Plus ...

Jobs,
Discussion,
Tips, Reviews
and Events

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About FreePint

FreePint is a global network of people who find, use, manage and share work-related information. Members receive this free twice-monthly newsletter, which is packed with tips, features and resources.

Joining FreePint is free at <http://www.freepint.com/> and connects information practitioners around the world with resources, events and answers to their tricky research and information questions at the FreePint Bar, our free online forum: <http://www.freepint.com/bar/>.

The FreePint Newsletter is available online in several formats and can be read, saved and forwarded at <http://www.freepint.com/issues/>.

Editorial

Love ain't easy - it's a cliche, but it also happens to be true. Ask anyone who's ever loved if it brought 100% happiness 100% of the time.

Making relationships run smoothly is bloody hard work, whether you're talking about staying married, having a child or even deepening connections with clients.

That last part might sound overstated, but that's just the problem, if you ask Robbie Frazer, managing director of Prenax <http://www.prenax.co.uk/>, a subscription agent that won the Online Information/FreePint award for customer service in December.

'People think good customer service is about being friendly and answering the phone on the fourth ring,' Frazer told me over a drink a few weeks ago. 'But that's not enough. The question is: "Do the company's executives feel it in their gut when the phone isn't answered by the fourth ring?"'

Creating solid customer service is about love - tough love. Frazer explains the lessons Prenax learned and still follow when it comes to creating a positive customer service culture.

We also feature in this issue an article to help you internally with product evaluations. FreePint's FUMSI reports <http://web.freepint.com/go/shop/report/> has just released a new report that presents step-by-step information on how to evaluate products. Read on for free needs assessment strategies.

Finally, we ask one of our favourite search gurus Martin White for his desert island books - those titles he turns to time and again to assist him in his career as an intranet consultant. Check out his new book from Facet Publishing, "Making Search Work: Implementing web, intranet and enterprise search".

If you could choose five websites to take with you to a desert island, what would they be? We want to know for our My Favourite Tipples column. Send me your five faves (read guidelines here <http://www.onopoly.com/author/freepint/>), and you might be published in these digital pages.

Sincerely,

Monique Cuvelier Editor, FreePint
e: monique.cuvelier@freepint.com
w: <http://www.onopoly.com/support/team/>

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Blogs & Social Media Forum 2

Tuesday 5 June 2007
Marriott London Grosvenor Square

Social Media and Enterprise 2.0
- Join the Debate!

The **Blogs & Social Media Forum 2 will** examine the impact of social media and enterprise 2.0 by combining expert industry insight with real life case studies to provide the latest thinking from leading experts in this space.

Breaking away from the traditional conference format, the day is made up of **conversational panels**, **case studies, open space** and **speed networking** to provide practical ideas and strategies that will help you address the challenges of social media in your organisation.

Following a sell-out launch event in 2006, this year's Forum will encourage debate on progress made over the last 12 months and offer predictions for the future.

KEY THEMES:

- The benefits of social media and enterprise 2.0
- Developing a corporate social media strategy
- Gain insight and knowledge from: **General Motors, The Economist.com, BUPA, BP/Castrol, Ask.com, BBC New Media** and **Sun Microsystems**
- Hear about metrics for measuring the internal and external impact of social media
- Creating a culture for social media
- Tackling organisational change to make social media work
- Using social media to boost innovation and creativity in the organisation
- Expert speakers include: **Euan Semple**, Independent Consultant, **Simon Phipps**, Sun Microsystems, **Ben Edwards**, The Economist.com, **Adriana Lukas**, Big Blog Company, **Myles Runham**, General Manager - Europe, Ask.com

From the organisers of Online Information

Michael Gutierrez is a reference librarian at the University of Delaware Library <http://www.lib.udel.edu/> and is currently obtaining his doctorate in Education Technology.

Submit your top five favourite web sites. See the guidelines at <http://www.freepint.com/author/>.

My Favourite Tipples

by Michael Gutierrez

As a reference librarian, I am constantly bombarded by new websites to explore. These are five that I have found useful over the past few months:

- Topix.net <http://www.topix.net/> provides easy access to relevant world, local and personalised news by categorising headlines from various publications.

- KartOO <http://www.kartoo.com/> is a metasearch engine that displays important websites and significant thematics in an interactive map. The interactive map can be used to refine the searched topic.

- Technorati <http://www.technorati.com/> is a gateway search engine that allows users to explore the world of weblogs. Technorati also searches video blogs, podcasts and other global conversations happening on the web.

- Public Agenda <http://www.publicagenda.org/> is used daily by concerned citizens, students, policy makers and journalists to explore different perspectives and syntheses of public attitudes, as well as pertinent facts and figures.

- Catalog of Nonprofit Literature <http://lnps.fdncenter.org/> is a searchable database for such topics as fundraising, proposal development and works related to charitable giving. It includes project reports, studies and statistical analyses.

Emerging Market M&A Total coverage

DealWatch is the source for on Emerging Market M&A and other transaction news and information. Designed by emerging market specialists for emerging market professionals. Forward looking information for people who need to know what isn't published everywhere else.

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The Jinfo Newsletter now features a CV Makeover, in which a job seeker's CV is critiqued and revised by specialists in the field as well as career tips for all experience levels. Read the latest edition and subscribe free at <http://www.jinfo.com/newsletter/>.

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Information Specialist

This post will focus on quick enquiry work, answering a wide range of queries relating to the work of the Department.
Recruiter: TFPL Ltd.
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6672>

Information Analyst

Information Analyst (maternity cover). Ideally 4 days (30 hours) per week but with some flexibility to being full-time.
Recruiter: Cushman & Wakefield
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6709>

See over for job listings ...

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Supporting your career, your organisation, your industry.

5 Posts available now. Researchers and Corporate Specialists.
Recruiter: Intelligent Resources Ltd
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6586>

Records Co-ordinator

A Records Co-ordinator is sought on a 12 month basis to work with a West Midlands based Public Corporation.
Recruiter: Weekes Gray Recruitment
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6681>

Knowledge Manager - Not For Profit

Contribute significantly to planning, integrating and achieving the operational goals by imbedding knowledge management processes.
Recruiter: Glen Recruitment
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6706>

Senior Knowledge Manager

Global accountancy firm seeks KM professional to identify needs, develop strategy & implement content management processes.
Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6715>

NB: These are just a selection of information-related jobs in the Jinfo database <http://www.jinfo.com/>. Receive the latest job listings weekly with the free Jinfo Update. Free to subscribe at <http://www.jinfo.com/>

{ *business intelligence* }

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Monique Cuvelier is Editor of the FreePint Newsletter. She has served as editor of several publications and her writing has appeared in Publish, USA Today, Bankrate and many others. Learn more about her at <http://www.onopoly.com/support/team/>..

Subscribe to the twice-weekly email digests at <http://www.freepint.com/subs/>

Growing populations and markets are hot topics in the FreePint Bar <http://www.freepint.com/bar>. Keep reading for nuggets on how people are addressing these issues, and then participate in the discussions.

- As the population continues to age and reach retirement age, more companies are thinking about what to do when some of their most valuable employees leave the workplace. One person in the Bar is conducting an informal survey on how others are handling 'effective knowledge transfer and retention strategies for when senior employees' retire or leave. Lend your insights http://www.freepint.com/go/b121422>.

- An exodus of older employees is always followed by new employees, some of whom may not have much work experience. That's the situation one FreePinter is facing with a new library administrative staff with no background working in a library. She's looking to offer a training program and searching for ideas. Have any? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b121282>. More ideas in the Student Bar <http://www.freepint.com/go/s23349>.

- Free Pint's DigBig <http://www.digbig.com/> comes to the rescue for a newsletter editor who's seeking a way to shorten long URLs. Read how others are using this service in innovative ways <http://www.freepint.com/go/b120436>.

- One frustrated Bar-ista is wondering how much companies spend on marketing compared to their company turnover, specifically in the information technology sector. She's out of ideas - and out of money - so offer advice if you have any <http://www.freepint.com/go/b121542>.

- Another inquisitive Bar member is wondering how big the construction market is in United Arab Emirates <http://www.freepint.com/go/b121549>. It's an exploding sector that's sure to keep growing. Keep your eyes on VIP, which is planning a special issue on researching companies in the Middle East <http://www.vivaVIP.com/>.

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Free Pint Limited
4-6 Station Approach
Ashford, Middlesex
TW15 2QN, UK

T: 0870 141 7474
I: +44 870 141 7474
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Make the most of product trials. Provides an adaptable methodology for evaluating business information products. Includes 5 worksheets, sample needs assessment tools and a sample evaluation report.

More info:
http://web.freepint.com/go/shop/report/product-evaluation/

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Turn KM techniques into RM initiatives. Step-by-step guidance on building or improving a risk management programme. Includes 8 hands-on worksheets.

More info:
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"Product Evaluations: Completing a Needs Assessment"
By FreePint FUMSI Editorial Staff

This article was adapted from an appendix in the recently published FreePint FUMSI Report, Product Evaluation Report and Tool Kit (URL). FreePint FUMSI reports are practical workbooks designed to help information practitioners Find, Use, Manage and Share work-related Information (FUMSI). Learn more about FUMSI <http://www.freepint.com/fumsi/>.

Over the course of doing business, every organisation encounters the need to conduct product evaluations. Sometimes evaluations are no more complex than taking advantage of a free trial period. For larger purchases, however, as well as products that require the input of many different stakeholders, it's important to approach product evaluation with the same rigour and attention to detail as any other research project.

A needs assessment is a critical step in creating a product evaluation plan that truly incorporates the unique needs of an organisation. This article, adapted from the recently published FreePint FUMSI report, Product Evaluation Report and Tool Kit, offers three approaches to building needs assessment tools:

- Surveys
- Focus Groups
- Workplace Observations

Surveys

Surveys are effective for gathering input from stakeholders, particularly those based in many different locations. Surveys can be conducted electronically through Web-based tools or the old fashioned way, on paper. If you haven't written surveys in the past, you may be surprised at how much planning and thought must go into crafting one to ensure you get good information.

This sample survey is designed to elicit user needs regarding a specific type of information. The survey could easily be implemented through a Web-based tool, making data collection and analysis much easier for the project manager.

Financial Information Needs Assessment The research centre is in the process of evaluating two database products to license for internal use. In order to help us make the right decision, we ask you to take 5 minutes to complete this brief survey about your needs and preferences for such a product. If you have any questions about this process or how the data will be used, please contact the research centre at extension 3353.

How frequently do you need or request financial information?

- Multiple times every day
- Once a day
- Three or four times a week
- Fewer than three times a week

When you access or request financial information, how critical is the data to your ability to perform your job?

- Essential - I can't work without it
- Important but not absolutely essential
- Nice to have but not a real problem if missing

Are you familiar with the following database products?

To view table see the HTML version here:
<http://www.freepint.com/issues/190407.htm#feature>

The following list of features is among the evaluation criteria for these

products. Please rate the following features based on how important they are to your work with financial information:

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What other features not named above are important to you in a financial database product or service?

Quick Tips for Crafting Surveys

• Be Brief: Your survey should be as short as possible and ideally take fewer than 10 minutes to complete.

• Question Arrangement: Be sure to create logical flow to the order of your questions - don't jump from one topic to another without raising a few 'signposts' to guide your respondents.

• Simplify your language: 'What is the frequency of your usage of the information centre over the last 30 days?' is better understood as, 'About how many times have you sent a request to the information centre in the last 30 days?' Relax your grammatical standards if the questions sound too formal.

• Assure a common understanding: Write questions that everyone will understand in the same way.

• Avoid leading questions: Leading questions demand a specific response. Here's an example of a leading question:

Which of our premium databases is your preferred resource for news items?

As written, the leading question assumes that the premium database collection is the preferred resource - rather than the open Web, for example.

• Avoid 'double-barrelled' questions: Double-barrelled questions are difficult to answer and impossible to interpret. Here's an example of a double-barrelled question:

Is the Info Update newsletter interesting and useful?

The newsletter may be very interesting but not very useful.

• Limit open-ended questions: The

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more open-ended (or 'fill in the blank') questions you include in your survey, the less likely respondents are to provide thoughtful and meaningful responses, and the less likely you are to get a high response rate. Open-ended questions also require much more work in analysis and interpretation.

Types of Questions and How to Use Them:

To view table see the HTML version here: <http://www.freepint.com/issues/190407.htm#feature>

Focus Groups

Like surveys, focus groups offer an opportunity to gather input directly from stakeholders regarding their wants and needs. One advantage of focus groups is that they create a forum for give-and- take. The group process can be creative, and a good focus group can surface needs that an evaluator did not even consider.

On the other hand, focus groups require more coordination of schedules, and reviewing results can be time-consuming since so much of the data is unstructured. And although more and more researchers are conducting online, asynchronous focus groups, it is still much more common for focus groups to be conducted in person, meaning that participants must be brought together at the same time and place.

Preparing for a focus group with a good

discussion outline lays the groundwork for success and sets appropriate expectations for everyone participating in the group. The provided sample outline for a discussion guide is a starting point for adaptation.

This sample focus group discussion guide demonstrates an approach to organising a focus group session.

Introduction and Welcome

Explain Purpose Prior to conducting an in-depth product evaluation, we want to gather input from you regarding your needs for this and similar products.

General Instructions for Session * No right or wrong answers * Your opinion is what counts * Provide candid input * Lasts about 1 hour * Confidentiality guaranteed.

1. What do you consider to be the most useful product on your desktop? Why? (Surface preferences and essential workflow needs based on responses)

2. How would you go about replacing that product if it weren't available anymore?

3. We're evaluating products for our market research collection. What are the products you are most interested in for this collection? Why? (Listen for products on our evaluation list)

4. Straw poll: On the flip chart is a list of product features. When I read out loud the feature you think is most important for a market research product, please raise your hand. (Look for clusters; generate additional discussion around important features)

5. Let's look at different ways you use the output of a market research product in your work. Talk us through a typical project and the ways market research is essential, important or just 'nice to have' as part of the project. (Let members share and note needs around workflow integration, frequency of usage, level of detail required, etc)

6. Summarise priorities and thank participants for their time.

Tips for Successful Focus Groups

- Determine your purpose - What do you need to know that you don't know?

- Select the proper group size (usually 6-10), composition, and time

- Establish a recording method
- Recording
- Note-taker
- Flip charts
- Other method

- Recruit participants based on purpose
- Bringing together 'like minds' is more effective than striving for diversity in each group
- Be sensitive to internal politics

- Plan for no-shows

- Craft your questions ahead of time
- Consider unique value of group

experience - what can you get in a group that you can't get from a survey?
- Pre-test your questions to be sure they are clear and targeted
- Identify which questions you are willing to drop if time runs short

- Manage the group
- Encourage quiet participants
- Listen for tone
- Keep to time
- Reflect back what you hear to ensure understanding

- Write results as soon as possible following the session to capture insight.

Related FreePint links:

- FUMSI <http://www.freepint.com/fumsi/>

Workplace Observation

Surveys and focus groups are both needs assessment tools that rely on users' self-reported needs and preferences. But users are not always accurate when they self-report things like the amount of time certain tasks take or the number of steps a project takes. Workplace observations can be a helpful needs assessment tool when decision- critical information demands accuracy in these areas. An external observer can time tasks, record steps and ask clarifying questions about tasks that the worker may not even be aware of doing.

Workplace observations are time-consuming and are used much more rarely than surveys or focus groups. For significant cost-savings related to worker time and tasks, however, they are more reliable than self-reported data.

This sample workplace observation outline is designed to capture information about workflow and hidden costs of search associated with time:

Database log-ins during 4-hour period (add hash mark for each log-in):

Duration of sample search sessions (time with stopwatch):

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First Steps, Next Steps

A needs assessment is part of a whole approach to product evaluation that starts with defining evaluation criteria, continues through methodology design and data gathering, and ends with purchase recommendations. Incorporating a needs assessment helps ensure that the product evaluation actually meets user needs. Most business products will do what they say they will do - a content management system will manage content; a premium content database will provide access to premium content. The needs assessment connects a product's features and functionality directly to user needs, enabling decision- makers to choose products best suited to the enterprise.

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Current Issue

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- Insight - Adapting corporate Web 2.0 strategies for B2B

- Insider - Understanding the EU on its 50th anniversary

- Focus On - Digging up information on European companies

Coming in 2007: More product reviews each month, plus focused feature issues on Middle East/Africa and more. What would you like us to cover? Share your thoughts at any time to support@vivaVIP.com, or post them to the VIP Lounge.

Forthcoming Reviews

- Apr 2007 — Reviews of Magpie and Brandwatch
- May 2007 — Reviews of World Investment Service and Newstin
- Jun 2007 — Middle East/Africa: business information needs and sources

Testimonial

"VIP gives me an objective analysis of business information products and vendors as well as practical and informative advice on industry issues."
*Kerryn Dillon,
European Marketing Manager,
OneSource Information Services*

"Book Case: Best Books for Intranet Consultants"
By Martin White

Martin White is the Managing Director of Intranet Focus Ltd. He is the author of The Content Management Handbook (2005) and Making Search Work (2007) both published by Facet Publishing <http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk>..

As a consultant you never quite know what the next telephone call or email will bring, other than in my case it will be something to do with intranets. On a long flight out to Phoenix recently I started to think about which books might be in my emergency kit if I had to fly out at a moment's notice, a sort of intranet Red Adair! <http://www.redadair.com/bio.html>

I've been quoted (by the authors!) as saying that if I just had to take one book, it would be "Information Architecture for the World Wide Web" <http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/9780596527341/index.html> by Peter Morville and Louis Rosenfeld. The 3rd edition was published late in 2006 but was a somewhat cut-and-paste revision of the 2nd edition, though the chapter on search functionality was much improved. Don't be put off by the reference to the Web; the book is just as relevant to intranets. Peter's book "Ambient Findability" <http://press.oreilly.com/pub/pr/1438> is a good read and has a very compelling preface, and I read it as a means of stimulating lateral thinking when short of good ideas. One of the problems of working as a sole consultant is that there is no one sitting across the desk with whom to brainstorm.

A key role for an intranet is in sustaining competitive advantage through effective access to information. No one has written about this better than Don Marchand <http://www.donaldmarchand.com/>, though Tom Peters <http://www.tompeters.com/> started it all with his book "Liberation Management" in 1992. Those were the days of Lotus Notes rather than the Web, but the insights and case studies are just as relevant today.

Sometimes, of course, information is mismanaged, and this was the major contributory factor to the failure of the Challenger Space Shuttle mission in 1986. Read Diane Vaughan's book "The Challenger Launch Decision" <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/13075.ctl>, and you'll never think about information the same way again. I am constantly fascinated by the information management issues that must have arisen in the use of decoded German signal traffic in World War II. David Kahn <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Kahn> started the flood with his book "The Codebreakers", and then Harry Hinsley

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Hinsley> wrote the definitive analysis with multiple tomes.

Intranets also need to support networks, and Rob Cross <http://www.robcross.org/> writes about "The Hidden Power of Social Networks" with a lot of authority and includes some useful workshop techniques. I feel that intranets need to be task-based - not just information stores - and I am an advocate of personas in defining the content and structure of intranets. "The User is Always Right" by Steve Mulder <http://www.muldermedia.com/> with Ziv Yaar is probably going to be the definitive handbook.

Of course, one of the challenges that intranets present is the way in which they need to reflect corporate culture, as I found out last year when working in the Middle East for the first time. Fortunately I had read the relevant sections in "When Cultures Collide" <http://www.crossculture.com/publications/wcc/index.html> by Richard Lewis. Peg Neuhauser's book "Culture.com" <http://www.pegneuhauser.com/html/my_books.html> is an excellent introduction to corporate culture in the virtual office.

My interests recently have turned to search, and I enjoy browsing through "A History of Online Information Services 1963-1976" <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=9955> by Charles Bourne and Trudi Bellardo Hahn, as it reminds me that search did not start with Google.

I will finish with two books that are information-rich but not directly about intranets. Richard Rhodes <http://www.richardrhodes.com/> is a genius at information research. Try his book "The Making of the Atomic Bomb". And if I could just have one book for the rest of my life it would have to be "Johann Sebastian Bach - The Learned Musician" <http://www.oup.com/uk/catalogue/?ci=9780199248841> by Christoph Wolff. Both authors illustrate that it is not just about information research but how information is analysed, synthesised and presented.

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- "Enterprise Search Guidebook", September 2005 By Martin White
  http://www.freepint.com/press/enterprise-search.htm

- Martin White Regulars Page
  http://digbig.com/4snet

- "Intranet Resources on the Web" By Martin White
  http://www.freepint.com/issues/300498.htm

To propose an information-related book or resource for review, send details to Monique Cuvelier, Editor of FreePint <editor@freepint.com>.

"Tough Love: Excelling at Customer Service Is Not Just One Big Happy-Clappy Hugfest"

By Robbie Frazer

Robbie Frazer is Managing Director of the subscription agent Prenax, founded in 1991 with offices in London, Paris, Stockholm, New York, Boston and San Francisco. The Prenax Group also comprises Basch Subscriptions Inc., in New Hampshire and IS Abonnements in Paris. Robbie sits on the Executive Committee of the Association of Subscription Agents, is a member of SLA, a committee member and trustee of the City Information Group and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Prior to Prenax, Robbie worked in financial services and publishing. He holds a degree in Genetics from Nottingham University, an MBA from Cranfield and a diploma from the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

In 2001 I was asked to put a pool table into Prenax's converted industrial loft offices in North London. At this time, 'fun' was one of our three values and everyone was dotcom drunk. The champion of the pool table campaign was a trendy Dane with wild hair and crazy dance moves. The guy who sat next to him, the coquettish Hans - a flamboyant Swede - wanted us to install a swing. A swing, for goodness sake, suspended from the iron struts supporting the glass church roof. He wanted to enjoy his 'downtime' by swinging to and fro 6 feet over the customer service desks whilst humming ABBA classics to himself. He was genuinely disappointed when we kyboshed the idea, and the Dane never forgave us for our fun-free stance on the pool table.

A year later, someone in the company told me that 'success' and 'being valued' were actually more fun than a swing on the ceiling. And without those two important values, no one was likely to have a good time at all. We needed to sharpen up our act and made our first tough-love decision. Hans and the Viking were on the next boat out.

Hard lessons, hard decisions

I never realised that running a subscription agent could take me to the cutting edge of the new world of business, but that's what this act did. The gorgeously named Red Herring magazine (which popped with the bubble, only to re-emerge in '03 as an online-only production) was full of strange companies doing odd things but with photos of deliriously happy employees and delighted clients. They had onsite creches, concierge services (so your employers would wash your smalls for you), community outreach benefits packages and, of course, pool tables and swings. For some reason, the businesses were usually named after oddly coloured animals or fruit. The world was full of red bananas, blue parrots, pink fish, orange cats and red herrings. Customer service was all about being warm and fuzzy, peopled by friendly types who wore distressed jeans at client meetings and drank carrot juice for breakfast.

That's the storybook idea of customer service, and it doesn't work. Sometimes, treating your customers right hurts.

My point is that there are rock-solid reasons why a company should champion its people, really care about its customers and create a culture where customer service is central to everything. And those reasons are not all joss sticks and dungarees, but hard business motives that sometimes need very tough decisions to be made: to create this service culture where people take pride in their customer relations and generally seem to be enjoying work takes some effort.

In other words, some silk mittens have iron fists inside them. Consider the chap who runs Innocent, the organic smoothie maker. I used to have a very clear picture of him - knitting his own underwear out of muesli and smoking dolphin-friendly mung beans. But no, he's got visions and values up the ying yang and knows his balance sheets from his hessian. Here was a man who created the yoghurt equivalent of a group hug and still skimmed off a nice

fat-free profit. Turns out the guy's running one of the sharpest companies around. Admirable stuff.

Think about all the trendy and excellent companies that debuted in recent memory. Pret a Manger kept their sandals dry when flogging a third to McDonald's; Ben and Jerry had more on their minds than Chunky Monkey flavourings when they sold up to Unilever; and Anita knew exactly how much strawberry foot salad she was shifting when negotiating L'Oreal's shoe-in to Body Shop.

Good investments

Clearly, being smart but tough about customer service is important from a supplier's profit perspective. Quite simply, a company that provides good customer service tends not to lose clients. New clients are expensive. Because you have to pay salespeople, it takes a huge amount of management time, and implementation costs mean you don't make a profit for ages - sometimes years. Also, if you offer lousy service, it's harder to acquire new clients because everyone knows you're a bit crap when it comes down to it. So how do you get business? Sell cheap. Yep, keep your market share by dropping your pants every time you get a sniff of a deal.

Now here's where you get into trouble and why customer service is a positive-feedback mechanism, scientifically speaking. The downward spiral comes from cutting your prices: you cut your fixed costs so that you hit profit targets which means you pay less (peanuts, monkeys, etc.) and those that survive the knife have less time per client,

especially as there are more new clients replacing old ones. It all points to a deterioration in service. Which, in turn, leads to more client haemorrhaging, more staff cuts and more price reductions. Eventually your remaining clients are so hacked off they start to swear at you, your prospects don't trust you, your gross profits are plummeting and your staff are looking for the exit. And if your staff want out, your customers won't be far behind.

From a client's perspective, the picture is just as clear. In any mature B2B environment, you can be sure that no one is making super- normal profits over a long period of time. The odd product launch or technology breakthrough might buy a supplier a year or so of premium pricing, but the Darwinian mechanics of the market will see that competition will be on your

doorstep sooner than you think. The paranoid in business are usually those that survive!

So, you pretty much get what you pay for. In my industry, there's a precise line that suppliers and customers are always trying to find - one where benefit exceeds cost. Presumably, Prenax and our competitors are much better at managing subscriptions than our clients are. But clients have to buy enough of our time to make sure they are getting enough service to make a difference. For example, pay too little and you simply get 'noise on the line', where the intermediary is actually creating more work because you end up managing them. Pay too much and you'll be paying our profit bonuses - something I'm sure is not high on your agenda. This line - often less than the most expensive but always higher than the cheapest - is where everyone's in profit.

Love hurts

That's the economics for dummies that everyone's aware of, but what is usually hidden is the fight against entropy that exists in all companies and is a daily event in the best. A customer service culture has one foot in both camps - the buyer's and the seller's - and, like straddling two canoes, can be painful if the balance is not right. It's fascinating to watch a group of people evolve in a work environment. The search for meaning at work is constant and if a positive model is not presented to us, then we'll look for other things to hang our hats on. That's not usually very pretty.

Most of us, as consumers, have experienced being passed like the proverbial hot potato from person to person in organisations that employ people who don't really care. It is infuriating and truly stressful ('Press 4 to feel like a number ...'). In many companies, good customer care has been reduced to being given your position in the queue. Dreadful. But leave a team of people to their own devices, don't give them support or anything to believe in, and even the most talented and positive of them will end up embittered, cynical clock-watchers.

So this fight against entropy is one a good company has to win and there are five weapons we have at our disposal to beat it:

1. People. There is a saying that you can't polish a brick (or something like that but less polite). When building a good customer service team, one has to be picky. That means only taking on people who have the brains to understand a problem and the attitude to do something about it. It also means that you usually pay a bit more and offer a positive working environment.

But we all make mistakes. And mistakes need to be rectified or else you end up with the sediment effect. That is, an organisation where no one is ever fired. Pretty soon you get to a tipping point where the bad people control the culture and all the good people leave. The latter may even be in the majority, but such is the power of negative energy, just a few bad apples can affect the whole barrel.

Related FreePint links:

- "Customer Service on the Internet" Written by Jim Sterne Reviewed by Diana Nutting <http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf/custserve.htm>

- "Can I have a little service here?: Being a great customer and getting what you need from vendors" By Robin Neidorf http://www.freepint.com/issues/300306.htm#tips>

2. Ownership. The people at the sharp end - the customer service team - need to have the power to make decisions. They also have to own their own clients, and this means no call centres.

3. Leadership. You can have all the mission statements you like, but if the boss doesn't jump higher than he or she demands of others, the whole structure crumbles. This means having immediate escalation for unhappy clients. 'Escalation procedures' should be thrown out - there's only one: talk to the boss. The management of all staff should also be based on customer satisfaction and the values that drive it. It sounds like the tosh that comes straight out of an MBA textbook, but if progression and salary is determined by client satisfaction, the results are quite predictable.

4. Stop fire-fighting. Easier said than done, of course, but if you get things right first time, there's usually not much fire-fighting later down the track. It's all down to economics again, and reminds me of the proverbial story about pulling drowning people out of the river when one should go upstream and stop the guy throwing them in. It takes investment at the beginning - in my business it's about mapping the client and cleaning the data - but it pays off in the end, because more of the time you're buying goes on solving the problems that naturally arise as opposed to cleaning up self-imposed screw-ups.

5. Put your wotsits on the line. Sorry for the coarseness, but when a service provider's fees (or pride) are related to SLA metrics, they tend not to fail as much as when there are no financial consequences. So from a customer's perspective, if you have had bad experiences with a vendor, make sure there's a 'prenup' before you jump into bed with the next supplier that brings you a bunch of flowers.

So there it is. Customer service is really just about how much it is valued. And once you can put a pile of cash next to that value, the hard decisions suddenly start getting taken and a virtuous circle of client retention, positive culture and profit starts to become manifest. It's not always fun, but it feels better.

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Practical ideas and strategies from leading experts including Case-studies from General Motors, The Economist.com, BUPA, BP/Castrol, Ask.com, BBC New Media and Sun Microsystems   5 June - London
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http://www.freepint.com/issues/130406.htm

- FreePint No.181 28th April 2005. "Distance Learning is Closing the Distance" and "Using A Website To Open Up The Archive"
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- FreePint No.135 17th April 2003. "Radio on the Internet" and "Scenario Planning"
http://www.freepint.com/issues/170403.htm

- FreePint No.110, 18th April 2002. "A World of Resources Awaits You in China" and "Customer Satisfaction - do you know what they think of your information service?"
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- FreePint No.85, 12th April 2001. "Getting Connected in a Rural Area" and "Streaming Media and Broadband Sites"
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- FreePint No.36, 15th April 1999. "Cataloging the Internet: The Dublin Core" and "Idiots' guide to chemistry information resources on the Web"
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TW15 2QN, United Kingdom
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Contributors to this issue

Monique Cuvelier (Editor, FreePint), Michael Gutierrez, Martin White, Robbie Frazer, Robin Neidorf (General Manager, FreePint), Pam Foster (Editor, VIP), Shirl Kennedy (Senior Editor, ResourceShelf and DocuTicker), William Hann (Managing Editor, FreePint), Penny Hann (Production Editor, FreePint), Douglas Brown (Proofreader).

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