

# Shop!



Putting **SPARK!** into customer service

Troy Forrest

## The why...

I put this short fictional series together to spark thinking about what constitutes great customer service.

It's heavily-influenced fiction, and I'm forever grateful to the role models and the shockers that helped shape some of the practices and attitudes you'll see in and around the Cadence Electrical team. The initiatives are imperfect, but maybe they'll trigger you to think & build on them.

Maybe even do that rarest of customer-focused disciplines.

Apply the thinking.

There's a mental line too many find tough to cross.

"I like these things being done for me.

But I'm not willing to do them for perfect strangers.

(Let alone make time to think about how to do them even better)."

I hope this inspires a mighty few to break that leash.

Enjoy!

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(Oh, & if you like it, just email me and I'll put you on the daily distribution list for its successor...)

# 1 - Regulars

"ShooooOP!" A familiar voice followed the dinging of the bell, signalling someone had opened the front door.

"Not today thanks - already gave to the girl guides!" came the smiling retort from behind the service counter. It was Bevan, one of Cadence Electrical's two internal salespeople.

"Very funny. I don't know why I keep coming here. At least those blokes down the road at PD speak nicely to me. Now quick sticks, I'm late for a job, and I need two boxes of 25's, five 10 amp single pole ELCB's and a roll of 2.5mm 2 core and earth. And a box of emery wheel sparks. You'll find them just near the left handed screwdrivers." Every time Jim (a jaded but likeable old electrical contractor) came into the store, a familiar dance took place. Loud announcement of his arrival, stir the pot a bit, place an order and try and get one over on the staff. Comfortingly routine.

"All out of emery wheel sparks, funny guy. Got the rest, except the single-polers are on backorder - still two days away. Can you use two polers? Or 15 Amp'ers?"

Jim rolled his eyes and gave a mock sigh. "How do you even stay in business?! Ummm - no, can't substitute here. I'll have to go to those blokes down the road. Give me the other things though."

"Sorry about that. Before you make the trip, want me to make a call just to make sure they've got them?"

"Well, that'd be the first nice thing you've done for me in a long time! How's Sally & the kids?"

Some light banter followed while Bevan phoned his competition to confirm they could help his client. While the call was in play, Jim perused the specials bins in the entrance foyer of Cadence Electrical. A tool belt marked at 50% off, slightly scuffed. I've been after one for a while, thought Jim.

"Hey shoppie, what's your best price on this?"

"For everyone else, 50% off. For you Jim, 30% off." With a half grin.

"Why do I keep coming back!" exclaimed a poker-faced Jim, taking the tool belt and placing it on the counter with his other purchases. On the wall behind Jim hung 12 customer service award plaques.

## 2 - Visibility

Danielle juggled her attentions between finishing the payroll ledger and watching the interplay between Jim and Bevan from her seat inside "The Fishbowl" - a glass-walled office area adjacent the service counter. From her Customer Service & Administration Manager's chair, there wasn't much she couldn't see with a subtle turn of the head.

She could see the entire entrance foyer and take in the same first-glance impressions a customer got. Repeat training, reminder checklists, a God-given eagle eye and a remuneration-influencing KPI had ensured Danielle cast this customer-shoes look around the lobby many times a day for the last 4 ½ years. Stray cable ties, bins looking shabby, leaves that'd blown in from the car park, even just brochures not lined up neatly in their display cases. If she saw it, she fixed it.

She could see how the internal sales guys were behaving - whether it was noses to the grindstone, wasteful skylarking, even on occasion wandering around not quite sure what to do with themselves. And while she wasn't everyone's boss, it was culturally ingrained that if Danielle gave you 'the look', it was time to get focused.

She could see into the other offices in the store, including the reps room, the General Manager's office and, if she craned her neck a little, even into the tea room. She didn't need an in-out board to tell her most of the team's movements (though the warehouse was a 'blind spot' where some had been known to hide). To good effect, the team had developed other ways to keep one other apprised on comings and goings.

And Danielle could see several laminated pages facing her workspace. Cadence Electrical's Goals. Danielle's own Daily Discipline's Checklist. And a phrase she'd picked up from a workshop some years before. A quote she'd borrowed from the founder of Walmart, Sam Walton. It read "There is only one boss. The customer. And he (or she) can fire everyone in here."

Danielle watched Jim walk out the door, smiled, and turned back to remunerating her internal VIP's.

## 3 - Rituals

"Les! Junction Box! 1 minute!" Alex, Cadence Electrical's senior sales rep, had his head poking through the doorway to Branch Manager Les's office, giving him the wind-up to join one of the many daily rituals at Cadence. Without looking up from the computer, Les nodded and kept tapping.

In the rep's room, the Cadence team sat, stood and leaned. Bevan and Brett, the internal sales guys, their boss Danielle and her other direct report Kelly (admin support), Wilf the Storeman, the other sales rep Penny and, his tapping complete, lanky local boss Les joined them, handing Alex a single page printout.

"Cheers Les. Righto - great day yesterday, everyone! Congratulations on some great feedback - real words I heard from Deano at Spriggets after we smashed their order deadline - *"you pr\*cks really know something about service!"* We'll take that! Bevan, what about you?" Alex handed the metaphorical talking stick to his internal colleague and around the group it went as they completed a quick daily exercise sharing one real piece of customer feedback they'd received the previous day.

"Great work! Les's just handed me the numbers...", and Alex took 30 seconds to run through 6 metrics that the business measured itself on daily, including progressive sales revenue, GP, backorder status and a mysterious one called the "SPARK rating".

"OK, a Volt activity you're each planning today - Wilf?"

"Ahh, that new fella from TBC Freight is still struggling with the route, needs some love, so I've teed up a simple new sheet that I think he'll like, help him map his route a bit better. Variation of the one I gave Jenks yesterday."

"Great stuff! Danielle?"

In a period of 5 minutes, the team shared feedback, were updated on their progress towards the collective goal targets and each described a simple extra service initiative they'd be implementing that day. With a wind-up call of "any help anyone needs?", the group disbanded and refocused on their core daily tasks.

A junction box is where wires come together, connections are made, and current can keep flowing.

## 4 - Standard

As the Cadence Electrical team disbanded from their Junction Box session, the front doorbell jingled. A 40-ish lady with two primary schoolers in tow took off her sunglasses and approached the counter. Brett, the younger of Cadence's internal salespeople, offered a friendly welcome to all three.

"Hi, I'm after a couple of ceiling fans - someone told me to come here and buy them."

"Sure! Well, we're glad you did! Are these for inside your house?"

"Yes, bedrooms. Do they come in different styles?"

"They do. I can show you a catalogue, but if you like, it's probably just as easy to come and see the fans on the shelf - we have some demonstration ones set up to show size and style. Would you like to come through?" An invitation behind the counter. In most places, a no-go zone. At Cadence, encouraged.

"OK. Before I do, are you guys going to be cheaper than if I were to buy them at K-Mart? Because I don't want to spend a fortune."

"I understand. Umm, I can't guarantee it - we're pretty sharp on our prices, but often the big discount stores will bring in some fairly cheap imported products. I guess the difference is in the product we'll sell you - we only stock product we believe in and know will last. Particularly ceiling fans, which I'm not sure if you've heard a cheap one after about a year, but they begin to tick-tick-tick. With what we'll sell you, we - not the manufacturer - will guarantee it unconditionally. It's part of our "Customer Service Standard".

With that, Brett pointed to a large black chalkboard-like plaque on the wall. Engraved in white were the words...

**We love what we do, and what we do is serve you.**

**We back what we sell, and we'll give you back-up if anything goes wrong with it.**

**We'll be better, guarantee longer and look after you like no-one else.**

**You can take that to the Bank. It's the Cadence Electrical Customer Standard.**

"Yes, my friend said your service is very good. OK, let's see your fans. C'mon kids." Brett led the trio through the warehouse aisles.

## 5 - Team for the client

Cadence Electrical boss Les returned to his desk and put his hand on the phone, about to make a call, when his Storeman Wilf rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. Les let the phone alone.

"Yes, mate?"

"Ahh, Les, I've spoken to Ken from Bernado's this morning, they're onsite at the new pipeline job down the bay, and their cable order hasn't arrived. They want to start tomorrow morning, and I've been on the phone to Jeff from Cable City, who tells me their big delivery truck just broke down, they're snowed under as a result, and it'll be tomorrow morning before they get their replacement truck in play and can drop it off. Alex's just had to shoot over to GT's on another job, so he asked me to speak with you about a fix."

A regular client of Cadence Electrical, Bernado Contractors, had recently won a big job on a water pipeline project for which they'd ordered a large shipment of electrical cable. Because Bernardo's placed their order at the last minute, and because they always needed it "yesterday", Cadence Sales Rep Alex had arranged for it to be delivered directly from the cable manufacturer rather than pass through their warehouse first. It now appeared the cable supplier, located on the other side of town, wouldn't be able to meet the delivery commitment today.

"What do *you* think we should do, Wilf?" asked the cucumber-cool Les.

"Well, morning freight's all done, there's some unpacking to do, but it isn't priority and can be done this afternoon. I can take the truck over to Cable City, grab at least a few drums to get them started - I can't fit it all in, the order's massive - and take it down the bay. We know what they'll be using first up, so we can at least prevent a delay, and then the rest'll turn up to them by smoko. Bevan's said he'll cover me for the 2 hours it'll take."

"Great stuff. How about you get moving, I'll place a call to Cable City, let them know you're on the way, then to Ken at Bernado's, let him know what's happening, and then I'll call Alex and update him on his client. Suit?"

"Beaut. I'm off then. Want an Iced Coffee on my way back?" Wilf knew his boss's Achilles heel. The lanky leader smiled, gave a thumbs-up, and picked up the phone to dial a soon-to-be happy customer. We can't stop all stuff-ups, thought Les, but we can certainly choose how we deal with them.

## 6 - Risk mitigation

As Wilf the Storeman jumped in the Cadence Truck to go help a client out of a jam and Les the Store Manager worked the phones to coordinate logistics, Cadence Electrical's Administration Support champion Kelly began her daily texting, phone & email round. She ran her eyes down the printout she'd just taken off the machine.

"Dani, I've got Billoway Constructions on the email list, but I'm pretty sure Kyle at Billoway said he'd prefer a phone call - do you know if this has been changed?" the office junior asked of her boss. Cadence's Customer Service & Administration Manager, who'd only recently delegated this daily task to her charge, looked up quizzically.

"Mmmm - I'm not sure why it says that. I think he does prefer the call. Make a call, check in with him again, and if he says he prefers email, then change it in the system and apologise for interrupting him."

One of the daily service practices Cadence Electrical prided itself on was to contact to all clients they'd shipped an order to in the past 48 hours. The contact was in part to stay close to payers and in part a risk mitigation strategy. If anything had happened to goods in transit, or (despite a transport manifesto saying the product had arrived) the product somehow had not reached its intended destination, this contact was a proactive early warning system and allowed a minimum of resentment to build up. Lancing boils before they festered.

"Hi Kyle, it's Danielle from Cadence - how are you this morning? Really well thanks! Kyle, a quick call to make sure that everything was fine with the conduit and cable order? Oh, fantastic - Kyle, are you happy for me to check in like this to make sure all is OK with your deliveries? OK, I understand - yes, I'm very happy to call. I know, some clients prefer a text or email.... and I like speaking with you too! OK, have a great day, speak soon!" Kelly hung up the phone. Turning to Danielle, "Apparently he'd mentioned in passing to Penny that an email was probably fine - she must have changed it in the system - but he says he's changed his mind - he likes the call."

Danielle smiled. "Even the busiest seem to. He always reserves the right not to take it."

The front doorbell dinged.

"SHOOOOOP!"



## 7 - Pre-call service planning

Alex pulled his souped-up bright red Holden Ute (with unmistakable Cadence Electrical branding emblazoned across the side) into the staff carpark of GT Homes. GT was a mid-size regular client of Alex's - Cadence's - and Alex was here to help their new sparky Sean interpret the Cadence product catalogue so Sean could complete a big tender spec.

Alex had spent his formative sales years working in retail (the floor of a whitegoods wholesaler) and then as a rep for a big multinational Cadence now competed with. A gifted gabber, he'd made the move about 4 years ago to join a team that was different, and for that very reason. Les, the Cadence Electrical boss, had seen something in Alex congruent with his own belief in customer service, and the relationship had blossomed. Alex thought of Les like Yoda - a wise master, of few words and crystal clear morals - and he'd move heaven and earth for him. Alex's phone rang. Speak of the Devil. Alex let it go to voicemail. His boss had trained him to stay focused on the task at hand, even when the temptation was strong and it was the boss calling. Besides, he knew it'd be to let Alex know he had matters in hand with Bernardo's.

Pulling a call planning sheet out of his compendium, Alex reviewed the notes he'd made at the office as well as from his last call. Pausing silently as his eyes rested on the prompting words "service plan", Alex thought about what service meant to *this* client. They didn't want 48-hour post-delivery follow-up calls - they thought it was double-handling. They didn't do cakes or movie tickets or slabs of beer or even footy corporate boxes. No, what they valued - what was service to them (and Alex knew, because he'd asked) - was pinch-hitter support with technical translations for tender submissions such as this one, and getting accurate, useful follow-up information through in an easy-to-follow format and within 24 hours. So Alex's challenge today was two-fold - be of maximum value as a translator, and the bits that need more research? Diarise time later today to nail and beat their 24 hour deadline. THAT would be appreciated more than trinkets by this client. THAT would keep him in the box seat for sales growth.

Alex jotted notes in his planner, listen to Les's message ping his inbox and climbed out into the sun to go play interpreter for the object of his morning's sales affection.

## 8 - Mind readers

"Why oh why is it so hard to get good help these days! Forget that "Standard" on the wall over there - talk about sub-standard! You'd think I was asking for a rocket ship! Your partner-in-crime, where's he at?" Jim, Cadence Electrical's loudly moaning but likeably loyal regular was having a spit without too much venom. Cadence's second internal salesperson, Brett, was trying to mentally guess what had gone wrong before uttering the words.

"What's happened, Jim?" The wiry, too-tanned and wrinkled old sparky rolled his eyes, mock sighed and dumped a new powerpoint on the counter. Next to it, the box it apparently came in.

"What does that box say?" asked Jim.

"It say's "25's", Brett inferring the product code denoted a double powerpoint.

"Very good! Gold star! Now, what does that look like to you?", pointing at the product on the counter. Brett could see it was in fact a single powerpoint. Jim's not-yet-precipitated point being they'd earlier sold him a box labelled double powerpoints when in fact it contained single powerpoints. Brett's mind followed the path - it's unlikely a manufacturer error, as their quality control processes are pretty good. Also unlikely but not out of the realms of possibility, someone's opened the box and inadvertently swapped the lid with the box next to it on the shelf. Staff member, or customer that just comes in and helps themselves to product - who knows? The point now - what to do about it? The temptation to blame the manufacturer here was always strong. Brett had been trained differently. He looked Jim in the eye.

"Jim, I'm really sorry that's happened. Was it just the one box, or were there more?", starting to move towards the bay where the correct product would be found. Jim's faux anger dissipated instantly.

"Ahh, just one. Looks like someone'd swapped the lids, might even have been that knucklehead apprentice of mine, still can't tell sh\*t from sugar. While you're there, get me an extra box. And tell knackers to check next time."

"Thanks Jim - I'm checking they're correct now."

Nowhere to hide, no point in blaming, nothing to be gained by dwelling. Apologise, address and move on. Brett put a bit of pace into his service - this client had been inconvenienced enough.

## 9 - Routine roadshow

While Alex was serving his don't-do-cakes customer with some technical support for a tender submission, his Cadence Electrical Sales Rep counterpart Penny was holding court in an industrial coffee shop.

"Hey Jock, hey Jonno. Where's Squish - got him crawling in a roof for you?"

"Nah - sick. Gen Y. Hopeless. Wouldn't work in an iron lung. Whaddya do?"

"Soft! Ah, glad you could make it though." Penny, a 5-foot-nothing comfortable shoe wearing ex-sparky, who wasn't built to crawl in roof spaces and so had given the game away for repping a couple of years back, spoke plainly with the two clients who'd joined her for the regular weekly product update session. "Penny's Product Plug-ins", as they were coined by one of her clients, were held at the same time each week in a commercial estate coffee shop near where a number of her customers operated. A 45-minute session where clients (and their guests) could come along, have a cuppa and muffin on Penny's Cadence Corporate Credit Card, and get a free mini training course on new products in the Cadence Electrical Line. Sometimes 6 or 7 clients turned up, sometimes only one or two, like today. Sometimes the information was useful, other times it was just a good excuse for free smoko and a catch-up with their favourite rep - "one of the boys". Penny didn't mind - she understood the value of omnipresence in a client's world and keeping relationships warm.

"Well, I'm sorry Squish is crook - he asked me last week for a bit of information on the new ceiling fans. Could you pass this onto him when he's back tomorrow?" Squish was Jonno's apprentice Electrician. He was keen to learn, but not very resilient it seemed.

"Sure. What new-fangled whizz-bang gear have you brought in today?" The two guys knew the price of a cuppa was hearing Penny out a while. They didn't mind - was a good way to stay up-to-date, and Penny didn't go for the hard sell, so it was reasonably balanced information.

"Well, because you bums have been telling me how difficult it is to change a light bulb - there's a joke in there, I reckon - I've brought in the new jobbie - a snap-in that they reckon might just replace both BC and ES connections!" Penny pulled a couple of samples out of her Cadence-branded tool bag, put them directly in the guy's hands, and started to tell a story.

## 10 - Eyes wide open

Wilf, Cadence Electrical's seasoned storeman, was heading back to home base after dropping off some cable to his client, Bernardo Contractors. He'd gone out of his way to help them, as well as helping Cadence's cable supplier, who were currently at 6's and 7's because their big truck had broken down and their cable deliveries had backed up. Wilf had swung in and picked up a part-order for Bernardos so they could get started on a time-sensitive job the next morning. While in conversation with the harried supplier, he noticed there was a small cable order to be delivered to another business also working on the pipeline project with Bernardo's. Happy to get in credit, Wilf offered to drop the cable to them too (even though they weren't a Cadence Electrical client). The guy-in-a-lather from Cable City almost kissed him.

And here, in the cabin of the delivery bus with the air con on and some Easybeats on the AM station, Wilf was feeling pretty good about things. He took a bite out of the donut (a spare from the box he'd also dropped into Bernardos as a sweetener). Looking around at the buildings in the new industrial estate he was passing, Wilf noticed a new sign on a new building - "Panjam Homes". Mmm, new ones, thought Wilf. Not heard of them. He checked there were no cars up his bum, indicated and pulled his bus to the kerb. This'd be one for Alex, he thought.

Leaving the engine idling, Wilf stepped out of the truck and pulled out his mobile phone. He pointed it at the building and took a photo, focusing on the phone number on the building's window and the website address. Then he forwarded it via email to Alex with a note - "New client? Worth a call?" along with the address.

No hard and fast lines in the Cadence structure to prevent anyone looking for business growth opportunities. The clients feed us all, thought Wilf. I'm here, so why not?

The creaky kneed storeman jumped back in his bus and pulled away, whistling.

## 11 - Happy anniversary

On a wall in the Cadence Electrical tearoom hung a large 12 month planner. It looked like a birthday board, covered with names written in particular dates. Instead of birthdays though, the board highlighted the date each regular customer first started buying with Cadence.

Their CCA. Cadence Customer Anniversary.

Cadence's CRM system had been programmed to spit out a report a week in advance of each customer's anniversary. It was Cadence's Admin Support person Kelly's job to check that the clients on the list were written on the board (where all staff members would see it each day) and that a note went out to the client, reminding them of the date, thanking them for their repeat business and inviting them in for 'anniversary coffee & cake' (which for a select few had swapped for an after-work beer).

The other anniversary gift the client received was a 5% rebate for any purchases made on that day (10+% if it was a 'major' anniversary). The rebates accrued in a kitty, and were combined with any rebates the clients received for their regular purchases (these were offered to clients that qualified as "High Voltage" level spenders or because they'd purchased special monthly rebate focus products). At the end of the year, clients could use their rebates to buy from a list of reward products, services or experiences.

A simple loyalty program which recognised the origins of the partnership. The board in the tea room served to remind each and every Cadence staff member whose custom they needed to recognise and be particularly grateful for today.

Les picked up the phone and dialled. "Happy anniversary dear!", he chuckled to one of their oldest clients.

## 12 - Culture eating strategy

Cadence Electrical boss Les was a devout believer in leadership guru Peter Drucker's maxim - "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Not that he had anything against good strategy or business planning. Both were topics he and his senior team members occupied a reasonable portion of their days towards, continually evolving and implementing the steps to achieve their agreed goals.

But he believed even more in the power of a team that shared a fundamental set of business beliefs. For Les, things like being 'can do' people. Chip in to help your mates. Show how much you love what you do. And if we aren't delighting customers, we can all go home.... permanently. Les believed that his overarching leadership lot was be the #1 culture role model, guardian & cheerleader.

"Hey Les!" yelled a regular Cadence customer from the counter - a one-man band air-conditioning mechanic. "Got yourself a decent football team yet?"

"I do, Pindo. Want a membership? We welcome all types."

"Hah - as long as all types drink Chardonnay! Where's that grumpy old bugger of a storeman anyway? Wanna give'im some grief over his round ball team."

"I gave him some time off Pindo - dealing with you will send him to an early grave. Has Bevan got you sorted out?"

"Yeah, he's down the back cutting me some cable. Mate, just between you and me, you've got a pretty good bunch here Les. Well, not pretty - Bevan could haunt houses. Good blokes though. And birds. Oops, hope Danielle didn't hear that, she'll have my guts for garters" said Pindo, looking through the fishbowl glass into the admin office where Danielle was busy in a report.

"Nice of you to say that, thanks Pindo. We are lucky - they work hard, but we have a bit of fun too. Are you bringing the family to our spit?", referring to a charity fundraiser the Cadence team had developed that involving succulent meat on a rotisserie.

"Nah, not sure, Jen's got softball. Might swing by with the kids."

"Please do. Wilf's eldest is going to face-paint the little ones." The rapport galvanising continued.

## 13 - Unlucky for some

Pulling his souped-up bright red Holden Ute (with unmistakable Cadence Electrical branding emblazoned across the side) out of the carpark of GT homes, Alex couldn't help but smile smugly to himself. He'd spent 45 minutes helping a key customer interpret a big tender request they were keen to win, translating the Cadence product catalogue in such a way that created jigsaw fits between Alex's offerings and the tender creator's needs. Now THAT's a partnership, thought Alex.

He saw the mobile ring in the cup holder and took his eyes off the road.

He was turning into light traffic at the time.

His head was consciously turning over the next-steps he'd implement to follow up with GT.

His subconscious was still in self-back-patting mode.

He didn't see the log truck.

He was about to get a hard lesson about what's truly important.

The Cadence Electrical team took the call at 4:46pm.

## 14 - Woodwork

While an intubated Alex trod a delicate line in the Intensive Care Unit over a fortnight, the progressively tighter knitting of an already strong team was further bolstered by a procession of supporters coming out of the woodwork.

The GT Homes gang, deeply shaken by what had happened to their favourite supplier right outside their premises, had gone into overdrive mustering support for Alex's family, adding to the no-questions-asked, no-time-wasted response of Les and his Cadence Electrical team.

Les, Alex's boss, had chartered a plane for Alex's parents come in from their remote regional home. Alex's wife Mandy, who was holding up remarkably given the circumstances, couldn't have asked for more from Alex's colleagues, who'd told her to drop everything and they'd take care of whatever needed to be done. That included liaising with Mandy's employer to explain the scenario and why she wasn't at work, arranging transport and accommodation and food for Mandy and Alex's parents so they could stay right by the hospital, and making sure their home was safe and secure (right down to mail and newspaper collection and dog feeding).

Clients, suppliers and even competitors didn't stop calling the office, checking in and asking if they could do anything, such was the respect for Alex and Les and the Cadence business.

The Cadence crew, after an immediate triage response to do all they could for Alex and his family, spent a day in a daze going through the motions, before Les closed the business a few hours early and pulled everyone in for an open chat. Les consulted an Organisational Psychologist about the best approach, and decided this forum would be a positive start. They discussed what had happened, how they felt about it, confirmed that they'd done everything they could for Alex outside of work, then got to the business of how to keep the business moving forward and applying the values they all - including Alex - believed in. Les made clear he knew they'd have up's and down's, and that was normal, fine. That their support of each other, of cutting slack, would be key.

And while no-one left feeling 100% hunky dory, there was a clearer air, and a resolve to stick together. You need team when it gets hard.



## 15 - Patience

"Uhhhhmmm... I'm not sure." The man had that deer-in-the-headlights look.

"Well sir, do you still have the old globe?" asked Brett, trying very hard to put the growing mound of paperwork on his desk out of his head to give this cashie his full attention.

"Uhhhhmmm... no, I don't think so. I think my wife threw it out."

"OK. Well sir, it could be a number of fittings - a house as old as the one you've just described, unfortunately they didn't just have a single standard for their globes back then. Can you describe it at all?" Brett doubled his concentration, actively pushing his worry for his severely injured colleague to one side.

"Ahhhhmmm... well, it screwed in, but it's not a normal screw size. The light is sort of a round shape, quite decorative, uhhh, it was about so big, I guess...", the man holding his palms 8 inches apart.

"Mmm, OK", said Brett, tripling his efforts to remember that, even though this cashie with no idea about what he needed was at best worth \$50 to the business, as a Cadence team member, he'd made a commitment to trying to help anyone that asked. "Sir, I'll see if we've got a couple of the older globes on the shelf and you can have a look, see if they look right. We'll try and save you a return trip if we can, but it may be that the best option is to get you to take a photo of the fitting, holding a ruler next to it as a scale. I don't suppose your wife is at home now, and could do that and email a digital picture through?" Lateral thinking was proving to be a strength of Brett's.

"Ummm, no, I don't think so. Ahh, maybe I'll go home and check, take a picture, that sounds like a good idea."

"Sir, something else to think about is how attached you are to the old light fitting. It may ultimately be easier and, over time, more cost effective, to replace it with a new one. There are some really nice looking and affordable new fittings. Would you like to look at some options so you can make a comparison?"

Brett chose to view this as an opportunity, rather than a pain in the backside. Never know whose ear this man has.

## 16 - Hand signed

Cadence Electrical General Manager Les put his moniker on the last of 120 letters and put down his pen. He paused to read his own letter one final time.

"Dear Rick

On behalf of the whole Cadence Electrical team, I want to thank you for all your concerns and well-wishes for Alex, who as you know was badly injured in a car accident just over 3 weeks ago. You'll be really pleased to know that Alex is out of Intensive Care, and while he's got a reasonably long recovery road ahead of him, he's in great spirits and displaying the sense of humour you know him for. He's resilient, he's being well supported, and we know he'll be back in business in no time. His wife and parents extend their sincere gratitude as well.

The support Alex and our team have received from our remarkable client group has been humbling. Please know this means a great deal to everyone at Cadence - we know how lucky we are having such a great bunch of regular clients, and we don't take this for granted.

We're still holding our charity fundraiser next week - a few drinks and a pig-on-the-spit out the back of our warehouse (and plenty for the non-carnivores too!). In light of what's happened recently, we've decided that as a business, it's only right that we double our charity donation, with half going to our long-standing charity partner, and the other half going to the hospital unit that's given Alex such wonderful care these past weeks. We hope you'll consider contributing a little to them too. Regardless, please come along and enjoy a bite with us, on us.

Thank you again - we've always valued your business partnership, but know that we really do treasure your friendship and support.

See you next week! Les...."

The event was jam packed.

## 17 - SPARK!

At the daily Junction Box meeting, Bevan held court.

"Yep, ahhh, good customer feedback from Pielo yesterday, said his freight actually turned up early, so Wilf, can you pass on the good feedback to the TBC freight dude?" Wilf the storeman nodded.

"OK, SPARK! rating for yesterday - 7. Big R, as usual, P got a couple too. Noticing we've had very little S in the last couple of weeks - ideas?" The Cadence Electrical brood furrowed their collective brow and contemplated in silence a moment.

(While they ponder, let me explain the SPARK! rating.)

S stands for "Shiny". It means how much extra polish, attention-to-detail or finishing touches a staff member has put onto delivering something to a client. Can be a smile, a well-packed box, a little thank-you note on a business card attached to the product.

P stands for "Passion". It denotes how much gusto, enthusiasm or zest a team member has demonstrated in their interaction with a customer. Not always polished, but no getting away from the feeling or intent or belief in what they're doing.

A means "Add-ons". It's where a team member has dug a little deeper or thought a little further about a client's needs or situation, and suggested an 'adjuvant' product to accompany the customer's primary purchase in order to help them in an even greater way.

R is for "Roustabouting". It's a butchered shearing shed term for the amount of running around someone's gone to in order to delight a customer. The unsexy, often unseen little extra jobs that others don't like doing, but that incite customer delight.

And K is a mis-spelt "Kollaboration". It's a measure of how much effort a Cadence staff member has made to pick the brains or proactively combine forces with one of their colleagues to help a customer out of a jam. Working together-ness.

On a daily basis, every Cadence Electrical team member is asked to keep an eye open to catch any of their colleagues demonstrating one or more of these customer service behaviours. On a whiteboard in the tea room, every day, everyone is asked to make a mark alongside one of the letters when they've seen a given behaviour shine. It's self-policed, it's imperfect, it relies on all to take it seriously. Cadence have used this service-culture litmus test for several years now.

"Right, what's a "K" opportunity someone has today? Anyone?" asked convener Bevan.

## 18 - Grownup choices

Les loved a good checklist. A proponent of any quality system that'll help deliver the best, most consistent customer service experiences, he appreciated the value of a simple set of clear prompts to help busy distracted folks (which is everyone) remember to apply best practices.

All around the Cadence Electrical building you'll find checklists. On walls, at work stations, as prompts on the computer to remind client servers to ask their "would you like fries with that?" equivalent. There's even a set of checklists on the back of the loo doors (though as you might expect, a handful of wags routinely add colour to these).

But while Les sought to build ever-more rigour into Cadence's customer-serving tasks via simple structure and proven process steps, he counterbalanced the scaffolding with a consistent leaders message of "I trust you to make the right decisions". Every team member, from the office junior to his most trusted long-termers, enjoyed the trust and empowerment that a leader confident in his staffing choices can gift.

At times, it fell over. Sometimes Les got let down in the form of a customer getting let down.

But on balance, and in stark contrast to highly bureaucratic cultures where power is held tightly and manifests as political game playing and excuse making, Les's approach of letting people make grownup choices had proven to pay jackpot dividends over and over.

Cadence Electrical's boss sat in his office and eavesdropped with one ear as his administration support star Kelly told her supervisor Danielle about an executive decision she'd made to create a flyer for some VIP clients to try and move some redundant stock at next-to-nothing. Danielle, who'd been drenched with the same staff empowerment medicine as Les, pumped her direct report's tyres right up for her initiative and asked how she could help. People just choosing to get stuff done and getting on with it.

Balancing rigour with release. Architecture with autonomy. Give them a ladder and let them climb. Les went back to the board report explaining why once more their numbers were exceeding forecasts.

## 19 - Not bad for a Fridee

"SHOOOP!" It was Jim, the customer that loved to stir.

"Hey Jim. How y'going?" asked Brett, finishing typing his stock availability request into the computer at the front counter.

"Ah, not bad for a Fridee. How's yer invalid mate going?"

"Yeah, good, thanks for asking. He's in the rehab facility, they've started him on Physio, he's grumbling about it, reckon's there's some hard-nosed nurses in there that crack the whip. But I think that's a good sign, that he's complaining." The near-fatal injury to Alex, Cadence Electrical's much-liked sales rep, had been tough for staff and clients alike. Now he was on the road to recovery, the jokes could resume.

"Well, tell him he's got to watch out for the cold spoon! Now, you got any brick dust in stock?", as deadpan as you like.

"Umm, I think it's on backorder Jim. I tell you what has come in though...." Brett reached under the counter and pulled out what looked like a trophy. Jammed onto a chamfered timber block was a screwdriver with an old riggers glove glued to the handle - a left handed glove - with a Dymo label stuck on it saying "For Jim - a bl\*\*dy left-handed screwdriver!".

"Took us a year to get that off backorder for you!" said Brett with a beaming smile.

Jim's grumpy old bugger facade cracked into a rare smile that revealed tobacco stained teeth that hadn't seen a dentist's hands in many years. A couple more of the Cadence Electrical crew, who knew this was coming, stepped out of the admin area with big grins to watch Jim's response.

"Wellll!!! And it's about bl\*\*dy time too! A year I've been waiting for this! You could have put a new glove on it at least! Which bl\*\*dy clown did this?" It didn't take much perceptiveness to tell the loyal client was stoked at the effort the team had put into playing along with his jokes and making him feel like part of the furniture.

"Bevan made it. Said if it would finally shut you up!" giggled Brett.

Jim chuckled and nodded, pleased as punch with his homemade loyalty token.

"I can't wait 'til you turkeys figure out how to put emery wheel sparks into a tin!"

## 20 - The right fit

Les sat in the coffee shop with Frank, an electrical contractor who wanted to be a rep. There was a pre-interview conversation to help Les decide whether things could progress beyond *The Shiny Bean*. A Carlton *Robusta Grande* hissed in the background as the barista poured cappuccinos.

"So why do you want to be a rep Frank?" asked Les, whose laconic posture gave nothing away about the ferocious intellect beneath.

"Oh, I'm gettin' too old to be on the tools Les. Can't climb around rooves any more. I like people, like dealing with 'em. I figure that with my experience as a sparky, and the fact that I know and have used the products for years and years, I'd be pretty good at it." Frank's appearance was relatively tidy, he was in his late 40's and he'd been a loyal Cadence client for some years. The Cadence team liked dealing with him.

"Yes, you certainly know the product lines. What do you think the most important part about this sales job would be?" With Alex on extended sick leave for the foreseeable future, Les had bitten the bullet and decided to appoint someone into his role. There was plenty of opportunity to have 3 productive reps on board - after all, he reasoned, it's the one job that, with the right people, more than pays for itself.

"Well, ahhh, you have to give good advice, know your stuff. If I'm out talking to a customer and they need something, I can give them guidance."

"True. What else? I mean, you've run your own contracting business for years - 'sold your services', so to speak. What did you find you had to invest time in doing?"

"Ahhhm... well, you've got to build relationships. If they like you, and they trust you, then they'll be loyal. It's a big part of my businesses success - they come back to you if you get to know them, and you look after them. I'm a big believer in giving people good service. I know that's something you guys are pretty hot on too."

Les let the mental tumble dryer toss around the competing forces. Service focused, but no demonstrable understanding of mapping and prioritising business development efforts. A proven 'problem diagnostician', but in a salaried role, would he have that same sense of 'sales urgency' that comes when you run your own business and selling means food on the table?

"Frank, let's set up an interview, I'll get Penny to come in on it, we'll run through a few 'what if' scenarios, and she can give you a better perspective about the job, and we can see if it's a good fit - how does that sound?"

"Yeah, OK, sounds great Les, thank you. Any reason why you wouldn't hire me now?" said Frank with a cheeky grin.

"Ahhh, couple of things we've got to look at first, but I'll be frank, Frank - that question just sent your stocks up a few points", said the impressed boss.

## 21 - Plotting

Barry sat at his corner office desk, chin on fist, and looked out at the rain colouring the bitumen in the customer carpark. I've got to do something, he thought. I've got to find a way to steal some customers from them. His ruminating was interrupted by a knock at his door.

"Hey Baz, I've got Shane from WireU on the line, he's arcing up because the cable tray he ordered 2 weeks ago still isn't here yet, and he wants to start his job tomorrow. He's pretty fired up" relayed Trevor, Barry's 2IC.

"Well, his cable tray isn't up my a\$#e, so what does he want me to do? Can you phone MetalGuys again and find out why there's a delay? They're normally slow, but this is ridiculous."

"Yeah, sure. Shane's being a bit of a pr\*ck about it, so I'm not going to bust a sweat here. Besides, he only buys from us to keep the Cadence guys on their toes." And off he went.

Barry's business, Power & Light Supplies, was a direct competitor of Cadence Electrical. A 5 minute drive from the Cadence premises, P&LS was once a thriving business. No more. Barry, who'd come up the ranks as a sales rep and now ran a team of 6 (down from 11 just 3 years ago), didn't share Les's passion for service, and his WIIFM attitude had woven itself into his team's cultural DNA. However, with the torch now scorching Barry's toes and head office asking very hard questions, he was being forced to think hard about business growth avenues. The most obvious was to nick back some customers that Cadence had 'stolen' over the years. But how? Barry's phone rang - an internal line.

"Yep?"

"Oh, Baz, Shane's really got his knickers in a twist, wants a word with you." Great. Another grumpy customer.

"Tell him I've just stepped out and I'll call him back later. And tell him you're onto MetalGuys and you'll call him when you know something."

Damn customers. Barry turned back to the rain and tried to think about how to grow his business.

## 22 - Just a pleasure

Two years ago, Cadence Electrical sent out a simple survey to a selection of long-standing and one-off purchasers at their store. When asked "how would you describe the service you received?", here's a random selection of responses;

"They were so nice, so easy to deal with!"

"It was fine - mine was a simple transaction, and nothing went wrong, so I'm happy."

"The product I wanted was on back-order, which was inconvenient, but they kept me posted on when it would arrive, and even had it couriered out to me when I told them it'd be a few days before I could get in to pick it up. I thought that was amazing."

"I've dealt with them for years. It's just a pleasure to go in, deal with people you can see give a damn about helping you out. They know their stuff, which is good, but it's the little extra things that stick in your head. There's always something a little special popping up there."

"I'm easy to look after. Give me the product I need at a good price and don't muck it up, and I'm happy. They ticked the boxes, so I'm happy."

"I didn't really need any service. But if I compare them to others suppliers I've dealt with, I did enjoy shopping there. Had a nice vibe, nice people, seemed to have good harmony."

"Buncha larrikins! Ah, they're like family, I've been going there that long. Damn good people who are on the ball. They know my business almost as well as I do, I reckon! They're part of my team."

"Service was fine. Not sure what else they could have done?.... No, all good."

"They gave me the wrong product to start with. But when they realised - and they realised before me - they actually phoned me, offered to send someone around to replace it immediately. It got me thinking that they must've been thinking about what I said I'd be using it for, and they must have spoken, and when they realised... they chose to do something about it! Tell me how many suppliers you deal with that do that? Most'd wait until the customer came back, right? I thought that was pretty speccy. I've told a heap of people about that...."



## 23 - Unreasonable?

The text message glowed on Cadence Electrical Rep Penny's iPhone.

"Penny. Need 2 drums of 2.5mm 2 core & earth sent to the bayside site. Need to get them through the gate right to the trench. Gotta have them before 2pm - pour's happening. Thanks, Cliff."

For a profit margin of less than \$15, a client was asking Penny to drop everything and arrange to have 2 small drums of cable delivered immediately to a remote worksite. Not just dropped to the gate, but through 3 site checkpoints which each needed hoops jumped through. And the client had a 'no local freight fee' agreement in place, so it was a love job that she'd have to recruit Wilf the Storeman to do, because she was currently driving out in the country. And they needed it in under 3 hours. And the drive from the office was 1 & 1/2 hours. And it got a 'thanks'.

Penny sighed.

Then she called Wilf.

"Hey mate, Pen here. How's your day going? Good to hear. Wilf, I've just had a note from Cliff saying he needs 2 rolls of 2c&e, 2.5mm, sent trench-side at the bayside site before 11am - they're pouring concrete, and they've run short by the sounds. I know your freight mate is out and about on another job, so would you mind deputising one of the boys to jump in the truck and take it out there? I'm sorry for the late notice - I'd do it, but you know where I am right now. Oh, you're a gem Wilf, I really appreciate it. So will Cliff. Cheers mate, I'll let him know it's on the way."

As Penny texted the reply, she didn't give a second thought to why she was jumping so many fences for a \$15 job. She didn't pause to reflect on the fact this client had already spent nearly \$2 Million with them in the last 9 months at 3 jobsites. Or that they looked like winning 4 more in the next few months. Or that the time pressures the client had recently been put under through no fault of their own had meant their normally well-planned-in-advance purchasing schedule had had to be compromised. Or that Cliff was a gem of a bloke who'd been through a horrible family hardship in the past fortnight. Or that Cadence had the mother of all service promises in place.

None of that crossed Penny's mind, because she'd already galvanised a mental trigger that they'd do whatever they needed to do to look after this client. She'd made sure the whole Cadence team new.

This act wasn't worth \$15.

## 24 - Concentrating the wisdom pot

Before the daily Junction Box meeting disbanded, Cadence Electrical boss Les asked his crew for 2 more minutes of their time.

"Hey guys, an opportunity has come up that you might be interested in. I was at my monthly business leaders networking show last night, and one of the guys I was talking to told me about a bloke coming to town in a fortnight."

Les pulled a flyer out from his compendium and held it up for the team. The glossy advertised a visiting "time management guru" who was running a series of short workshops for business groups.

"I've heard of this bloke before, comes pretty highly recommended, and if there's one consistent thing I see in our future, it's that time pressures will continue to grow unabated. This guy is running some public workshops that you can pay to attend, but I believe he also opens himself up to running 1/2 day in-house sessions with teams like ours. So while it's not a product or industry-specific training opportunity, I'd suggest it's something that's really relevant in our 'busy working world'. Thoughts?"

Some general murmuring before Storeman Wilf piped up.

"Yeah, if there's things he can help us with to better manage the growing workload, sounds interesting." Customer Service & Administration Manager nodded and echoed Wilf's thoughts.

"If he can tailor his guidance specific to our business and how we help our customers, and take stress out of the busy workload and make us more efficient, and more profitable, then that sounds good." There was general nodding from around the room. Les wrapped it up.

"OK, well, why don't I make a call, see what he can offer a business like ours. I was thinking we might even ask a couple of our great customers in on the day, we'd pay for them. Might be a great relationship galvanising experience?" Again, eye widening and head nodding. It was Penny who nailed it.

"I reckon this sounds great. I mean, I want to know a bit more about what he can do, but if he can help us be the best time managers in our industry, with good systems to keep us focused and prioritised and making sure we get more important stuff done than anyone else in our space.... well, that's got to be pretty valuable, I'd have thought. We're pretty good at keeping technical training up to date, but to become industry-best in efficiency? Love the idea of bringing in customers, Les. Let me give you my client wish list...."

## 25 - Sometimes they come back

The front doorbell dinged. Brett left the stock he was putting on the shelf to attend to the counter. There stood a man who'd been in to Cadence Electrical some weeks before, trying to find a unusual replacement light bulb for one he didn't have with him (for a fitting he didn't know much about, and even if he had, it was unlikely to have been manufactured anytime in the last 15 years).

"Hello Sir! How did you go finding the light globe for your lounge room?" asked Brett. Despite the man agreeing that he'd go home and take a photo of it, Brett hadn't seen or heard from him again.

"Hi! Wow, you've got a good memory! I'm sorry I was so vague last time I was in here, and that I didn't get back to you. It'd been a pretty horrific day." Brett remembered the day well - they too had been worried, about whether their sales rep colleague Alex, a car accident victim, was going to make it.

"No, no problems at all. Did you find a globe?" Brett continued brightly.

"Well, that's why I'm here. No, in answer to your question, but I didn't really try. After getting home, we had some pressing personal matters for a few days that meant I pushed the globe out of my head. It's all good now though. But it gave my wife and I time to think through your suggestion about how attached we were to the light fitting.... and we're not. So that gave rise to some discussions about how attached we are to the room the light is in... and we're not. We've only recently moved to town from interstate, only been in the house a short time. So, long story short, we've actually decided to undertake a major renovation of our house. It's a big old character home, and we've got young kids, and we've decided to basically double its size. I'm an Architect, so I'm going to design and project manage it myself. But because we're new to town, I'm still familiarising myself with who the best subcontractors are to use. You were so helpful to me when I was here, despite the fact I must've sounded like I had a screw loose. So I thought I'd come and ask you guys, who must deal with the best and worst tradies in the area, the names of some great local electricians and chippies I might get in touch with. I'm assuming you have some regulars that you rate highly, that'd reward your referral with their business?"

Well there you go, thought Brett. Les's advice paying off once more. "Not enough people try to help. Try to help, really try, and you'll be amazed what happens."

"Wow! What an exciting move! Well, let me get some numbers for you..." said Brett.

## 26 - Leveraging the love to learn

"Crackling?" the spit roast caterer asked the young man, who thrust his plate of potato salad and gravy-covered pork slices forward.

"Hey Jacko, beer?" Bevan shouted to one of Cadence Electrical's regular customers as he dived his hand into the ice-filled chest.

"Not going already?" Wilf asked Deano, who was mustering his two freshly face-painted children away from the swarm of sprites on the bouncy castle.

Cadence Electrical's boss Les was having a quiet conversation with one of their bigger clients while the customer thank-you shindig at the back of Cadence's warehouse was in full swing.

"So it sounds like business is looking great for you, Ed? Well, we're grateful you and a few of the guys could come along - you're loyal customers" said Les. Ed, the MD of a mid-size engineering firm, nodded and had a bite of his chop.

"Well, your team do a great job of looking after the team. Things like this, where you can bring the family along, it means a lot to them."

"Thank you mate, we try. The market is always changing though, We want to keep finding better ways to be more valuable to key clients. We're continually trying to benchmark ourselves against great suppliers in all sorts of industries. Get our head around how other industries do things we could do." The give-me-feedback question was implied without being overtly (crassly) stated in a social setting.

"Well, you guys do some great stuff, none of the suppliers in this space compete on service. There are some sharper prices, which, I won't lie, is important. But that always comes at a price, and I know you go in with a sharp pencil where you can. Outside of this arena though, we get some great support come from our IT providers... and our finance company just last week sent through this great innovation..." and Ed laid out the details.

Les soaked up the customers candid feedback, loosened from his opinions vault by carbonised meat, a cold Coopers and genuine hospitality. The principle of mutual reciprocity was something Les knew to leverage wherever possible. When they feel indebted, happy, comfortable, they want to pay you back. At these times, no point asking for feedback about yourself, they'll just blow smoke up your backside. But ask them about what others do well, and if they think it'll help you, they'll offer intelligence like no man's business.

Les smiled, nodded and considered some of the initiatives Ed was describing that no-one in their industry had tried before.

## 27 - Playing with the role play

"What about this.... *"we've been serving similar businesses for a number of years now - we understand the range you'll be purchasing, the need you have for fast turn-around times, the ability to deliver on time and on budget consistently."* How's that sound?" Cadence Electrical's currently lone sales rep Penny was sitting opposite her boss Les at his desk.

"I like the focus on consistency. Are we assuming their needs though? We think we understand them, but what if we asked? What sort of question could we use?"

Les and Penny were spitballing how they were going to approach a presentation they were to make tomorrow. A large construction firm was looking to lock in a preferred supplier arrangement to leverage efficiencies and economies of scale, and Cadence had been granted the chance to present to the leadership team. The brief - tell us why we should choose you.

"Yep, good point. How about *"while we're very experienced in serving and partnering businesses of similar size in similar industries, I'm very keen to understand precisely what you'd like from your preferred supplier - what's most important to you?"*

"Fantastic Pen, love it. Play with it. Can we make it even more impactful?" Her boss brought out the best in Penny, being provocative without patronising.

"Umm... well, it's Frank and Trevor we'll be presenting to. They're no b.s., so maybe... uhhh.... *"We want to help you grow your business & be successful. What are the most important things you're looking for?"*

The sounding board bouncing continued, the questions sharpened, the boss provoked the protégé to play with the words in the safe space, and the pre-call plan came together.

Les believed in basketballer Ed MacCauley's famous quote.

"Remember, when you aren't practicing, someone somewhere is. And when you meet them...

... they will win."

## 28 - Little shiny things

It's little shiny things that stand out at Cadence Electrical (Wholesale + Retail). By themselves, unremarkable. As a collective, glowing.

The attention to detail in the layout of the showroom, with boxes straightened many times a day and litter patrol on everyone's responsibility list.

The hand-written thank-you that goes on every printed invoice, be they cashie or trade.

The counter-top bowl of shiny apples (chocolates on special occasions) giving the shop a Qantas Club-like feel.

The photos of happy clients at happy client events in customer eyesight.

The delivery trucks, rep utes and Cadence team uniforms, all in synch, all clean, all sparkling, all the time.

The neatness of the product bays, constantly ready for a customer tour, which happens daily.

The order and visible efficiency operating in 'the fishbowl', an administrative working space that clients could see into, which influenced their perceptions, which influenced their spending habits.

The 'thank you for coming in' welcome and departure words that were drummed into each team member for each visitor.

Little shiny things. Done once, an aberration easily forgotten.

With disciplined consistency, brand building bullets.

## 29 - Critique

"Anything else?" asked Kelly, Cadence Electrical's administrative superstar, who was chairing this morning's Junction Box gathering.

"Yes, just one thing Kelly" said Les, Cadence's laid-back leader. "We've got 3 supplier reps coming in today. As you know, one of them - Jeff from Green Lights - is running the new product training session at 4pm. Each of these guys is a great supporter to our business, so it's a given that we treat them like part of the Cadence family. But this also presents us with the opportunity to look carefully at how they go about *their* roles as suppliers. We can benchmark our service approaches against theirs - try and think about the good and the bad of what they're doing, see if there's anything we can learn from them."

"Jeff's a ripper. Not quite so sure about Ken from FlexiStrut" offered storeman Wilf.

"Well, they approach their roles differently, that's for sure. But they're both valuable partners, and I encourage each of you, when they come in, to think about what they're doing. How they present, how they speak about their products, the types of questions they ask us, whether they've actually followed up on the things they said they'd do for us last time they were in. Whether they get in the way of us doing our jobs or whether they're perceptive and sensitive to their surrounds. How well they listen to you when they speak. Like us, none of them are perfect, but if we're to get ever-better at how we serve our clients, I hope you'll take the opportunity to learn something from each of them."

"Maybe we can each come to tomorrow morning's Junction Box with 1 thing we learnt from each of them?" offered Bevan.

"Great idea" said Les. "Brett, I think you're chairing - can you add that to the agenda?" A nod from his internal salesperson.

"Of particular interest to me is the training session" said sales rep Penny. "We do a bit of it, but I think we can get much better, and I want to make this even more of a feature of doing business with us. Hopefully can pick up some good ideas."

The team wrapped up their daily pow-wow and dived back into the business of delighting the payers.

## 30 - Drop 'em

Barry thumbed through the catalogue. All of his biggest competitor's pricing, including margins, right at his fingertips. A smug smirk crept across his face as Barry's day brightened. You little beauty.

An hour ago, a loyal Power & Light Supplies customer popped in to see Barry and quietly handed him the catalogue. "Cadence Electrical Pricing Q1 2012". The light-fingered client had been into Barry's competitor's business and, when Bevan had been down an aisle grabbing him some blue points, he'd appropriated the '*For internal use only*' booklet from behind the counter and into his workbag, then shot off before Bevan had the chance to realise it was missing. His logic? If they were silly enough to leave it out for anyone to grab... Now here he was delivering the intelligence to their direct competitor, hopeful of some future goodwill in return.

Barry thought about what to do with the booklet.

He could, of course, throw it away. Wash his hands of it - stolen goods.

Hah.

He could return it.

Double hah.

What he chose to do, what all with myopia choose to do, was try and use it to his advantage. Barry got Trevor, his 2IC, on the internal phone.

"We're going to put a special together. Hand-pick 20 products that we know Cadence has had the wood on us with, and drop the price to the floor. We'll not make any money on them, but we'll put a rocket up 'em, 'cause we know they can't compete, and when some of their regulars come in here, we'll put on a song and dance show and show them why they should be customers of ours. Maybe lock in some really low pricing on their most common items, something we know Cadence won't compete with."

"Uhh, OK" said Trevor. "What if they try price-matching us?"

"Nah, I know their margins now. And they don't drop their pants on price - it's a policy Les has. They'll just watch their loyal guys walk out the door, confident they'll come back. We'll get 'em in here, show 'em why they should stay. Keep the revenue ticking over, keep Sydney off our back a while. I'll get the products and prices together, I'll get you to get the flyer done."

With that, Barry went about identifying Cadence's soft spots.



## 31 - The response

Cadence Electrical's Customer Service & Administration Manager Danielle brought the topic up at the morning Junction Box.

"Sam from Haney's showed me the flyer last night. PLS is running a big sale on a number of common items, and their pricing is at or below anything we could match - nearly cost. Powerpoints, circuit breakers, fluoro's. Sam's a loyal guy, and he's said he'll buy whatever he can from us, but for these items, while their sale is running, he's going to spend up with them."

Danielle was referring to a pricing blitz a nearby competitor business had just launched which, unbeknownst to the Cadence Team, had been formulated as a result of the PLS manager receiving a stolen copy of Cadence Electrical's buy and sell price list.

"Mmm" said Les, Cadence's relaxed boss. "Serendipitous that pricing should come out at the same time we lose a price list." A languid affect masked Les's splinter-sharp scone. "I also saw the flyer last night, and you're right Danielle, they're at unsustainable prices which we won't do. I've got no doubt we've got regulars who will take some business down the road for a while. In fact, you'll each have some very loyal clients you should let know about the pricing. If you'd do it for your family - tell them to take advantage of an unsustainable special - then you should do it for your best customers." Les had a customer-centric bravery that never ceased to shock his team.

"But what if they don't come back?" said Brett, the youngest sales team member.

"Well, it's our job to continually demonstrate why we're worth sticking with in an increasingly competitive, commoditised market. Please don't misunderstand me - I don't want any clients taking business we can help them with anywhere beyond our counter. But it's the right thing to do to let the most loyal know. Then it's our challenge to show why shopping with us is overall the best business decision they can keep making. Let's take a minute to discuss why it might be in our clients interest to stick around when there's a really cheap offer 5 minutes down the road. Penny?"

"Well, for a start, we know what we're talking about, and we tailor recommendations rather than take orders" said Cadence's currently lone sales rep.

"Sure! What about for products where our regulars don't need our recommendations - where it's a simple purchase? Bevan?"

"Ahh... they get great peace-of-mind knowing that if anything goes wrong, we deal with it unbelievably fast and with no questions asked. Others won't do that, particularly when they're not making any margin on the sale to cover the after-sales service costs."

"Fantastic! How can we communicate, and even better, demonstrate that to the regulars in the next few days? Wilf?"

As the client retention ideas flowed, the Cadence team re-galvanised their convictions that, despite carrying a premium, they were still the place to shop.

## 32 - What happens when you stick to your guns

Of the 12 loyal customers Cadence Electrical staff chose to tell about their competitor's great sale, 10 already knew about it (but were stoked to know a supplier was so invested in helping their business save money that they'd send them to the arms of another), and the other 2 were gobsmacked that a supplier would proactively tell them where they could get a better price on a commodity product. Only a pretty confident, competent business would do that, they reasoned.

Of those 12 customers, 9 said they would be taking the competitor up on their temporary special. 9 also said that that's all the products they'd buy from them. In the course of time, 8 of them demonstrated that they were telling the truth, and came back not only to buy every other higher margin product they could from Cadence, but with field intelligence by the toolbelt-ful and a galvanised commitment to continued shopping whenever possible with the Cadence team. (The 9th felt lousy for lying, but found a way to live with it.)

As other clients came in to Cadence over the 4 week period the competitor's special was running, they found themselves subjected to a renewed sense of passion, service ethic and desire to go above-and-beyond that had nothing to do with sticker price dropping.

The friendliness meter went off the chart.

The SPARK initiatives were front and centre of every Cadence team members' mind.

Extra **Shine**. Demonstrable **Passion**. Deeply-considered **Add-ons**. **Roustabouting** like mad. **Kollaboration** at every corner.

The team viewed the price pressure as a challenge. A benchmarking opportunity they'd raise the bar for (permanently).

Cadence's sales of the products the competitor had on special went down that month.

Overall revenue remained reasonably consistent with their target.

Profitability went up.

And the returning hordes in the subsequent month, when the competitor counted their increased sales volume (not profit), more than made up for any volume downturn.

(Footnote - As a result of the competitor blitz, Cadence did review their pricing of those commodity lines they were being tested on, and made a strategic choice to alter the list prices of 7 of them. 4 of them went up.)

## 33 - All contribute

Bevan came in looking like death warmed up. Eyes like holes in the snow. A clammy, flaccid pallor about his chops. Breathing fumes that stripped wallpaper. Les saw him first, and called him in.

"Hello mate. Big night then?" A smiling assassin ready to pounce? Bevan immediately knew he was in it.

"Ahhhh.... yeahhhhhh. If it's any consolation, I was out with a customer - Stevo from Bandicoot. His wife just had a baby, we went to school together, a few of the boys got together to wet its head and, well.... but I'm here!" There was an unsteadiness in Bevan's gait and words.

"I can see that. How are you feeling?" A quizzical nod, albeit a slow one.

"Well, my friend, I'm afraid I'm not putting you in front of customers today. Go home. In fact, I'll get Wilf to run you home, because I don't even know you'd be legal if your breath is anything to go by" said Cadence Electrical's calm-but-no-compromises boss.

"Oh, I'm fine Les, honestly. I've had a few hours sleep, I'm good. Missus' made me some eggs. Bit dusty, but that'll pass. A Berocca sandwich, good to go!" Bevan sucked it up and put on his best game face.

"Understand. But it's not negotiable. Go home, have a sleep, we've got it covered here. I'll give you a hoy at 1. See how you're going. I really encourage you to get some sleep. But you're not working here this morning. You'd be letting the team, and all they work for, down."

Bevan felt the air being sucked out of his tyres. He had nothing but the utmost respect for Les, and to feel like he'd let him down, he was starting to feel gutted. Les, savvy teacher that he is, let it sink in a moment, before continuing.

"Mate, you work hard, you're a valuable team member, and you deserve to let your hair down every so often. But you know what I believe in when it comes to how we present to our clients. And you're not up for it today. So go home....WILF! CAN YOU COME HERE A SEC?! Bevan, have a rest, I'll give you a call, and you can come back in later this afternoon if you're up to it."

Bevan nodded slowly, realising he wasn't negotiating his way out of this. Les wrapped it up before Wilf came in the door.

"And when you come back, you'll have a bit to do - others'll cover the load this morning, but your contribution will come! So get some rest. And brush your teeth - you smell like cr\*p."

## 34 - Frank's first day

"ShooooooooOOOPPPP!!!"

Cadence Electrical regular Jim's entrances seemed to be getting louder and more protracted since being presented with his "Left Handed Screwdriver" award. Positive reinforcement of his annoying habit? Today it was Cadence boss Les at the counter with the new bloke, Frank.

"Morning Jim. You look particularly chipper this morning?" said Les.

"Man who doesn't drink or smoke's always got a lot to be happy about!" returned Jim, his tobacco stained fingers landing on the counter.

"Jim, this is Frank - he's just starting today, taking on Alex's repping role while he's recuperating. Ex-sparky that saw the light. Frank, Jim's a great loyal customer who always makes himself known when he walks in". The two men exchanged man intro's and tradie-rough handshakes.

"Well, you've got your work cut out here working with these jokers, Frank. Glad to know someone in the building's going to have some idea of what their products are actually used for." Frank, very used to the dry sarcastic humour of his trade-kin, didn't interpret Jim's tongue-in-cheek comments literally.

"Ah, I've got a bit of finding my way around to do first. And to learn how to use the computer system. Bit different to crawling around in rooves like I'm used to. And just getting used to the uniform too", Frank said, fiddling with his roughly-tied neck tie.

"Well, when you figure it out, you better teach the rest of them. Les knows a bit, he's not too bad. But enough chat, I'm a busy man and time is money. 3 boxes of 25's and 10 lengths of 25mm conduit, thank you Sirs."

Les turned it over to Frank. "Got this one?" His new rep nodded slowly and headed down the aisles to find the products. Les took a quick moment to have a private word with Jim.

"I think he'll be great. Work ethic's tops, knows his stuff, and we'll get him up to speed quickly. Want to test him?" said Les with a cheeky smirk. Jim grinned back and took his lead.

"OY, FRANK! WHILE YOU'RE DOWN THERE, GET'US A BOX OF LONG WEIGHTS? TA!"

See if the new bloke's OK under some pressure and hazing, thought Les. Get the hazing out of the way quickly, make him feel part of the team. Down the aisle, Frank grinned. He hadn't heard that one in years.

## 35 - Status Quo don't live here

The top 5 list Les had captured on the whiteboard;

1. Start a "Coffee Van" style service - daily (am?) restocking van visits to top 10 customers to proactively top up their most frequently purchased stock lines (bolster spend?) - save them time, make it easy
2. Build "Key Client Bays" - dedicated shelves for top 5 - 10 clients where their most commonly purchased items are stored, have near counter - convenience, speed, protect them from back-orders / stock-outs
3. Create a "Simulation Station" - develop under-used corner of warehouse, set up mock common wiring challenges etc - apprentice / TA training, refresher for less common jobs, new product training area. For both customers and staff (suppliers to fund?)
4. End-of-year reward trip - manufacturing plant tour for top 10 spenders plus entertainment. Show commitment, help them understand product origins & proactively manage client expectations (esp. re: backorders & why they happen)
5. Reciprocal visits - Cadence staff to tour top customer worksites (major) - gain increased understanding of client jobs, needs; combine with hospitality (shout lunch for all onsite)

"Fantastic thinking, guys. Some brilliant initiatives with great customer focus and well-considered rationale. So - let's pick one to start with. Which is likely to give us the greatest, fastest ROI?"

The monthly Circuit Breaker session - half a day's training, business plan review & refinement, and new customer service initiative generation, was in full swing. The goal of a Circuit Breaker session? Stop the day-to-day flow for a short window, and hit reset on everyone's thinking.

By any standard, the Cadence Electrical team were good at customer service. By many standards, great. But they all knew 'good' isn't a perpetual state.

And 'great' moves upwards evermore.

## 36 - What do they want (& how do they want it?)

"So what's the plan?" asked Frank, the older new-kid Cadence Electrical sales rep. In the driver's seat adjacent, the more experienced rep Penny opened her Cadence compendium to reveal a par-completed call planning form awaiting i-dotting.

"Well, Kent's been buying most of his domestic product from us for years. He goes down the road occasionally, but always comes back. He likes the fact we look after him pretty well and have never let him down too badly with delivery muck-ups or protracted back-orders. The thing is though, he doesn't extend that same loyalty to the bigger commercial tender projects he wins. He shops the big jobs around a bit more, does 'mini tenders' of his own. I know for a fact he's in a good position to win a couple of big jobs down south in the coming month. I'm very keen to see if we can get him to just extend the loyalty to us for those jobs."

Frank, an experienced small businessperson himself but still green to this sales rep caper, sat looking at Penny, nodding. She gave him a few moments.

"So... are you going to ask me?" provoked Penny. Frank looked confused.

"Ask you what?"

"Why he hasn't extended this loyalty already? Frank, you're a nice bloke and I'm sure you'll do well in this job, but when you're out with me, I'll put you to good use. I want you to challenge me. Ask me questions." When she chose to, Penny could break'em with the best.

"Uhhh.... OK. Why doesn't he give you... us... this business now?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm going to ask."

"You don't know? Uhh, what could it be?" Frank cottoned on to his litmus paper role.

"Well, I can guess. I mean, he wants us to keep our pencils sharp. He wants to build margin into these big jobs that you just can't hide in smaller jobs. Maybe he uses these big jobs as a fair market price indicator exercise. Maybe he believes it's an easy means of demonstrating & exercising diligence in his supplier sourcing practices. I don't know. Point is, I've planned to ask him a couple of questions to really get a better understanding of what he wants when it comes to bigger jobs, and what we can do that we're not already doing to help him not only win more of them, but make sure they're highly profitable to him."

"Oh. OK. Ummm... what sort of bloke is he? I mean, how will you tackle the conversation?"

"Great question newbie, you're a fast learner! Well, he's friendly without being over the top, but he's also a bit of a thinker - you can see the cogs turning. I've looked after him for years, and I've earned the right to ask him questions, but I can't be too confronting, or he'll feed me a BS line to shut it down. I'm planning on being friendly but direct; clear in what I want to know, but framing it so he knows it's to help us help him in better ways..."

The pre-call planning pow-wow went on another 60 seconds before both climbed out of the car and headed in to see Kent.

## 37 - Failing better

When Penny first started out in her Cadence Electrical sales rep role, she'd do a wonderful job of piquing interest in her products-as-solutions, but she'd never ask the final "let's formalise the arrangement" question. Fear? Lack of confidence? She routinely left money on the table, she left avenues for the competitor scavengers to come in and pick at the prepared sales feast, and so she got disenchanted with herself. Maybe she couldn't sell.

Then one day, sick of racking them up but not knocking them down, she changed her approach, and asked. Low and behold, she got a couple of early wins. Thinking she'd stumbled on King Solomon's Mines, Penny religiously overcompensated. With an aggressive old school text closing patter, she annoyed some loyal conservatives by asking for business boldly before they were ready, by sounding harder than she was, and she inspired more than her fair share of calls-to-her-boss from miffed regulars.

With a headful of annoyance, shame and confusion, Penny retreated into her shell and sulked awhile, not asking so much anymore. And while the annoyed few forgot about it and got on with their own businesses, Penny quietly watched her overall sales numbers grow in the accounts where she asked.

One morning, her boss Les sat her down, made her a cuppa, and asked her what she'd learnt. Penny said she understood the value of asking, but because asking was taking yourself way out of your comfort zone and exposing yourself to rejection, it was damn hard when people said no, or worse, got angry at you for asking. She knew she sometimes came on a bit strong, but was struggling to reconcile just where the line was - when she'd earned the right to ask, and how she should frame the asking.

Les, wise old bird he is, said to her;

"You know what you're doing that's so remarkable, Pen? You're failing actively. That's unbelievably brave. So few people in life choose to do it. They fail passively, by not asking, by not exposing themselves to risk. You are - you're putting it out there. And you're chalking up bruises. But the beauty of bruises? They remind you to think about the lessons you learnt getting them. To think. About how you'll try differently, better, next time. And guess what? You'll fail again, if you're brave enough to keep trying. But every time, if you look at the last bruise and think about why you got it, you'll fail better. Until the day the failures are so outnumbered by the wins. Please Pen, for yourself, keep failing actively. It's the only way to be great. I need you to keep failing better."

Penny got back on the horse. Every day, she reads Samuel Beckett's words.

***"Ever tried? Ever failed? No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."***

## 38 - The artful dodger

"So, Kent. I understand you're in a good place to win the business on those two big tenders down south?" Penny was no shrinking violet.

"Uhh, we think we've put in a good bid, but who knows, Penny? Never over 'til the fat lady sings!" said her regular client.

Penny, flanked by Cadence Electrical's new sales rep Frank (co-travelling with her to learn the ropes), was sitting opposite a client whose smaller-business loyalty she wanted to translate to some big jobs he was about to win. Kent usually tendered out supply for his bigger jobs - Penny wanted to lock him in for *all* his work, and in the process, lock the competitors out.

"Kent, you've been a great client of ours for years. We love dealing with you, supporting your team, hopefully helping you grow your business and make your life easier. Are our service levels meeting your expectations Kent?"

"Umm... yes. You're always on the ball Penny, I've got immense respect for Les, and your service is always good. I'm pretty happy." Kent sensed where this was going, but chose to let it play out.

"We're keen to help you and your team however and whenever we can Kent. You know my philosophy of 'making your life easier', and it's something I - and the Cadence team - are proud of, but always trying to improve on. I want to help you enjoy that same peace-of-mind, that same sense of 'easy to deal with', to the bigger jobs as well as the smaller jobs you use us for without fail. How does that sound?" Penny tried hard not to sound like she'd swallowed a Tom Hopkins book.

"Ahh, Penny, you're great supporters of ours. I'm always happy to invite you to put forward your best offer on the big jobs, your track record is great, so I'll always give you that chance - happy to!"

"Kent, I appreciate that." Deep breath. "What about using us for the big jobs rather than going out to tender?" There. I said it, thought Penny.

A smilingly philosophical look spread across Kent's pleasant face. He raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips, nodded gently, and replied.

"You are good suppliers Penny. You're not always the cheapest, but you rarely let me down. The thing is, I have 5 other reps that sit opposite me, trying to win my business. Over the years a number have asked me to circumvent the tender process, although more ham-fistedly than you just did. I don't begrudge it. In fact, I'm pleased you asked. I'm always pleased when you win the bigger tenders - it means I can sleep easier at night. But I've seen what happens when a business becomes unfailingly loyal to a supplier in a previous job I held. And while I don't anticipate you getting sloppy or resting on your laurels the way others have done, I need to make sure we're staying in touch with fair market pricing, and giving all in the market fair chance at our business. Does that make sense?"

Penny nodded and opened her mouth, but before she spoke, Kent continued.

"I like it when suppliers don't pressure me, and you don't Penny. I don't mind being asked for a shot, but I like it when I don't feel threatened. I'll certainly be happy if you win this one Penny. I'll know one way or another next week whether I've got one of the jobs, then I'll get a tender document together. It might be tricky, and I'll be honest, I could use some help with some spec's. Can you give me a hand with that?"



## 39 - No soft options

Les felt like rubbish.

A head cold, a sleepless night, an auditor coming into the branch today, and more than likely he was going to be short staffed (if Wilf's coughing and spluttering yesterday was anything to go by).

Les pulled back the doona, took another look at the clock - 5:05am - closed his eyes for 3 more seconds and then steeled himself. Up and at'em, sunshine. He slipped on his ugg boots, wandered out into the kitchen, poured a glass of water and stood at the sink, drinking and thinking.

Not going for a walk this morning. Feel like crap, cold air will only make it worse. Will plan one for after work - 5:30 until 6:15 - get some vitamin D at the same time, might help this cold. Means I've just freed up an hour now. How to use, how to use. Les took his glass, walked into his home office and turned on the light. Neat and tidy desk and bookshelves. A computer begging to be turned on. A reading pile of 4 books adjacent. Atop - "[Willpower](#)" by the psychologist Roy Baumeister. Kind of apt, thought Les.

He looked at the hand-written aspirational checklist he'd pinned in front of his workspace.

1. Take the business, all within it and all who touch it, someplace remarkable.
2. I lead by serving. I serve by asking. I ask because I give a damn.
3. Show them in little ways, all day every day, that I love it.
4. Make sure I'm loving it, or brave up and change it.
5. One bite at a time. What's the best next one?

What's most likely to help me tick the important boxes right now, thought Les.

Emails?

Spreadsheets?

Crawling back into my own sheets for an extra hour?

The LED on the computer had a hypnotic glow, like the evil Maleficent's spinning wheel pulling Sleeping Beauty towards its cursed spindle. Turn me onnnnn. Suuuuurf meeee. Check your emaillllll.

Les took the book off the pile along with a pen, set his alarm on the Blackberry for 6am, walked over to the easy chair in the corner of his office and sucked it up.

## 40 - Religion, faith & proof

"Junction box everyone!" called Danielle, Cadence Electrical's Customer Service & Admin Manager.

The troops mustered in the fishbowl - the open-plan office area with a glassed-in view of the front counter and reception area. Internal Salesperson Bevan muttered as he walked in.

"Can't we give this a miss today? With Wilf out, I've got a ton of stuff to do."

Danielle looked at him like he'd just stolen her sandwich, then remembered the piece about 'everyone's a customer' that Les continually drummed into them. She nodded slowly and addressed his gripe.

"I know, and we'll keep this to a couple of minutes. We do this rain, hail or shine, guys" said Danielle. Les, who'd moved quietly into the room, let Danielle drive the reinforcement conversation. "On a day like today, it's more important than ever. So - here's the numbers..."

The team listened for 30 seconds as Danielle rattled off their daily progress towards the metrics that mattered, before she opened the floor to any customer feedback the team had received in the last 24 hours. Only Brett offered some - from a first-time customer who'd been delighted at what they'd perceived as 'bending over backwards' to get him a strange light switch (in fact, it hadn't been much effort at all).

"Truth be told" said Brett, "I think he was influenced by our Customer Standard". Brett motioned towards the large black and white plaque that hung on the wall, proclaiming the above-and-beyond service commitment Cadence Electrical backed itself to deliver to every customer.

"Goes to show the power of advertising your boldest promises?" asked Les, who while not his sharpest self, was giving a damn good impersonation of an enthusiastic boss despite a head cold.

"Great work Brett. Right. SPARK! rating - a lonely 2. Only a couple of r's - well done to the roustabouts. I know we're short staffed, and it's hard to go above & beyond when we're stretched. So let's look for *little things* we can do that don't take much time. Would be great to see some 's' shine acts make it onto the board in the coming couple of days. Couple of ideas before we break?"

After the group had decided on some small extra's they'd each try and do for customers in the coming 2 days and then disbanded, Les hung back to speak with his 2IC Danielle.

"Don't get too despondent with Bevan" said Les. Danielle blew air, rolled eyes and nodded.

"It's just frustrating. It's a Cadence religion, the Junction Box. Everyone else has faith in it, they've seen the proof of staying customer-focused every day. I worry he's stopped believing in it."

Les smiled a tired, knowing smile.

"So take the chance to show him today why these are important. Make him your VIP today. Role model the behaviour you want."

## 41 - Mighty losers

Penny knocked on her boss Les's office doorframe. The Cadence Electrical big cheese looked up from his computer with kind eyes. Penny's facial expression wasn't as bright.

"We lost. Kent's tender. They went with someone else. Not sure who yet. Just seen his *"Dear John"* email." Penny looked gutted.

"Ahh, Pen, that sucks. I know how much you put into that. How are you?" People first, business second.

"I'm p\*ssed. Really p\*ssed. Pr\*ck. I put so much effort into helping him build the specs for that tender, I was sure he'd put us in the box seat. How could he do that?" Penny was working her way through the grief curve.

"I don't know Pen. Did he say why?" Got to ride with her to the bottom first, thought Les.

"No, just an *"I'm sorry that you weren't successful on this occasion"* along with a couple of butt-kissing comments to keep us on the hook for next time. Ars\*."

Les nodded sagely, keeping his kind eyes locked on Penny's.

"Penny, I watched the process you went through - that you've gone through for a long time now - to keep Kent happy. It sounds like you asked the questions, you've stayed close to him, you've done all he's asked and more, you even helped build the document. Is there anything else you think you could have done to change this outcome."

"More!? Les, we went so far above and beyond for this bloke, it wasn't funny! I mean, who knows, maybe there's something I missed, something more I could have done - there always is, I guess. But I can't think what it is... I mean, it's got to be price, but.... and .... this is cr\*p!"

"Then Penny, be OK with it. We don't know why he made the choice - we'll talk about how we might debrief with him in a minute. There'll be a good reason he made this choice. We know he values what we do - you do - for him. He's a good guy that likes you. So how do you think he feels delivering a kick in the guts to you like this?"

Penny paused a moment. "Not as bad as I feel" was what Penny had wanted to say, but the miracle of time and talking was starting to defuse her anger. Les seized on the silence.

"How about this for an idea? A quick note back to Kent - I'll proof read it if you like - saying something to the effect of *"Thanks for letting me know Kent and for giving us the chance to tender. I'm sorry we couldn't help you on this occasion, but as always, we're here to help you however we can."* You can play with the language, but show him that you're OK with it. I've never seen a surly annoyed response to rejection pay off longer term. What do you think?"

Penny knew her boss was right. Good losers make great Plan B's. Clients always need Plan B. And amazing how many Plan B's become Plan A when the others drop the ball.

## 42 - Home

"SshhhhoOOOPPPPPPP!"

Gnarled sparky Jim's grandiose entrances never failed to bring a smile to Bevan's face, even though his day had already smacked him upside the head several times.

"Well! It's our favourite customer. Welcome Jim, can I get you a chair? You're looking well today. Anyone ever told you you've got a great head for radio?" Bevan knew that what Jim found funny, few others would. To an outsider, this supplier impudence would be shocking. To Jim, it made him feel like he was at home. It was deeply personalised service.

"Don't get me started, Turkey. These are beauty lines, carved from having to deal with you inepts for so long. Now hurry up. I need 5 lengths of 25mm HD conduit... and a tin of striped paint. Quickly now."

"Heh heh... I haven't heard that in years. Glen from Petrucco's was in here the other day, tried to get Brett with the old 'Brick Bender'. Had him for half a second" said Bevan, as he headed down the aisle to get the conduit. Jim was making notes in his order book at the counter and yelled after Bevan.

"How's knacker's going? Me old mate 'Crash'?", referring to Cadence staff member Alex who'd been involved in a serious car accident six months earlier.

"Yeah, really good. In fact, he's coming back in next week, start back just a couple of days at a time. Les's got him working on a couple of special projects. Bl\*\*dy amazing, I tell you. Want some elbows to go with the conduit?"

Jim's hard face softened just a moment, safe in the knowledge no-one was watching him. He was glad Alex was well. He'd phoned the hospital every week while Alex had been in there, never let anyone know he'd done it. Never had family of my own, he thought. These people are the closest I've got. Good eggs. Man's pretty lucky, I s'pose.

Seeing Bevan returning with his conduit, Jim's game-face slipped back on like an old sock.

"Yeah, well, be good to get someone who knows something about service back in here, even if he is an invalid. And yes, of course I want elbows. Now, while I'm here, you better give me some of those cable ties you've got on special..."

**SHOP! closed.**

Hope you enjoyed - thanks for reading and passing it on!

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