

with a degree from Scripps and no employment but shilling tourists eager to see Moby Dick's remaining relatives told me that "George appraised his house at \$250 000. Six million bucks is more like it."

God bless American integrity.

Due north on a four-laner at 65 mph and fifty minutes later I parked across the street from a building which looks like a pavilion at Walt Disney World. L.L. Bean. "Not a store, a tradition".

### The Bean Guarantee

Why was I here, a city lad more accustomed to a car park than a parka? The lure was twofold.

First, in Salem, Massachusetts, famous for burning [a] the midnight oil waiting for cargo ships and [b] witches to enliven dreary autumn evenings, I heard a tall tale. The Hawthorne was a young lad narrating for \$7 a walk through the House of Seven Gables: "I wore a pair of Bean jeans in the store, and they made me take them off. They gave me a new pair, for free. Like really."

Second, the L.L. Bean advertisement which appears as a warm up for the hard-core US gifting season. The nugget of copy which grabbed my attention promises in down-homese:

#### Notice

*I do not consider a sale complete until goods are worn out and the customer still satisfied.*

*We will thank anyone to return goods that are not perfectly satisfactory.*

*Should the person reading this notice know of anyone who is not satisfied with our goods, I will consider it a favour to be notified.*

*Above all things we wish to avoid having a dissatisfied customer.*

## INFORMATION TERRITORIES

### MAINSTREAM CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

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Drive north from Boston for about 90 minutes, and you find yourself in a state largely untouched by condo builders, K-Mart, and people who earn their living killing trees and laying down parking lots.

Make your way past the gawking aficionados of American machismo who queue for hours in their **mini-Winis** to stare at George Bush's summer White House in Kennebunkport, Maine. One whale watcher

. . . Attributed to L.L. Bean, inventor of the Maine wader, a waterproof shoe with a genuine-leather upper.

I must admit that my visiting this shrine of honesty, appropriately separated from the **Low-Baller** of Kennebunkport by two score miles, did not prove or disprove this advertising claim. There were dozens of people roaming the multi-floored sanctuary of the woodsy. Mind you: because Bushwatchers added hours to my trip, I arrived at 22:00. Under the greenish fluorescent glow, night owls snapped at neon-pink, **graphite-**reinforced kayaks; elephant guns with the firepower to make dead a killer squirrel or terrorist deer prowled not; and 100 percent, hand-loomed Norwegian wool sailing sweaters smelling faintly of sardines and perfect for country club wear.

I asked a chipper young clerk about the Bean commitment to customer satisfaction, and she said: "What do you want to return?" "Nothing", I said. "What about the jean story?" She answered, "It's true, I think. But like, ah, not on my shift".

It was on the drive back to my motel that I wondered about the commitment to customer satisfaction in the electronic information industry. Were there any data pioneers who took the same weird and antique stance as good old L.L.? Do database producers offer money-back guarantees if their data doesn't satisfy a customer? Do CD-ROM vendors guarantee 100 percent satisfaction for their hand-loomed products day or night, 365 days a year through update and power surge? Will timesharing companies refund money immediately, demanding that the customer remove his intellectual pants so he or she may be fittingly clothed?

### Customer Satisfaction for us in the US

A public librarian in Northern Indiana had a few days earlier described her own customer satisfaction experience. She used one of the

major merger and acquisition databases which yielded information about investors and the number of shares they bought at a specific time. The data delivered online didn't match figures she had obtained from other sources.

Puzzled about the possible discrepancy, she rang the database producer. The first call produced a sympathetic customer service **staffer who** ran the search on the database producer's in-house system. Same numbers? Nope. The data generated were different from the information in the printed source and the timesharing company's version of the database. The librarian asked, "What's right"? The customer service staffer replied, "**I'll** get right back to you".

Cursed with the thoroughness of the profession, the librarian dialed up the timesharing company and reported the **inconsistency** to a customer service staffer. The vendor's expert ran the search and got the librarian's result. "Why are the data different on your system and the database producer's system? What's right"? The timesharing company's customer service staffer crooned, "**I'll** get back to you". She had kept the faith two weeks but was beginning to doubt when I spoke to her.

Then 48 hours later I received another telephone call. It was Linda Rosen, co-author with me of *Managing the New Electronic Information Technology*, who called from San Francisco to tell me that at a recent CD-ROM conference in California, one of the self-professed leaders in optical technology failed on two consecutive days to get his equipment operating. The hapless salesperson couldn't get customer satisfaction from his own company. Ms Rosen, who lives in New Hampshire and enjoys with residents of Maine considerable skill in understatement, said, "Major flop. Lost, no, *killed* sales".

What should the information industry do to carry its approach to customer satisfaction outside the narrow bounds of electronic information?

Customer satisfaction. . . no problem

I'm not sure that the information industry can do much. The standards of excellence are in place, deeply rooted, and widely practiced. Here are five of modest importance which most information companies have already nailed down.

1. Telling the truth. In theory, truth is virtue. Virtue, however, is not a particularly valuable concept in making an information sale. If we add a marketing twist, we get "Tell some of the truth". That's better, and it has more zip, crackle and snap. Now database producers can crow about daily updates and tactfully omit that only a half-dozen titles are processed on this schedule. Hey, updating some titles daily is better than updating zero titles daily? A customer cannot be dissatisfied when titles are updated daily as advertised. Hence, the database producer has fostered customer satisfaction.
2. Returning telephone calls. Telephone calls are expensive and generally annoying. Anyone involved in the information industry maintains a keen sense of time zones. Calls are routinely returned before the customer arrives in the morning, or when he/she steps out of the office for lunch, leaves at the end of the day or travels on business. The pink telephone slip showing that a customer was called saves time, which is in short supply. If an actual voice contact is established, time is wasted. Talking with the customer is, therefore, neither efficient nor desirable. Thinking about making a call is as good as actually making the call. When no contact is established, a customer cannot be dissatisfied. Hence, satisfaction is a result not returning telephone calls.
3. Refunding money. Smart people know that money is in short supply. What money is available is needed to increase the profitability of the information product.

Furthermore, money gravitates to those who are most clever. Running an ineffective search demonstrates and yields incontrovertible evidence that a person (the customer) is not clever. Giving money to people who are not smart changes the natural flow of cash from the dumb to the smart. Hence, the information company increases customer satisfaction by keeping the customer's money.

4. Knowing the product. There are too many databases for any information company to know them all. Database producers are too busy making data to know what's in the product they manufacture. Senior managers know that knowledge of a database fosters an understanding of the product's strengths and weaknesses. With such knowledge, dangerous or disturbing comparisons might be made between competing products. The customer can unwittingly be dissatisfied by an informed product comparison. An information company, of course, must never dissatisfy a customer. Hence, if product knowledge stimulates customer dissatisfaction, it follows that product ignorance increases customer satisfaction.
5. Treating others as we would like to be treated. Customers are, of course, customers and know their place in the Great Chain of Searching. If not happy little worker bees, customers are certainly the obedient servants of the information companies. Like proper domestics, they enjoy the heel of their betters. By definition a superior cannot treat an inferior as an equal without creating in the lesser soul dissatisfaction with his niche. Thus, eliminating such sources of irritation increases customer satisfaction.

Comforted that L.L. had it wrong and we information industry types had it right, I left the Holy Shrine of the Outdoorsman and started the journey to my motel. There I would be secure in a vacation haven made safe by

submarines, troops and electronic surveillance gear installed when the electoral votes were pulled from the bushes. L.L.'s troublesome approach to customer satisfaction wouldn't set my teeth on edge.

Back in Kennebunkport, the road past Mr. Bush's house was almost deserted. Only a lone North Dakota Republican with an elephantine wife stood on the top of his Chevy Blazer with Bean's night vision glasses pressed to his eyes. He was watching the US Army guards patrol the perimeter of the Bush compound, making sure no killer whales threatened.

### Bean's Off Beam

As I wrestled my Dollar Rent-a-Car Plymouth into the motel's parking lot, I had come to grips with the fact that old L.L. had his rubber pants on backwards.

He didn't understand his customers. No wonder his store is buried in the same Maine woods that attracted Thoreau and other similarly crazed visitors by the van load.

More to the point, how does L.L. pay the bills? His notions are counter to those which are at the core of America's renaissance industry — information. Refunds, 24-hour service, post-sale support — my God, did he have moose grease for brains?

I slammed the door on my Chrysler product, heard the reassuring tinny clang, and knew that the American information industry, like its counterparts in automobiles, really understood how to deliver customer satisfaction. The librarian in Indiana. Off her bean too. Consistent data. Explanations. Baloney!

I caught a whiff of the Atlantic Ocean and mumbled to myself, "L.L.'s going to get a harpoon in the dorsal if he doesn't get customer satisfaction squared away. Maybe we should invite him to the next (US) Information Industry Association meeting so

we can set him straight about customer satisfaction"?

**The company mentioned in this essay:**  
L.L. Bean, inc.  
9455 Spruce Street,  
Freeport, Maine 04033, USA.