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# UPLIFTING SERVICE

The Proven Path

*to Delighting Your Customers, Colleagues,  
and Everyone Else You Meet*

RON  
KAUFMAN

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## CHAPTER 17

# Service Benchmarking

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Imagine you drive into a parking lot and find that the most convenient space has been reserved for your arrival. Someone approaches your car and holds the door open as you step out. He introduces himself and guides you toward a small security counter. The security guard greets you personally. A badge with your name has already been prepared. Beyond security you find a red carpet leading you into the building.

The meeting room is comfortable and well prepared, with presentations neatly arranged on the table. A selection of refreshing drinks is available to suit your taste. As you take your seat, a small gift is given to you by one of the smiling hosts. Inside the elegant box you find a modern, attractive pen engraved with your full name. As you thank your hosts, they smile and nod respectfully to you in welcome.

Where are you? In the conference room of a private bank? In an elegant showroom for luxury goods? In a jeweler's special enclave for celebrities and other wealthy guests?

It may be hard to imagine, but you have arrived for an on-site visit at a Vopak terminal in Asia. Vopak is the world's oldest and

largest provider of conditioned storage facilities for bulk liquids, and is an emerging icon of uplifting service. With 80 terminals in 30 countries—storing liquids and gaseous chemicals, oil products, petrochemicals, biofuels, vegetable oils, and liquefied natural gas—you might assume that the company is more focused on safety and operational excellence than it is on the aesthetics and emotional appeal of service. But your assumption would be wrong.

Vopak certainly understands the necessity of safety and the value of operational excellence, and it works hard to maintain its excellent reputation in both of these areas. But Vopak is also working hard to differentiate itself with service before this becomes the new industry standard. Vopak knows its competitors aren't yet providing uplifting service. And it is looking outside its own industry to learn how other organizations have built lasting reputations for world-class levels of service.

### **What Is Service Benchmarking?**

Standard business benchmarking means comparing your business processes with the best practices of selected “target” organizations. Dimensions frequently studied include quality, time, and cost—with an eye toward improving your own processes to increase output, reduce waste, boost speed, or lower costs.

As a building block of service culture, Service Benchmarking is distinctive. First, when you explore the dimensions to study, focus on service experiences, not just processes. How do leaders in other fields create service value, increase customer loyalty, deepen service partnerships, improve internal service, and build a service culture where great people love to work?

Second, your objective is not only to improve your processes and results. As a building block of service culture, an equally important

goal is creating endless curiosity throughout the organization with every person observing, inquiring, and learning. Your objective is a self-sustaining culture distinguished by uplifting service, not just valuable data points for tactical service improvements. You want to develop a focused team of service providers who seek to understand: How do other leaders create uplifting service experiences for their customers and colleagues? What can we learn, then adapt, adopt, and apply to improve the service we deliver to our customers and to each other?

### **Benchmark the Experience**

Benchmarking opportunities exist at every point in the customer experience: discovering, shopping, testing, trying, buying, applying, learning, improving, upgrading, installing, and even commenting, complaining, and returning.

I worked with a global team of Microsoft Operations leaders at a global conference to improve their customer and partner experience. They were conducting an early benchmark discussion about who to study for best practices in their field. With an ordering system that includes authorization, activation, security assurance, credit checks, license updates, and billing approvals, the company naturally thought about other large software licensing organizations with similarly complex systems: SAP, Oracle, IBM, Cisco, and others.

I offered that the fastest benchmark they could apply was Amazon's patented "1-Click" system. One of the leaders quickly responded with an explanation about how business-to-business purchases through a partnership channel are completely different from someone buying a book for delivery to his or her home or for downloading to his or her Kindle.

“It’s not what is being ordered that I suggest you benchmark here,” I said. “It is the process for placing the order.” The executive paused quietly for a moment, thinking about how many different screens his partners must navigate to successfully place their orders. Then he nodded, recognizing the challenge that lay ahead and the benefit of benchmarking Amazon.

You can benchmark any point in the customer experience. For example, who does a terrific job with their newest customers, making them feel welcome, comfortable, and successful? The new car delivery process at the BMW factory in Germany is so uplifting that people schedule their purchase months in advance and fly in from all over the world. What is it like to be a brand new customer of your organization?

Who takes terrific care of existing customers, earning a high rate of returning customers and low volume of product returns? Apple is a leader in personal devices with levels of loyalty earned at the Genius Bar in their stores every day. My daughter, Brighten, smiled as they replaced her laptop battery for free. She said, “I don’t know why anyone with an Apple would ever switch to another brand.” Do your customers say that about you?

Everywhere you look, best practices are waiting to be discovered. Which company makes buying a pleasure? Nordstrom is devoted to this cause. Where is it enjoyable to test or try a sample? Häagen-Dazs wants you to sample every flavor. Which organizations are great at teaching new customers how to get the most from their products and their service? In Portland, Oregon, Apple buses senior citizens from the local community center to its stores and teaches them to use a computer, some for the very first time. Who delivers most conveniently or quickly? Pizza Hut will have dinner on your doorstep in fewer than 45 minutes. Where is upgrading super simple? Many online software services require no more

than a click. Which company is best at bouncing back if you are not completely happy? L.L.Bean makes it guaranteed. Who are the leaders in connecting their customers into a community on Facebook, LinkedIn, Google, or any other forum?

## **Benchmark Beyond Your Competition**

Competitive analysis is worthwhile, but is more likely to promote emulation and fine-tuning than breakthrough innovations. Service Benchmarking invites you to look outside your own industry for ideas outside of the usual box. Become curious about every other industry. Look more closely in all directions. Who creates a great experience face-to-face, in the store, at your home, during delivery, on the web, on the phone, by email, by text, by chat? Who impresses the customers they serve day and night; with comfort and choice; with security, speed, and smiles?

For example, Changi Airport wants you to enjoy personalized, stress-free, and positively surprising service. So the airport installed a lush butterfly garden, which is an incredible place to be personally uplifted, and a twisting, four-story slide that offers unexpected thrills and family excitement. But no other airport in the world provided these as competitive benchmarks. Where did they get these great ideas?

Changi Airport schedules aircraft, allocates specialized aircraft gates, and welcomes visitors who accompany arriving and departing passengers. Hospitals schedule surgeries, allocate specialized operating theaters, and welcome visitors who accompany recovering patients. Hospitals have long used gardens as quiet places to help people rest and relax in a personalized and stress-free environment. And in many of the world's best gardens, you will enjoy the grace and beauty of butterflies.

Changi Airport welcomes families from all over the world with children who have energy to burn and want to enjoy a good time. Theme parks offer engaging attractions and amusing rides to families with children who have energy to burn and want to enjoy a good time. And in many of the world's best theme parks your family will discover multi-story slides.

Let your appetite for improvement inside fuel your curiosity about what's working on the outside. "Who does what we do, but does it better?" is a good question for competitive comparison. The more powerful question for Service Benchmarking is, "Who creates an experience that makes their customers feel the way we want our customers to feel?"

## Benchmark the Architecture of Service Culture

You can build an uplifting service culture by benchmarking how others are doing the same. The architecture introduced in section 1 includes Service Leadership, which we discussed in section 2; the 12 Building Blocks of Service Culture, which we are exploring in section 3; and Actionable Service Education, which you will discover in section 4. All of these can be benchmarked.

**Service Leadership:** Study successful leaders with unyielding commitments to service and the legendary companies they lead: Richard Branson at Virgin, Lou Gerstner, the former CEO at IBM, the Nordstrom family, Walt Disney, L.L.Bean, and Jack Mitchell, the CEO who wrote *Hug Your Customers*. Study their histories, read their biographies, and then follow their lead to the top.

**Common Service Language:** At Starbucks, employees speak a common language, making it easy for them to coordinate

with each other and deliver great service to customers. This is the result of their vigorous efforts to promote and encourage the language. Do your customers understand your language of service as well? Are you doing as much as Starbucks is to teach them?

**Engaging Service Vision:** Who has a motto, tagline, slogan, or statement that really turns their people on? FedEx employees proudly say their blood runs purple. What do your people say?

**Service Recruitment:** Zappos sets a standard for selecting team members who *really* want to work there. You can visit their national offices and benchmark them for free. Find out how at Zappos.com.

**Service Orientation:** The integrated orientation program for all employees based at Changi Airport connects them to the facility, the airlines, the passengers, the nation, and each other. How well does your program help new team members connect?

**Service Communications:** Political campaigns, sports contests, and celebrity stories are broadcast around the world with repetition and record speed. Your communications may have a different objective, but how can you get the same level of awareness and engagement?

**Service Recognition and Rewards:** The Nobel Prize, Olympic Gold, and the Hall of Fame. Our global culture is rich with traditions and moments of glory. Is your service culture as abundant? Is “employee of the month” the best that you can do?

**Voice of the Customer:** Remember the last time someone listened carefully to what you think and feel? When was the last time someone paid close attention to every word you wrote?

These experiences are high on a scale of interest and attention. On that same scale, what do you want your customers to feel when they speak and write to you?

**Service Measures and Metrics:** Google measures every possible data point to serve you with the best pages, answers, links, and advertising offers. The Japanese word *kaizen* means “continuous improvement and change for the better.” Who will you study to make your use of measures even better? How much better can you become with the measures that you use?

**Service Improvement Process:** Singapore Airlines consistently scores at or near the top of every service ranking and has done so for many years. It’s not from having access to better airports, travel websites, or travel agents—or even better aircraft. Every other airline has access to the same. Singapore Airlines’ dedication to continuous service improvement is what makes it such a great way to fly. It uses every Service Improvement Process to fine-tune, upgrade, and even transform its customer service. Which do you use as well?

**Service Recovery and Guarantees:** If anything goes wrong, we promise to make it right. There are lifetime guarantees, money-back guarantees, and 100,000-mile warranties. What promises do your customers deserve? What do your colleagues deserve? Is satisfaction with your service guaranteed?

**Service Benchmarking:** You can learn how other organizations benchmark by asking these questions: “Where did you learn that?” “Where did you get that idea?” and “How did you make that work so well?” Anytime they do not answer, “We made it up ourselves,” you are moving closer to discovering their benchmark.

**Service Role Modeling:** Watch the waiter who earns the biggest tips. Find out which professor has the highest student rankings.

See which vendor gets the most five-star ratings. Notice the service provider where you work that everyone else looks up to. What is he or she doing that you could do, too? How can you learn from his or her example?

**Actionable Service Education:** Study companies with integrated suites of top-down and bottom-up service learning. You may have to look hard until this becomes a more common practice. Perhaps you and your organization will see the benchmark in this domain.

## Benchmarking Can Be Easy

Traditional business benchmarking is a high-level activity with careful target selection, substantial pre-visit planning, and a rigorous process of post-visit evaluation and implementation. You can do this, too. But don't let a thorough and detailed approach stop you from encouraging a much simpler version of benchmarking. Remember, one of the goals is for everyone to become curious about learning and improving.

Each phone call can be a benchmarking moment. Did the person you were speaking with make you feel appreciated, welcome, confident, or understood? What did he or she say? How did he or she do that? Can you use that in your next call? Each incoming email is one to evaluate and emulate if it moves you to positive action. Each meeting is a possible benchmarking moment, another opportunity to appreciate, adapt, and apply.

An easy way to start benchmarking is to have people inside your organization learn from visiting each other. Is your customer service team known for its friendliness and flexibility? Ask the finance team to make a benchmarking visit. Are your

finance team members respected for their accuracy and speed? Ask the delivery team to make a benchmarking visit. Is any one branch, factory, or outlet admired by everyone else? Ask that group to extend an invitation and welcome frequent visits from its peers.

## **Everyone Can Do Service Benchmarking**

When you organize a visit to an outside organization, include people from different levels in your organization. Those who work on the front line may not understand certain details those in higher positions do, but they will see things from a different perspective, often with insights of equal value.

A membership club I frequent features the restaurants, pools, tennis courts, and other facilities you would naturally expect to find. But the Service Benchmarking process is one I have not found anywhere else in the world. During the orientation of new team members, participants are paired up. Each pair is assigned to benchmark one of the nearby five-star hotels where some of the world's highest service standards are on display. They are asked to visit the hotel and to return four hours later, after enjoying a treat in the hotel's coffee shop.

Before the pairs depart, everyone reviews the benchmarking assignment. Each team must discover where the hotel excels and where it could improve:

1. Observe the hotel carefully from the outside. What looks terrific? What needs to be improved?
2. Approach the hotel. How are you greeted?
3. Enter the lobby and walk around. Are you welcomed and offered help?

4. Find the house phone. Ask the operator for a restaurant recommendation. Ask what time the restaurant opens for dinner. Ask what is the soup of the day?
5. Find the lobby shop and ask where you can buy a bouquet of flowers.
6. Go to the coffee shop. Enjoy a drink and a snack while observing carefully every moment of the service.
7. Discuss your experience with your partner. Take notes during your visit when you can.
8. Be ready to share with the group: What was most impressive? What did you find surprising? What could still be improved? What did you learn that could be applied here at our membership club?

Imagine the impact of this visit during someone's first few days on the job, comparing service experiences with some of the best in the world. New employees are asked to explore and think; they are trusted to evaluate, compare, and recommend. This experience itself is a benchmark. How could you adapt and apply it?

### **Be a Generous Benchmarker**

Winners of many national quality awards are asked to showcase their practices for others as a condition of winning the award. This encourages everyone to keep improving.

When you ask another organization for permission to visit and learn, be sure to return the value. Promise to share a report about what you learn, or conduct a presentation showing how you will apply it. Let your "target" know you will help them grow as they help you improve. And when you are ready for the highest levels of Service Benchmarking, invite the recognized leaders to come and benchmark you.

### **Questions for Service Providers**

- What can you learn by studying the service you receive from other people?
- What can you learn by studying the service culture in other organizations?
- Who delivers great service inside your organization? What can you do differently to follow their example?

### **Questions for Service Leaders**

- Who are you benchmarking now? What do you want to learn?
- Who does the benchmarking inside your organization? Who else could you involve in this vital learning process?
- What lessons have you learned from your benchmarking efforts? What actions have you taken to apply these insights?

# Meet Ron Kaufman

Ron Kaufman is the world's premiere thought-leader, educator, and motivator for uplifting customer service and building service cultures. Ron is the author of 14 other books on service, business, and inspiration.

Ron provides powerful insights from working with clients all over the world in every major industry for more than twenty years. Ron is an inspiration to leaders and managers with his content rich and entertaining speeches, and his impactful, interactive workshops. He is rated one of the world's "Top 25 Who's Hot" speakers by *Speaker Magazine*.

Ron has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*. He is passionately committed to uplifting the spirit and practice of service worldwide.

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A breakthrough book  
that will surprise, delight, and uplift you,  
your organization, and your team.

In *Uplifting Service*, Ron Kaufman takes you on a journey into the new world of service. Through dynamic case studies and best-practice examples, you will learn how the world's leading companies have changed the game, and how you can successfully follow this path to an uplifting service transformation.

“Read this book, apply the steps. Watch your culture transform and your perspective on service change forever. Ron Kaufman has unlocked the mystery of service. Get ready for a magnificent journey into a new world.”

**Marshall Goldsmith**

Bestselling Author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

“Ron Kaufman has pinpointed a massive wound in society, and offers a strategy to uplift the world around us. For mankind, it's transformational. For business, it's a clean and clear path to a sustainable competitive advantage. This book is long overdue, and will create a legendary shift.”

**Thomas Moran**

Director, Customer and Partner Experience  
Microsoft Operations



**Ron Kaufman**, the founder of Uplifting Service, is the world's premiere thought-leader, educator, and motivator for uplifting customer service and building service cultures.

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