The Tattered Cover in Denver is one of the largest independent bookstores in America. Founded in 1971, it has hosted live readings by such famous writers as Julie Child, J.K. Rowling, Garrison Keillor, and three U.S. presidents. The bookstore came under attack when owner Joyce Meskis refused to release the book-purchasing records of a customer who was part of a criminal investigation. Losing her case in the lower courts, Meskis funded an expensive appeal on the grounds of her customers’ First Amendment rights. Not only did she win the state Supreme Court case, she won the admiration of customers around the globe. Even those who disagreed with her position praised her honor and courage in the face of strong opposition and risk of significant financial loss.

Honor is the soul of the service covenant. We rely on it to govern fair and proper practice. Service interactions aren’t regulated by formal contracts that bind the server and the served to virtuous behaviors — customers simply assume they’ll be treated in a respectful, ethical, and civil manner. When they aren’t, cracks begin to form in their repurchase intentions. Should customers experience further disrespectful or dishonest behavior, those fissures grow into fault lines that rupture and send them drifting away to the competition. Those who serve customers with honor act as “trustodians,” constantly guarding the transaction and relationship to protect their trustworthiness.

As the chief customer “trustodian,” people who serve with honor know even one significant slip-up can cause customers to question an organization’s motives and unravel a hard-won bond. This trait requires staying vigilant and disciplined to spot weak spots in the organization’s trust-building efforts. Like a mother who uses “any means necessary” to protect a child in danger, those who serve with honor are not respectful of practice or protocol when trust is in jeopardy. When these conscience-centered servers come across a customer complaint that represents a violation of the covenant, for example, they take immediate action to ensure the situation doesn’t escalate and trust is restored.

John Gutweniger, then an assistant manager in the call center of AIG Insurance in Florida, was nearing the end of a long shift when his supervisor called to say an irate customer was demanding to speak to a manager. No sooner had John greeted the customer than the blistering began. “She was hysterical, her words a combination of screams and sobs,” John says. “She had just purchased an auto insurance policy through our sales department earlier that day. Being that she was on an extremely limited budget, she asked that her down payment be deducted from her account the following day (Friday) when she got paid.”

But this wasn’t exactly what happened, John goes on to recall. “She claimed
that this was agreed to. However, she
found out otherwise when she tried to
purchase groceries later that evening and
was told the account was overdrawn.”
The customer demanded her money be
refunded immediately and her policy
cancelled; John knew there was no way
for him to refund her money that night
and attempted to explain this as gently
as possible. “What followed was about 15
minutes of screaming about the fact that
she was a single mother with two chil-
dren living from paycheck to paycheck,”
John says. “She informed me she had no
food at home for her children other than
moldy bread. I was speechless.”

Not knowing how to respond, John
asked the only question that came to
mind, “Other than getting your refund
back to you tonight, is there anything
at all I can do for you?” She paused for
a moment and said sarcastically, “Yeah,
you can buy us dinner.” “Of course,” John
thought. “Why hadn’t I thought of that?
I asked her if her children liked pizza.

Somewhat confused, she responded that
they did. I asked her if she would allow
me to have a pizza sent to her house that
evening. She initially declined, but I
insisted. Finally, she accepted my offer.”

John went online, found a Pizza Hut
in her town, and had a large pepperoni
pizza along with an order of cinnamon
bread sent to her house. Driving home
that night, he felt a sense of peace about
himself. “Although I knew the customer
would certainly be canceling her policy
as soon as her refund was processed, it
wasn’t about her business anymore; it
was about her welfare as a human being.”

Once the refund was processed, John
contacted the woman one more time
to apologize for everything that had
happened. He said he was sorry to lose
her as a customer and informed her if
she ever decided to come back to contact
him directly. “She informed me that she
would not be coming back. I wished her
the best and prepared to close the call.”

“One other thing,” she stated, “Yes?” I
replied. “Thank you for the pizza.”

The magic of trust is that it quickly
compounds — show trust to customers
and they’ll trust you right back. And
customers who trust you, and feel trusted
in return, typically buy more, are more
patient with hiccups and more forgiving
of mistakes, return more frequently, and
sing your praises to others.

Honor is the fundamental expression
of civility and consideration — that is,
people behaving as they always should
toward other people. Shakespeare has
Anthony tell Octavia before the battle
with Augustus, “If I lose my honor, I
lose myself.” So it is with the person
who serves with honor. If he or she fails
the customer, it represents a failure to
everything his or her organization should
stand for.

About the Author: Chip R. Bell is a customer loy-
ality consultant and the author of several best-selling
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Have Changed and What to do about it. He can be

Help Us Tell the Story of
Home Care and Hospice Nurses

May is Nursing Month, the time we dedicate to celebrating the
special folks who serve those in need. To honor the occasion,
CARING Magazine will join the Home Healthcare Nurses
Association and Forum of State Associations in highlighting nurses
from all 50 states. Our May issue will feature real-life stories of home
care and hospice nurses, along with the patients to whom they give
care and support. Telling these stories is a powerful way of showing
what home care and hospice is and the important impact it has on
individuals every day. It’s also a chance to get your agency the notice
it deserves by contributing a story of your own. Whether you live in
New York or Nevada, tell us what your nurses have done to reduce
hospital admissions and keep their patients safe and happy at home.

If you’d like to get your agency involved,
please visit www.nahc.org or www.hhna.org