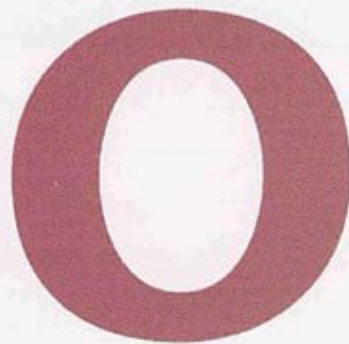


VOICE FROM THE CHAIR

Think “Inside” the Box



On a bookshelf in my office sits a funny little gift I received. It's a perpetual motion-type of device with a three-dimensional wire box. Perilously perched outside of the box is a stick figure (again made of wire), countered on the inside of the box by a weight. Inscribed in the base of this device were four seemingly inspirational words: "Think Outside the Box." In other words, the box represents the norm, and I was recognized by a friend for my ability to think outside of the norm. I was certainly far from being the only person to whom such recognition was awarded -- many business owners, managers, employees and even school-children have been urged to "Think Outside the Box." In hindsight, I do not believe that I deserved that recognition.

You may recall recent history when virtually every magazine from Sports Illustrated to Time broached the subject, doling out advice about how to zig when others were zagging, how to build bigger when others were downsizing or how to buy when others were selling. We were taught how to "train" your customers, employees (perhaps even the family pet) to forego traditional views and embrace the innovative, unknown and unfamiliar.

And look where that's gotten us. Corporations are bankrupt, respected company officers performing the now infamous "perp walk," and we're in a society where customer service is as scarce as a high-flying technology stock.

Several years of thinking outside of the box has, in fact, changed the box. What was the norm for many, many years has been changed over just a few short years. We now find that the "norm" is to be creative and original, to abandon the traditional views of the past and to seek originality. The box is now a place where cus-

tomers service has fallen by the wayside in return for improved efficiency and profitability. It is a place where traditional values, such as friendly service, quality goods and company ethics have been replaced with high staff turnover, substandard products and mismanagement. The good news is that I am finally ready to earn that funny little gift -- I am finally ready to "Think Outside the Box." Interestingly, all it took was a small change in my perception of the almighty box.

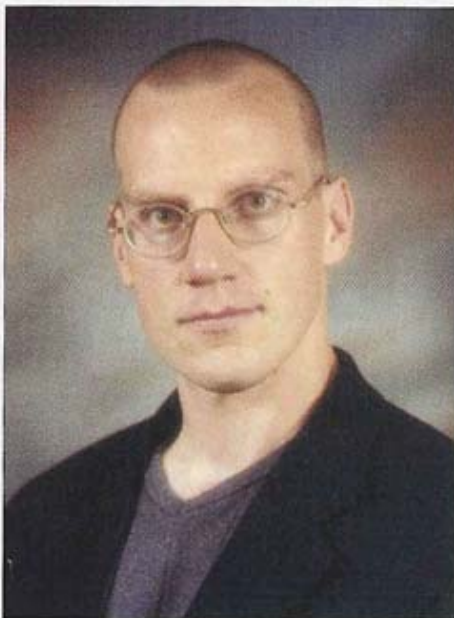
Here are some of my ideas:

1. When a neighboring restaurant turns away a small private party, my restaurant will embrace the party with open arms.
2. When I screw up, I will take full accountability.
3. When a customer speaks with one of my managers, the manager will respond with sincerity, respect and empathy.
4. When one of my staff comes up with a good idea, I will acknowledge that idea and not take credit for it myself.
5. When I receive a message (e-mail or voice), I will respond to that message in a timely manner.

Quite a breakthrough, huh? What, you say? Companies have had ideas similar to mine for many years? Of course, they have ... just not recently. By thinking outside of the recently remodeled "box," I am in fact, thinking "inside" the predecessor box. It is that predecessor box that, quite possibly, should not have been tinkered with in the first place. It is that predecessor box that, I believe, should be the only box.

And so I go, with my modern thoughts and unconventional wisdom, to "Think Inside the Box."

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