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CHAPTER 1:

The Puzzling Situation Today

Check out company creeds, management books, business courses, and seminars — what one thing do you find nearly everywhere?

It's the instruction "*Wow your customers!*" Or, its wordier variation "*Exceed your customers' expectations.*"

Of course, the true believers of this precept aren't talking about wowing a customer or exceeding expectations just once. Nosiree — they'd have us do it in *every* encounter with *every* customer.

Some companies have even elevated the notion to the highest order: the mission statement.

OUR MISSION: To exceed each customer's expectations every time.

Woweee, that's impressive-sounding. Even smacks of nobility. Only the smartest, most insightful, highest-intentioned business owner or executive would have such a lofty calling. Right?

Started in the 1980s, the wow-the-customer, exceed-expectations mantra has grown to become one of the most loudly-proclaimed, universally-accepted precepts of the business world. The way some consultants and company execs speak of it you'd think that it's the panacea for all business ills. Or, at least the final answer to building sales, buyer loyalty, and customer satisfaction. You'd even be led to believe that it's something brilliant, correct, and useful.

Over the years, what has puzzled me in all this is: No one — to the best of my knowledge — has ever challenged it. No one has posed just a few basic questions, such as:

Do customers really *want* to be wowed (or to have their expectations exceeded)?

When they're wowed, do they actually *enjoy* it?

Do some customers *not* enjoy it?

Does wowing customers cause them to become more loyal, *or* might it cause some to become less loyal?

Does wowing customers really produce a *competitive advantage*, or cause customers to select a business over its competition?

Could wowing customers actually drive some customers *away*?

Are there other aspects of the service experience that customers *rate higher*, or prefer more, than being wowed?

Is there an organizational *downside* to wowing customers? Is there an organizational downside to *even trying* to wow customers?

Is wowing every customer every time, or exceeding every customer's expectations every time, *achievable*? If it's not achievable, should it be a company's mission or overriding objective?

I'm amazed that in the past 25 years of the wow-the-customer, exceed-expectations chorus not a single voice has risen to question or challenge it. What further compounds my puzzlement is, no matter how I examine this precept it comes out looking like the screwiest, most counterproductive, most misguided instruction in the business world today.

So, in an attempt to start a dialogue on this concept — and perhaps get our business community to do an objective, blinders-off examination of it — I'm herewith putting my blaspheming thoughts to paper and unleashing them onto the world.