

# ***Relentless***

**Customer Service:  
The Only Core Principle**

*John Tschohl*

# Relentless

## Chapter I: Introduction



Over the decades I've been researching and speaking, it has become very clear to me that:

- The most successful organizations in the world —business, government and non-profit—keep customer service at the center of their work.
- Those that are-the most customer service driven, maintain that focus relentlessly.
- The biggest reason most are not customer-driven is because they are not willing or able to be relentless.
- Far more organizations could be much more successful if they had a relentless customer-service focus.

If you want your organization to grow and succeed long-term, you've got to be a service leader. To do that, you've got to be ***“Relentless”***.

***“Relentless”*** has to be a lifetime commitment.

Lots of executives talk about their focus on customer service. Most can't, or more likely, won't sustain it.

For years, I've watched organizations spend millions on advertising to attract customers. But then, by neglecting a single core principle, they drive their customers away.

The problem is that, when it comes to customer service, very few CEOs, and as a result, very few organizations are ***“Relentless”***. Some focus on customer service for a month, a year; some for six years. Walmart quit after 18

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years. Very few leaders are willing to be constantly, permanently focused on customer service.

A focus on customer service can't be an add-on. It can't be for a while. It can't occur under one chief executive and then be forgotten with the next. It has to be part of the organization's culture and it can't be B.S.

If you're going to be successful, you got to be ***“Relentless”***, *today, tomorrow and for all time*.

Too often, the financial people take over. They only look at numbers. They don't care about the customer experience and customer service, so they cut those programs. Financial people rarely understand the importance of customer service, and so their businesses fail to be as great as they could be.

If your goal is to build an organization around the customer experience, you've got to be ***“Relentless”***.

Amazon and Jeff Bezos are among the most ***“Relentless”*** in the world. Costco is ***“Relentless”***. Year after year, the management of Southwest Airlines stays ***“Relentless”***. Vernon Hill at Commerce, Metro and Republic Banks remains ***“Relentless”***. Mayo Clinic is a not-for-profit organization and they are every bit as ***“Relentless”*** as any for-profit company in the world.

There are countless examples of organizations not being ***“Relentless”***. There are plenty of examples I could share where a company was ***“Relentless”*** then lost that focus (and became less successful.) We're not going to waste time on them. In this book I want to show you how to be ***“Relentless”***—to make your organization succeed.

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### “Relentless:” by the numbers

As executives, we pay a lot of attention to numbers—sometimes too much, in my opinion. But they can be useful in measuring success—or failure. Look at these successful numbers:

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<b>Commerce Bank</b>		
	<b>1973</b>	<b>2007</b>
Locations	1	470
Employees	9	14,000
Stock Value	\$0.17	\$38.14
<b>Compounded annual return</b>		<b>23%</b>

These numbers very clearly show how valuable a sustained commitment to being “*Relentless*” can be. Vernon Hill founded Commerce Bank in 1973. Based on the same model, he founded Metro Bank (UK) in 2010 and was appointed Chairman of Republic Bank in 2016. Vernon is the most customer-driven CEO I know. He walks the talk and understands the financial results of awesome service.

The late Jack Welch ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity at General Electric, increasing sales by over one hundred billion dollars and the company’s stock value by more than 2800%.

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<b>General Electric</b>		
	<b>1981</b>	<b>2001</b>
Sales	\$25 billion	\$135 billion
Employees	425,000	300,000
Stock Value	\$1.40	\$40.50 <sup>i</sup>

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In his book, “Jack: Straight from the Gut”, he wrote, “Companies can’t protect jobs. Only satisfied customers can do that.” Jack Welch clearly understood the value of customer focus and kept it over many years. That’s “*Relentless*”.

If you are “*Relentless*” about serving your customers, you will succeed. If you focus solely on the numbers—making profits and cutting costs, you won’t.

## Down the drain

After Jack Welch and his “*Relentless*” attitude left, so did much of the value he built. From 2001 to 2019, sales fell by nearly \$40 billion while employees grew from 300,000 to 313,000. As of this writing, GE’s stock price is down to \$5.53. When Jack left, stock was worth \$40.50.

“*Relentless*” has to be part of the corporate culture and it must be sustained over time or value will fall.

Dell is another company that used to be “*Relentless*” in their thinking about customer service. But they dropped in value when that attitude was left behind:

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<b>Dell Value After “<i>Relentless</i>”</b>		
	<b>2003</b>	<b>2020</b>
Investment value	\$1,000	\$488

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Dell lost its focus. “The team was managing cost instead of managing service and quality,” said founder Michael Dell. In October 2013 he completed a leveraged buyout

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and the company's value turned around. It is still working to recapture its service brand.

So, if I was to say, "What does it take to be **"Relentless?"** The most important thing is that it has to be a strategy. If you miss the *strategy* point of view, then it's just a matter of money and there's no real commitment.

**You must have a strategic,  
relentless commitment to  
customer service.**

**Period.**

Being **"Relentless"** is part of culture in all elite, exceptional organizations.

**"Relentless"** means that you can never give up: you've got to constantly focus on customer service.

**"Relentless"** has to be a passion. **"Relentless"** has to be a lifetime commitment.

## **What you'll gain from reading this book**

This book is written primarily for executives who set the tone and vision for their business, government or not-for-profit organizations. Senior and middle managers who influence service quality can benefit from it as well as entrepreneurs who want to grow a business by serving their own customers.

**"Relentless"** is intended for *anyone* who wants their organization to grow and prosper by putting the needs of their customers at the forefront of their work.

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After reading this book you should have a clear understanding of what it means—and what it takes to be **“Relentless”**. And once you decide to commit to it, you’ll be well-equipped to weave being **“Relentless”** into your life and your work.

In addition to discussions of **“Relentless”** principles, this book contains:

- Illustrations and guidelines about what **“Relentless”** is, and what it looks like when applied.
- Personal and business practices that can help you to carry **“Relentless”** forward.
- Inspirations from those who have succeeded in being **“Relentless”**—and a few cautionary tales from those who have not.

### **Will you & your organization be “Relentless”?**

**“Relentless”** is not about implementing something new. It’s about recognizing, reaffirming and reprioritizing your goals, then using the tools you already have at your disposal, and refocusing your organizational mission.

**“Relentless”** must be your core operating principle: *serve your customer above all things.*

As Vernon Hill said in his book *Fans! Not Customers*:

**“Customers Rule. They pay our salaries.”**

Everything else revolves around that conviction.

**I: What does it mean  
to be “RELENTLESS”?**

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# **Chapter 2: What is Relentless?**



### **Definition**

*“Relentless”* is:

- An obsession with providing exceptional service to your customers.
- A propulsive, self-directed, passion to continue to learn, improve and exceed expectations in everything you do.
- Much like breathing, it’s essential to your being, and it never stops.
- A race without a finish line
- A reflection of the core principles, beliefs and attitudes of people within healthy and hugely successful businesses.

#### **RULE NUMBER 1:**

**Serve the customer.**

#### **RULE NUMBER 2:**

**When in doubt, see RULE NUMBER 1.**

### **Principles to Beliefs to Attitudes to Actions**

Our actions arise from our personal beliefs and attitudes. As leaders, those *personal* beliefs and attitudes imprint and lead to our *professional* attitudes and actions.

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Principles can guide how we act. Stephen R. Covey wrote about principles: “They seem to exist in all human beings, regardless of social conditioning and loyalty to them....”<sup>ii</sup> Whether or not we embrace them is a personal choice, but principles exist all the same. For example, principles of fairness, honesty, integrity, human dignity, service and excellence. Principles are separate from practices.

When we recognize a principle, we can choose to believe in it. That will then affect our attitudes and in turn, our actions.

So, if we embrace fairness, human dignity, service and excellence, these might (if we choose) give rise to the attitude to serve the customer. For sound business reasons, I think the attitude should be *serve the customer above all things*

To me, this is common sense:

1. You’re responsible for your organization
2. You want it to grow and thrive
3. Embrace this and act on it!

This is a no-brainer. Recognize the principles that are likely already inside you. Believe in them. Let your attitudes reflect them and ACT on them! This is where **“Relentless”** comes from.

If you look at LL Bean, they've always been **“Relentless”** when it comes to customer service. It's part of their strategy. They've never let up on their focus on customer service. They really understand, so it's part of their culture. It shows in their actions.

Lots of companies say things like “the needs of the patient come first.” For most, these are empty platitudes.

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The Mayo Clinic Health System is the best healthcare system in the country—maybe in the world. When they say the patient comes first, they mean it. In a world where most hospitals are like Motel 6, Mayo is the Ritz Carlton.

It doesn't get more "**Relentless**" than that.

### **... to Actions**

Since "**Relentless**" is based on principles, beliefs and attitudes it stands a solid chance of outlasting the tenure of a single leader. You can encourage those around you to find *in themselves* the principles, beliefs and attitudes that lead them to want to be "**Relentless**".

To have a "**Relentless**" attitude permeate your organization or agency or company takes sustained effort. It must be essential to the culture. A majority have to buy into the idea. But that shouldn't be too hard. It makes good sense.

**It's got to be driven from the top all the way down through the bottom. At the end of the day you've got to commit ongoing capital investment into it.**

~Keith Vincent, CEO, Wilderness Safaris

"**Relentless**" is more than an attitude. It gets woven into the fabric of an organization. "**Relentless**" actions show in programs and systems (from training to policy) that reinforce and apply continual top shelf customer service.

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Executives believe and act on it. It is a clear, stated emphasis across the organization. That priority results in resource commitment.

A “**Relentless**” approach shows up in the attitudes and aptitudes targeted in staffing. Priorities and allocations in business plans reflect customer-service priority. There is a sustained investment in training. Obviously, it shows in interactions with customers, and results in better experiences, improved satisfaction and increased loyalty.

Building an efficient and effective organization requires investing time and funds with an eye to long-term success rather than short-term profits.

Sections II and III go into how to spread “**Relentless**” attitudes and actions in detail.

## **What “Relentless” ISN’T**

It’s important to recognize what does not count as “**Relentless**”:

This isn’t about endlessly hounding customers. Promotional offers, satisfaction surveys, internet ads, PR releases, social media posts... they have a place. But when you think of using them, *start* with what makes sense from the customer’s perspective. Use these tools with finesse, to meet customers’ needs. Unrelenting pursuit is nearly the opposite of *servicing the customer above all things*.

This isn’t about hounding employees either. You want employees who choose to serve customers because they think it’s the right thing to do.

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This isn't about slogans and signs by the cash register or weekly themes or a new drive for email addresses or subscriptions or signups. A company that truly lives out its *Principles to Beliefs to Attitudes* will have far greater success than one that only spends lots of money on lots of signs and slogans and quippy motivations.

This can't be a flavor-of-the-week, the month or the year. It can't be a flash-in-the-pan or a consultant-of-the-moment idea. I'm asking you to live out what you know at your core. Spread that message to your team and then practice it every day.

This isn't the sort of thing that will be forgotten with leadership changes. This strategy, this attitude, is essential to the success of the organization. And if you convey that to your staff—and they believe it too, they'll carry the mantle long after you're gone.

This won't “magically” save you from past mistakes. When you make them—and we all do—you lose the trust of your customers. You have to re-earn that trust by showing integrity over time and a renewed willingness to put the needs of the customer first. Being **“Relentless”** can help with that, but it will take time.

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## **Chapter Summary**

- **“Relentless”** is based in your beliefs
- Principles lead to Beliefs lead to Attitudes lead to Actions
- Serving the customer builds the bottom line and long-term growth prospects of an organization
- **“Relentless”** attitudes are built into the entire organization
- **“Relentless”** is not hounding customers to buy your products
- **“Relentless”** is not a campaign or initiative
- **“Relentless”** is a way of life for your organization going forward

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## **Questions for reflection**

- What are your personal “**Relentless**” principles?  
How do they tie to serving customers?
  
- What attitudes and actions reflect your “**Relentless**” principles in your personal life?  
How do these tie to serving customers?
  
- In your professional life, what attitudes and actions reflect your “**Relentless**” principles?
  
- How do you share your attitudes and principles with others? How do you encourage others to be “**Relentless**”?

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# Chapter 12: Commit to Staying “Relentless”

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I truly believe that providing “*Relentless*” customer service WILL drive your organization to success.

Certainly, all other business-focused concerns and metrics have their place. “*Relentless*” doesn’t replace the drive to provide shareholder value or the concerns about reducing costs and increasing profits. Organizations will still have to juggle technology concerns, succession plans, and countless other worries.

Being “*Relentless*” about customer service is the central strategy that gives ALL those other concerns the proper and profitable context.

A “*Relentless*” leader recognizes that *servicing the customer above all things* is the single foundational principle guaranteed to bring significant, sustainable, long-term value to an organization.

“*Relentless*” provides the foundation.

“*Relentless*” begins with the Vision of leadership and is encouraged and nurtured across the organization.

“*Relentless*” is a reflection of the core principles, beliefs and attitudes of people within healthy and hugely successful organizations.

“*Relentless*” is fostered in others to drive an organization’s culture.

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“**Relentless**” is woven into everything. Every job function clearly sees its direct connection to serving the customer and building a long-term, healthy organization.

- It becomes the central idea that fuels a successful organization.
- It becomes an obsession—a propulsive, self-directed, passion to continue to learn, improve and exceed expectations in all you do.
- Much like breathing, it’s essential to your organization’s being. It never stops.

When an organization is “**Relentless**,” every day, every employee can confidently show “Here’s how my work today helped/supported/*served* out customers.”

*“Relentless” is part of who you are.*

*“Relentless” is for the long haul.*

*“Relentless” stays with you into the future.*

*“Relentless” forges your path to success.*

Be “**Relentless**”.

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## **Chapter Summary**

- Applying “*Relentless*” principles will drive your organization to success.
- “*Relentless*” provides the foundation and context of all other organizational decisions.
- “*Relentless*” arises from your personal beliefs and convictions.
- Applied to your professional life, it becomes central to all you do.
- Sharing “*Relentless*” with others is the key to its success.

