



Retail Adventures in the Real World™

By RICH KIZER & GEORGANNE BENDER

Jumping the Shark

"In a hyper-competitive world you cannot take away something customers have come to expect."

Exceed the customers expectations! Give them what they want, when they want it, the way that they want it. Do one more thing!

Do those phrases sound familiar? Those phrases have been our mantra for some 13 years.

Exceeding customer expectations is tantamount to your success. So what happens if that expected service is gone?

We've written about Georganne's car dealership before. It's a beautiful facility, and the people who work there are known for their consistently good customer care. Georganne is a loyal customer who likens the customer experience to buying a car at the Ritz Carlton. It's that good. But last week the dealership "Jumped the Shark" and forever altered the relationship Georganne has had with them for more than four years.

Jumped the what? Okay, we'll explain.

"Jumped the Shark" is a pop culture term coined by then college student Sean Connolly in 1985 while watching *Happy Days*. In this particular episode the Fonz, dressed in his famous leather jacket while on water skis, actually jumped over a shark. Sean commented that at that particular moment, *Happy Days* had crossed a line and would never be the same.

Fast forward to 1997 when Jon Hein launched www.jumptheshark.com, a forum used to catalog when television shows went awry. Since then the term "Jump the Shark" has become a pop culture favorite, "applying not only to television, but also music, film, even everyday life." In other words, when someone or something does

something completely out of character, they have "Jumped the Shark."

Now back to the story ...

It was time for Georganne to bring her car in for its 30,000 mile checkup, so she called to make an appointment, and was told she could have her pick of days and time – the service department's claim to fame is flexibility. Georganne chose a Friday afternoon, dropped her car off in a sparkling clean service bay, and drove away in a brand-new loaner car. As in past experiences, every one of George's expectations had been met or exceeded.

When she returned to pick it up four hours (and hundreds of dollars) later, the transaction was handled with the dealership's usual impeccable care. Then they brought Georganne her car. Her dirty car. "Wait a minute," she said, "You always wash my car. Why not today?"

She received several answers and none of them made much sense. They weren't "We forgot" or "We messed up" kinds of excuses. The answers were a shark-jumping, "We don't do that any more."

It wasn't that the dealership hadn't washed Georganne's car that day that bugged her, it was the fact that they *always* wash her car when it's in for service. They wash everybody's car. So we called the owner, not to complain but because Georganne really likes the place, and this single, albeit little, thing just didn't feel right.

The owner explained that not washing clients' cars was a corporate decision made based on a number of reasons; reasons that made sense to us operationally, but

did not make sense from a customer-service perspective. In a hyper-competitive world you cannot simply take away something customers enjoy without an explanation. If you do, the only winner will be your competition.

You may also have heard us discuss The Customer Care Circles of Excellence. Imagine a smaller circle within a larger circle. The smaller circle represents the things you have to do just to be in business. Rich calls these things the ante in a poker game – if you don't have them, then you're not in the game. In a store, these things include having a place for customers to park their cars, someone to ring the register, and bags to carry purchases home.

The larger, outer circle represents the extras you do for customers – things like a hot cup of coffee on a cold day, special in-store events, a handwritten thank-you note, or washing a customer's car after servicing.

You own the outer circle; it's yours to do as much with as you want. Just remember that once you exceed a customer's expectations, those expectations become the norm, and in essence, become as expected as those basic things in the inner circle. When you stop doing what customers expect you to do, you jump the shark and forever alter the relationship.

Coming up with outer circle extras that keep your store ahead of the pack takes dedication and vision. You must constantly think up – and deliver – new ways to dazzle your customers. And annoy your competition. ♦

Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender are nationally recognized experts on customer service, customer retention strategies, "messing with the media," and everything retail. Contact them by e-mail at info@kizerandbender.com. © Kizer & Bender 2003. All rights reserved.