fired up his psychedelic chemistry set back in 1965. *Avatar* is opening the doors of perception at your local cinema, and now we've got augmented reality to cope with too. Augmented reality, for you squares still living in the past, is the combination of real-time camera footage with digital enhancements. iPhone users will be familiar with apps that show the location of your nearest tube station and flash up restaurant reviews. It's going to be bigger than 3D.

The best use of augmented reality we've seen is at online spectacles retailer GlassesDirect.co.uk, a long-time *Real Business* favourite. Twenty-six-year-old founder Jamie Murray Wells has created a dotcom legend, selling spectacles at a fraction of the price of high-street vendors such as Specsavers.

His one problem is that at Specsavers, you can try on frames in store. Online, it's a little more difficult, which is why he's pioneered an "aug-reality" solution.

At GlassesDirect.co.uk, you can use webcams to "virtually" try on frames. Download a piece of software, stare into the webcam and the frames are superimposed onto your face. Turn left, right, up and down, and the glasses magically turn

with you. At the click of a button, you can switch frames. The software is so good it really does look as if you are staring into a mirror - only your reflection is wearing glasses. Who needs to trek to a stuffy high-street shop? GlassesDirect.co.uk already boasts a powerful

YOU USE A WEBCAM TO "VIRTUALLY" TRY ON FRAMES

customer-service offering. Glasses can be trialled for seven days, free of charge. There are buying guides to download, a price-comparison service and a world-class helpline. Murray Wells even lists his personal email address on the site so customers can contact him directly. Augmented reality takes GlassesDirect.co.uk close to the ultimate goal of retail: achieving all

the benefits of a walk-in store while retaining the rock-bottom overheads of an online operation. It's a game-changing innovation - and has the feedback from customers to prove it. One satisfied customer wrote: "I applaud your sense in realising the simple concept of service is to do what you say you will. I am truly pleased with the service, including the phone call from an optometrist

because my prescription is unusual! Thank you for restoring my faith in human nature." In ten years, every online store will use augmented reality. We may even see in-store applications where you stand in front of an "intelligent" mirror that imposes clothes on your reflection. Right now, GlassesDirect.co.uk is showing the industry what is possible. Ground-breaking stuff.



Whoa, Nelly: Lorraine Watson-Buchan of Hatstand Nelly has placed her focus squarely on customer service, with impressive results

HIGHLY COMMENDED

HATSTAND NELLY

If you thought the world of hairdressing was a ditty gossipfest, take a look at Scotland's most ambitious salon. Hatstand Nelly has pioneered a service-level methodology that wouldn't look out of place in a global IT firm.

Founder Lorraine Watson-Buchan has laid down a fearsome goal for her Aberdeen salon: to tend to 240 clients a week. This requires six hairdressers to tend to 40 people a week at an average bill of £66 each.

To reach this nirvana, she measures everything her hairdressers do. The most important metric is called "Fantastic Client". This, she says, is measured by the number of clients who choose to have five services per visit, such as a cut, a colour, a head massage, purchasing retail products, and booking another appointment. Stylists must hit one Fantastic Client for every ten customers, while senior stylists need three in ten, and the art director needs five in ten. There are similar requirements for stylists requested by name: one in four is the standard rate, rising to half for a senior stylist and 75 per cent for the art director.

There are more than 60 measured standards salon-wide, including how warmly the receptionist smiles. Stylists train at least one day a week, and Friday morning is devoted to customer-care analysis. There's a world-class smoothie bar and you can even pick up a free umbrella. This is one razor-sharp package.



Duncan dares: Entrepreneur Duncan Wilkes of Nationwide Autocentre has a 97 per cent customer satisfaction record thanks to his NPS service

WINNER: CORPORATE CATEGORY

NATIONWIDE AUTOCENTRE

We made room for a large corporate category in this year's competition to see what we could learn from the big boys. Nationwide Autocentre, snapped up by Halfords for £73.2m as we were going to press, made us glad we did. This 223-outlet car tyre and servicing chain taught us how to give customer care an MOT.

The story begins a few years ago, when Nationwide Autocentre implemented a customer feedback programme. It used an external call centre with agents making written notes. Unfortunately, agents paraphrased quotes and conversations, making their scribbles impossible to understand. And it took three days for the feedback to be processed, so any complaints were ancient history by the time they surfaced. Not good enough.

So, the firm moved feedback in-house. A new platform, Confirmit, allowed surveys to be sent by email. If customers were positive about their experience, they received a follow-up question and a marketing offer to refer a friend for a discount. Negative feedback triggered an automatic alert to the area manager, who immediately rang to offer a solution.

The new process highlighted four areas needing improvement,

including staff training. The issue of jargon was addressed – so now mechanics are capable of communicating complex technical issues in plain English. Customers said they didn't understand the online booking system or how to use online vouchers. A few tweaks later, the problem was solved. Now 30 per cent of bookings are online. And referrals have soared – 400 in the first five weeks, paying for the cost of Confirmit.

Nationwide Autocentre uses a Net Promoter Score (NPS) for each centre. An NPS rating of 85 is green. Between 65-84 is amber, meaning managers need to select three areas to improve. Less than 64 is red, forcing an action plan within seven days involving all managers and directors.

The company is now able to quantify precisely how its customers see it.

Unsurprisingly, Nationwide Autocentre has an entrepreneur at the helm. Duncan Wilkes took control of the firm in 2006 in an MBO backed by Phoenix Equity Partners. His impact at Nationwide Autocentre is such that 97 per cent of customers are happy and would recommend the firm to a friend.

"Listening to customers and making changes based on their feedback doesn't only improve the experience, it generates revenue. No-one else in this industry is doing this. We have no idea why!" says Wilkes.

REFERRALS SOARED TO 400 IN THE FIRST FIVE WEEKS

HIGHLY COMMENDED

HSS

HSS is a well-known brand in the construction trade. Whether you need to rent a hammer or an industrial crane, HSS has been your first port of call for tool hire since 1957. Today, there are more than 250 branches, but it's online that HSS has been making waves with its innovative LiveHire service.

LiveHire is more than just a booking service. HSS has created a set of applications that enable customers to manage projects more efficiently. There's a personalised diary, so customers can see exactly what they've ordered, where it is and when it will arrive. A real-time data dashboard displays KPIs and management information reports chosen by the customer. A wide variety of data-crunching functions is available, and each account can be manipulated to make it ideal for the person logging on, be they a finance director, plant manager or construction worker. Historic data is also available, so customers can see whether they have used all their hired kit efficiently.

Chief executive Chris Davies says: "The LiveHire concept is the first of its kind for the industry. Our aim is to give customers better management of the equipment they have on hire, driving efficiencies and helping them to bring down their costs."

Launched in 2009, LiveHire is raising standards for the entire construction industry.

WINNER

TOTS TO TRAVEL

Wendy Shand had her eureka moment in 2005, when her two-year-old fell into an unenclosed swimming pool on a family holiday. The wee lad survived, but Shand was inspired to found Tots to Travel, an online holiday company specialising in child-friendly Mediterranean villas. By using her experience as a mum, Shand has created the ideal service for parents who dread going abroad with young kids in tow.

Every villa advertised on the Tots to Travel website is visited by her crack team of inspectors – all mums. They vet the houses to ensure every property is safe and properly equipped. Flash points are flagged up: low windows, steep steps, water features are all documented. Facilities from high-chairs and bed guards to night lights and sterilisers are listed.

The villas are required to provide all the hardware guests will need so they can preserve packing space. The result is that parents don't need to cart half a ton of kiddie clutter with them. Instead, they can use precious suitcase space for clothes, books, flip-flops and the odd toy.

The local region is given a child-friendly review. If there's a local restaurant with sniffy waiters, it gets a mention. Honesty is the Tots to Travel hallmark.

The site provides lots of small but telling pieces of information, such as the contact details for babysitters, and whether the villa owner does home-cooked meals. Correspondence is done electronically, with text an option for busy mums. Crucially, the business has an offline component. Customers can give Shand or one of her team on location a ring if they need personal advice. Shand says: "If a customer wants to talk to a real person, they just call. They usually end up having what feels like a casual chat with a friend. All their questions are answered by a mum who understands the specific needs of families."

The proof of the service is in the reviews collected by Tots to Travel from each customer. More than 90 per cent rate their holiday as "absolutely fabulous" or "great". One mum commented: "I am so glad I used Tots To France. The villa was a home from home and I managed to relax – no mean feat with two small children."

The Tots to Travel package is so complete, the Customer Kings judges were left scratching their heads as to what more Shand could do to improve it. No doubt that, as a mum, Shand will use her personal intuition to come up with something. And the high-street travel majors will be watching with concern to see what she stuns us with next.

MORE THAN 90% OF FAMILIES RATE THEIR HOLIDAY AS GREAT

HIGHLY COMMENDED

AXIOM

No gimmicks here. Axiom is a printed circuit-board manufacturer that knows that clients prioritise low costs, cutting-edge technology and a flexible attitude. So this firm has engineered its manufacturing process around these values to create a market-leading service.

Axiom's offer starts with the initial conversation. Managing director David Davies says: "We employ a design-for-manufacture principle, which sets us apart from other contract electronics manufacturers and allows us to strip out production costs and troubleshoot the process early on. Since 85 per cent of a product's costs are fixed within the first ten per cent of its development, our cross-functional team, with an understanding of product design, procurement, testing and the environmental impact of equipment, helps our customers save money."

Axiom uses lean manufacturing principles to reduce waste in production, supply chain and logistics. It also has the luxury of in-house testing facilities, so that durability is determined before the products leave the plant.

The firm is keen to acknowledge the support it received from UK Trade & Investment and the Institute for Manufacturing to shape its business model, and advocates keeping manufacturing in the UK to maintain standards for clients. Frankly, the UK needs more firms like Axiom.



Totting up the rave reviews: Wendy Shand founded Tots to Travel in order to meet the specific holiday needs of families

WINNER

BACKUP DIRECT

“We talk about a Korean ending,”

says Brett Raynes, founder of Backup Direct. “Don’t worry. It’s not filthy.” The term is, in fact, a customer-service philosophy invented by Raynes, who founded the online back-up service in 2002.

“It came from a story I read about Korean Airlines. Apparently, they hid a hostess in the jacket cupboard so, when passengers hung up their coats, she could help them from the inside. I loved the idea of being that dedicated to customers. We wanted to bring the same obsessive ideology to Backup Direct.”

No, there aren’t IT guys hiding in computers. Instead, Backup Direct’s service agents are trained to actively find ways of helping clients in unexpected ways. “If a client rings us to reset a password, we find ways of doing something else – something useful – for them.

“All our agents have full access to customer records, so they can have a quick look for outstanding issues and ask if they have been resolved adequately. We check whether they have done a data restore recently, and ask them whether they would like to do a test run with one of our engineers. This is not something we are obliged to do, but we offer it all the same.” By the end of the phone call, the customer ought to be beaming. “We want to delight, not just satisfy.”

Raynes is the figurehead of this Korean approach. Every client gets

his personal mobile number, so they can call him any hour, day or night. “I don’t get inundated, but when I do get a call, I deal with the matter personally. Customers like this; they know they aren’t dealing with a faceless monolith.”

His service agents also work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. “In the beginning, we opened at normal office hours, but a year ago, we went

round the clock. We use VoIP and iPhones – our service guys are available even on Christmas Day.” There’s a Live Assistant option on the website to help customers work through their queries or complaints using live chat, as well as free, step-by-step video tutorials.

Crucially, Backup Direct makes sure its clients’ data is completely secure. “We don’t do the

configuration – they do that, but we don’t stay quiet. We frequently check in with them to confirm they are able to do a full restore at the touch of a button.”

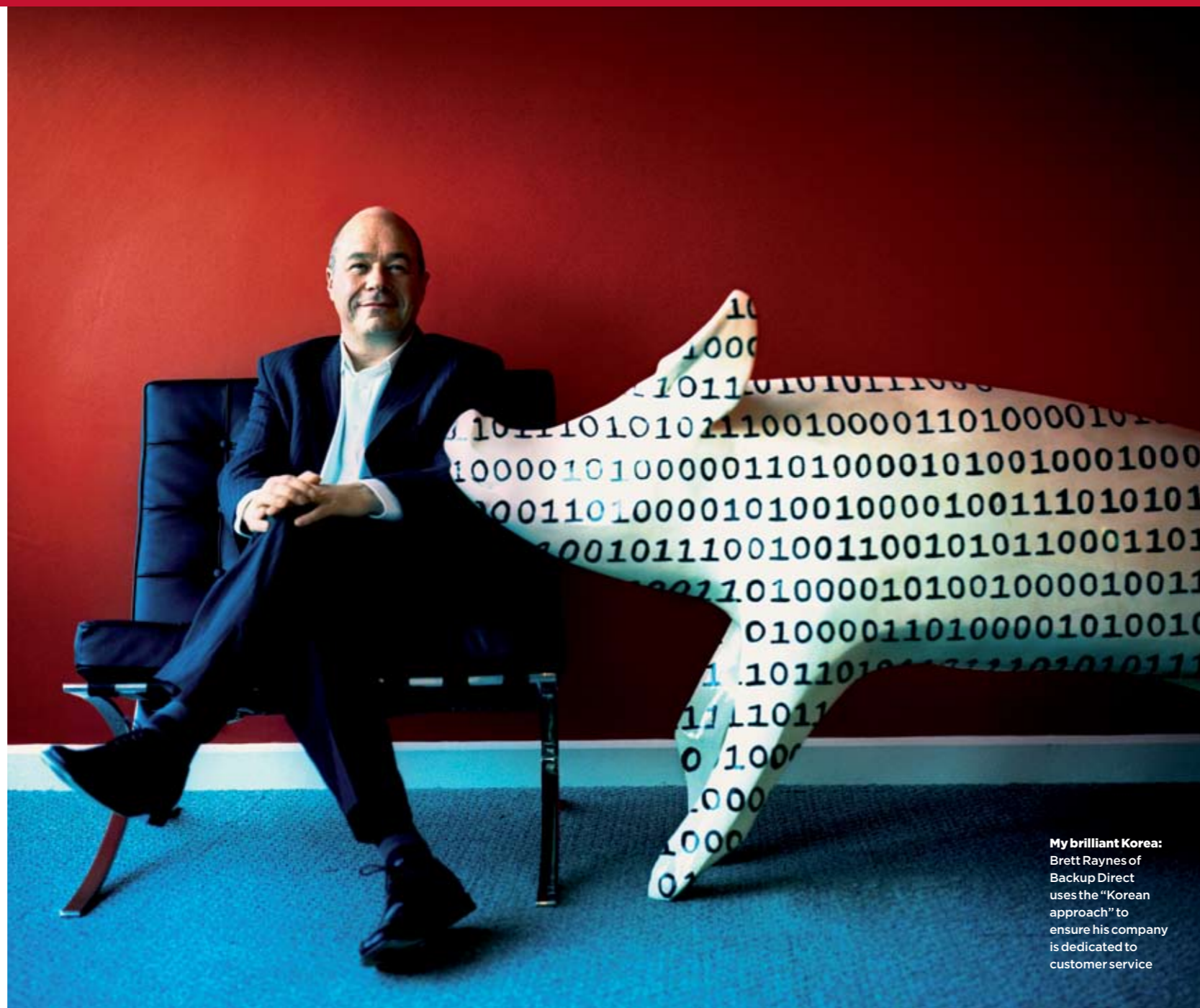
The Korean attitude has helped Backup Direct grow 20 per cent year on year through the recession.

It now has almost 2,000 clients.

Raynes’ advice to those thinking of going Korean:

“It takes a great deal of time and effort. At first, we faced a lot of setbacks – people said they were too busy. It takes hard work to make it an endemic part of your company culture.”

BACKUP DIRECT HAS GROWN 20% YEAR ON YEAR SINCE 2007



My brilliant Korea: Brett Raynes of Backup Direct uses the “Korean approach” to ensure his company is dedicated to customer service

HIGHLY COMMENDED

FIGLEAVES

Figleaves.com is a giant of online retail. Selling bras and knickers, it is a 100-employee blue-chip brand, rivalling the likes of Tesco and M&S in cyberspace. Because it is privately owned, primarily by founder Daniel Nabarro, Figleaves is still an agile, ever-adapting company.

The lure of Figleaves is the outstanding degree of convenience it offers customers. The product range is vast. In addition to the normal suite of underwear, pyjamas and swimwear from more than 100 brands, it has expanded further into niche markets. There are post-mastectomy ranges, bridal, maternity and ultra-large sizes (the lingerie ranges from sizes AAA to K). Figleaves even offers a personal shopper service for free.

There’s a gift shop with an interactive gift-finder service; a gift-wrapping option and videos helping women measure themselves perfectly. Customers are encouraged to leave feedback underneath each product for all browsers to see. All returns are free, and the payment options are exhaustive.

The site is constantly reviewed using focus groups and surveys. The information is being used to completely relaunch the lingerie business in the spring – a bold move for a firm already known for its slick web interface.

It’s a stunningly customer-centric approach, which is how Figleaves has been able to grow steadily in the face of tough high-street competition.

WINNER

BLOCK SOLUTIONS

The National Health Service has a controversial record with outsourcing IT. The flagship NHS database, Connecting for Health, is billions over budget, late and doesn't work. So it's heart-warming to come across an IT contractor that's a model of prudence, good sense and good value. Block Solutions provides IT services to hospitals such as Great Ormond Street, Guy's & St Thomas', and a number of NHS Trusts. It has helped these institutions to develop glitch-free information infrastructures that allow them to focus exclusively on patient care.

Block's reputation precedes it – in fact, no one seems to have anything but lavish praise for this fast-growing firm based in London's East End. How does it do it?

Jonathan Pickering, managing director and co-founder, says the key is to work closely with clients: "Our idea of support isn't simply about an occasional phone call when things go wrong, but about getting under the skin of the organisation we're trying to help as soon as possible. Our team members work closely alongside *their* team members, as colleagues rather than as suppliers, helping to find the right solution, based not just on the individual priorities of IT managers, but also on how IT can best help the organisation as a whole to achieve its goals."

"WE'VE DOUBLED TURNOVER. NOT BAD FOR A RECESSION YEAR"

Block aims for transparency throughout the relationship, and prides itself on never advising customers to spend any more than is absolutely necessary. It encourages employees to go further than contracts stipulate. Pickering remarks: "Our sales director recently helped a customer co-author the entire IT strategy document for a major NHS trust hospital in London – none of which we billed for. Is that always profitable? No. Does it help our relationship with them? More than can be measured."

In technical terms, Block scores maximum points. It conducts regular feedback surveys, including a method for investigating any job rated three stars or less by clients according to ISO 9001 certified processes

– particularly impressive, since three stars is usually regarded as acceptable by rivals. The strongest evidence that this company is a Customer King comes from clients. The board at Great Ormond Street Hospital

commended the firm in a meeting to discuss its multi-million pound network redesign, citing minimum disruption and a smooth migration.

Pickering says: "It's true what they say – what goes around comes around. Because of our policy of not always prioritising our own pocket, we've made some great customer relationships. We've even doubled turnover – not bad for a recession year!" Not bad, indeed.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

TILLEY HATS

Lifetime guarantees are a thing of the past. Or so we thought. Tilley Hats, a brand of all-weather headgear, offers exactly that. Tilley, in fact, goes one better – it guarantees the product rather than the owner. Even if you snuff it, your progeny can ask for a new hat.

And, for outdoorsy, adventurous customers, the guarantee covers most kinds of wear and tear. Here's the Tilley guarantee, verbatim: "Unbleached Tilley Hats will be replaced free if they ever wear out, mildew or shrink." And the pledge isn't reserved for Tilley headgear – if you find a hole in a pair of shorts, or a tear in your favourite vest, Tilley will either repair or replace it for you.

Tilley says it's had customers calling up after 20 years of using a product to ask if they can invoke the guarantee. They can. Furthermore, they get their old hat back in the post along with the replacement. After 20 years, a man can get pretty fond of his tatty old hat.

Tilley also sells socks. Surely there's no lifetime guarantee for socks? Well, no, but the guarantee extends for three years, "no holes barred". That's an impressive pledge considering the normal lifespan of a pair of hiking socks.

All claims for the "nearly indestructible" range of Tilley hats, socks, shorts and trousers are dealt with in a "no quibble" manner – it's safe to say that Tilley Hats has its customers covered.

WINNER

HOWELL PENNY

There is a limit to what surveys can teach you. Quantitative data can never capture the nuances of a qualitative experience. Sometimes, the only way to learn what customers really think is to get off your backside and walk into their world.

Marketing agency Howell Penny takes this approach to the extreme. Founder Chris Penny explains: "We recently introduced the 'feel' philosophy into our agency culture. We need to feel what it means to be a customer of our clients. To that end, everyone in the agency goes out to experience our clients' products and services from a customer's perspective." They even use their clients' rivals' products to ensure they have a rounded understanding of the picture.

Howell Penny executives are then sent into their clients' offices. Penny says: "In the same way we believe that an agency can only add real value to their clients when they are truly customer-centric, we believe that an agency also needs to understand the capabilities, processes, culture and politics of an organisation in order to propose and implement solutions that are client-centric, practical and achievable. So we encourage clients to let us come on field trips, or work in their head office or one of their stores. It's beneficial for everyone

"WE 'FEEL' WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A CUSTOMER OF OUR CLIENTS"

because it means we're better informed and know how it feels to be a part of the team." Howell Penny uses other tools to glean information about clients, such as mystery shopping and online questionnaires. Some clients might feel that this level of inspection – occasionally by covert methods – borders on intrusive. But Howell Penny's view is that this approach gives the company unprecedented insights into the true needs of its clients.

Penny believes that the key to ensuring his executives are inspired is to keep them away from the comfort of their own offices and to push them out into the world. He even urges staff to head out and experience new things on an impulse: "We've set up Feel Trips, where we encourage staff to jump on a plane or get in a car and visit a new place. It's about getting out there and experiencing stuff for themselves. We believe it's worth stepping away from your desk once in a while to feel something new, fresh and even surprising."

Founded in 2007, Howell Penny already boasts a client list including retail giants Homebase and H Samuel, and travel website VisitBritain.

The lesson you can learn from Howell Penny? No matter what sector you're in, it pays to learn more about your clients – and you can't do that stuck behind your desk in an office.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

URBAN COFFEE

Coffee is a crowded sector. There are so many Starbucks cafés that spoof newspaper *The Onion* reported: "New Starbucks opens in rest room of existing Starbucks."

So what can two young Birmingham entrepreneurs, Simon Jenner and Amir Belkhelladi, bring to the party with their start-up Urban Coffee? Not experience. "Neither of us have any experience retailing coffee," admits Jenner, who ran his own IT firm for ten years. And not capital – it's self-funded. But these disadvantages are perhaps why they've been able to be so innovative.

At Urban Coffee, you can participate in coffee tasting, rather like a wine tasting. No one else does that. It has a coffee academy for baristas. And then there's its Twitter campaign. "We get 30 per cent of footfall via Twitter. I can't believe how effective it is. It's phenomenal!" says Jenner. Urban Coffee hosts band evenings, a book club and a book-crossing point, where customers share books. Baristas are trained to remember customers' names and their "usual".

Above all, Urban Coffee is a destination for consumers. One only has to read the plethora of testimonials online – including one from the editor of the *Birmingham Post* – to see that the pair has created a memorable venue.

Next mission: open venue number two and retain the same vibe. The template, so far, is perfect.



A little bit of **history** repeating itself

In 2009, those of us involved in the inaugural Customer Kings felt as if we'd been privy to something very special happening among UK businesses. The exceptional array of businesses that entered the competition showed us that customer service was very much alive and at the heart of our home-grown businesses. So, when we started thinking about Customer Kings 2010, we approached it with mild trepidation. Would we be able to find businesses whose innovation and dedication to customer service could match that of 2009's winners? Would Britain's businesses, jaded by the recession, have downed their customer service tools and simply focused on raw cost cutting instead of quality of service?

Thankfully, we needn't have worried. The UK's businesses didn't let a global recession stop them doing what they do best - providing their customers with outstanding service.

So, as we celebrate 2010's superb winners, we're thrilled to see that Britain's businesses are still demonstrating such innovation when it comes to engaging with their customers. Our research echoes this sentiment. In the past 12 months alone, more than 60 per cent of businesses have introduced new measures to help build and retain customer relationships. Dedication to say the least.

We'd like to thank every single company that entered Customer Kings 2010 competition and say congratulations to all of our winners, as well as our Winner of Winners, Green Energy UK. At Cisco, the customer is always king so it's hugely encouraging to see that the spirit of Customer Kings still very much exists within Britain's businesses.

David Critchley, director of commercial and small business at Cisco UK.

THE JUDGES



Tricia Phillips:
Finance editor at the *Daily Mirror*



David Critchley:
Director of commercial and small business at Cisco UK



Simon Nixon:
Founder of Moneysupermarket.com and Simonseeks.com

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