UNCOMMON SERVICE:
How to Win by Putting Customers at the Core of Your Business
By Frances Frei and Anne Morriss

“As Holmes said, when someone tries to sell us a simple answer to a complex problem, it will be simplistic and worthless. But if someone first grinds deeply through its complexity and then offers a simple explanation, it is priceless. Frei and Morriss have distilled a very complicated problem—the managing of service businesses—into this simple and priceless book. It truly is a delight to read.”

—Clayton M. Christensen, Kim B. Clark Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School; author of The Innovator’s Dilemma

It should come as no surprise that the primary driver of our economy is no longer what we make but how we serve each other. Eighty percent of jobs in the U.S. and 80 percent of the gross national product are currently tied to the service industry. Further, not only is service our primary economic function, but according to psychologists, it’s also a core human ambition—we are born with an innate desire to help each other.

And yet when you zoom in on our day-to-day interactions, the majority of our service experiences are overwhelmingly negative. So, why the disconnect? Why is great service still so rare?
In *UNCOMMON SERVICE: How to Win by Putting Customers at the Core of Your Business* (Harvard Business Review Press; hardcover; February 7, 2012), authors and experts Frances Frei and Anne Morriss argue that despite the fact that we’re wired for service, it’s not enough to simply *demand* service excellence from your employees. Instead, companies must *design* excellence into the very fabric of the organization.

“It’s easy to throw service into a mission statement and periodically do whatever it takes to make a customer happy,” write the authors. “What’s hard is designing a service model that allows average employees—not just the exceptional ones—to produce service excellence as an everyday routine.”

In *UNCOMMON SERVICE*, Frei and Morriss offer just that – a system that allows companies to deliver consistently great service, regardless of the industry, employee, customer or positioning. They argue that taking care of customers is not the exclusive domain of high-end companies; rather, it’s a basic imperative for anyone who wants to survive in a volatile economy, where the old rules of competition no longer apply.

Combining their two unique perspectives – from Frei’s academic research and in-the-trenches experience with executives, to Morriss’s work on the front lines of mission-driven organizations around the globe – the authors identify the four universal truths for delivering uncommon service:

• **You can’t be good at everything.** Striving for all-around excellence leads directly to mediocrity. Achieving service excellence requires underperforming on the things your customers value least, so you can over-deliver on the dimensions they value most. Decide what trade-offs you will make – where you will do things badly, even *very badly*, in the service of great – based on deep insight into who your customers are and what they need operationally. Then be unapologetic about it.

• **Someone has to pay for it.** Great service must be funded, or you risk giving it away. Either find a palatable way to charge your customers for it, reduce costs while improving the experience, or get customers to do some of the work for you. Choosing among these strategies will depend on both industry dynamics and the specific relationship you have with your customers.

• **It’s not your employees’ fault.** Too many organizations have designed service models for phantom employees, superstar employees they wish they had but actually don’t. Hiring those superstars – or getting your current employees to act more like them by
“trying harder” – is not the solution. Instead, you must design a service model that sets up average employees to deliver excellence as a daily routine.

- You must manage your customers. Customers are major players in any service experience. They don’t just consume or purchase the service; they help create it, even if it’s just by showing up for an appointment on time. You need a strategy for managing them, just as you need a strategy for managing your employees. You and your customers must work together to deliver great service.

The authors also offer a plan for shaping the other half of the service equation – organizational culture. Culture defines an enormous part of the customer experience. Design and culture must work together, and today’s leaders must ensure their alignment.

“A great service organization needs to get both right, the service design and the culture that animates it,” write the authors. “Both must be pointing in the same direction, toward the outputs you’ve identified as critical to your organization’s success.”

Rich with actionable advice, UNCOMMON SERVICE makes a powerful case for how any organization can increase profitability, satisfaction and competitive advantage by delivering consistently outstanding service.
Frances Frei is UPS Foundation Professor of Service Management at Harvard Business School, where she developed the school’s successful Managing Service Operations course. Frances regularly advises organizations seeking to create greater value through their service experiences.

Anne Morriss is the Managing Director of the Concire Leadership Institute, a consulting firm that helps leaders to surface and remove performance barriers. She has worked with companies and governments throughout the United States and Latin America on strategy, leadership, and institutional change, with clients ranging from Fortune 50 companies to public-sector leaders.
Praise for UNCOMMON SERVICE

“Frei and Morriss have provided powerful, proven insights into the requirements for excellence in service. From challenging the belief that great companies can excel at *everything*, to pointing out that service ‘heroes’ may actually be signals of systemic service problems, the authors cut through myths and misconceptions to clearly define the essentials for success. The book is an inspirational and provocative presentation of the fundamentals of excellence.”

–Jack Cochran, MD, Executive Director, Kaiser Permanente

“Frances Frei and Anne Morriss have written the definitive book on service excellence, which is timely given that many companies are planning a future accelerated by services. Their humor, thoughtfulness, and expertise shine through as they create a compelling journey into service innovation. But that’s not enough, as they define, with equal importance, the ways to create a culture that’s completely aligned with service excellence.”

–Beth Comstock, Chief Marketing Officer, GE

“At Zappos, delivering great customer service is one of our top priorities. *Uncommon Service* lays out the importance of providing the best service possible to customers. This book is for anyone looking to improve service levels!”


“If you believe in service excellence, you must read this book. In it, you will discover the importance of making the right choices and trade-offs in your business model so that your team can consistently deliver uncommon service.”

–Carlos Rodríguez-Pastor, Chairman, Interbank Group

“Frances Frei and Anne Morriss’ *Uncommon Service* is a joy to read and a treasure to study. The authors provide both theories of how great service works and case studies that demonstrate how to make it happen. Always intuitive, never patronizing, and really smart, *Uncommon Service* will help any executive—in a big company or small, public firm or nonprofit organization—think creatively about how to deliver service that truly works.”

–Debora Spar, President, Barnard College

“*Uncommon Service* is about delivering service excellence by design, showing managers how to satisfy customers, not just on your organization’s best days, but as an everyday routine.”
An interview with Frances Frei and Anne Morriss, authors of UNCOMMON SERVICE

Q: What prompted you to write this book?

A: Organizations want to deliver great service, and customers want to experience it. But it turns out the path to sustainable excellence is not intuitive – it’s not about trying harder. There are surprising rules and pitfalls.

Q: In the book, you outline four truths for delivering service excellence as routine. How did you determine these truths?

A: We looked at organizations that were getting service right, and others that were getting it wrong. A clear pattern emerged, a pattern that held across industries, markets, cultures. There wasn’t a fifth truth that didn’t make the cut.

Q: You argue that an organization cannot be excellent without first being bad in some service dimensions. Why is this the case?

A: Because your resources aren’t unlimited, and so you have to optimize. You have to make smart tradeoffs. To be able to invest in excellence in the areas your customers care about, you need to conserve your resources elsewhere. We call it ‘bad in the service of great.’ You can try to be great at everything – many companies do – but you will exhaust yourself along the way, and the reliable outcome is mediocrity.

Q: In your work with top executives and leading organizations, have you found one truth particularly difficult to embrace?

A: Giving up the fantasy of all-around excellence is hard, understandably hard. For mission-driven companies, in particular, it almost sounds immoral at first – until you realize that on the other side of it is the chance to be great, truly great at the things that matter most.

Q: In the book, you discuss the importance of company culture being aligned with a company’s service model. Why is this so critical?

A: Customers remember how you make them feel. The employee handbook only gets you so far in making sure your customers feel cared for. For everything else, for all the discretionary
decisions that your employees make – how they answer the phone or respond to an unprecedented request – you need a strong culture. Culture tells everyone what to do in the absence of clear instruction, and there’s a lot of ambiguity in service management. Customers are wonderfully unpredictable.

Q: If readers took away one thing from the book, what do you hope that would be?

A: Great service is not mysterious. It’s the product of careful design and deliberate tradeoffs. It’s possible for any organization with the stomach to make hard choices.