

The Rules of Retail for a First-Year Performer

by Werten Bellamy

Readers have permission to share this open letter with their new associates, other new hires, and law students.

Dear First-Year Performer:

What would you tell a new student who asked for advice about how to succeed at your university or law school? Your recommendations would likely not include anything from the school website or new student orientation materials.

Instead, you would explain *how things really get done*. You would likely share some of the things you wish you had known on day one. You would likely identify some of your favorite courses and professors (and those to avoid), the best dormitories, and your favorite late-night eating spots. You might also offer to make an introduction to some of your friends who remain at the school. In short, you would offer insights into *the practical things that really matter*. This letter shares a similar objective.

I have written this *Letter to a First Year-Performer* because the best work, most rewarding experiences, mentorships, and sponsorships will be available to you only *after* you demonstrate that you are truly indispensable to the leaders who assign you work, your peers, and other workplace colleagues. This letter is designed to provide you with the insights needed to identify *what you must know* and *what you must do* to achieve your full potential.

You have learned many important lessons throughout your life. Most of these lessons are learned in the context of a particular type of life experience, such as family life, athletics, religious life, travel, or in an academic context. Scientists say that we file

these lessons learned in specific parts of our brain for later use. Interestingly, because each lesson was learned in a specific context, we have a tendency to sometimes store a lesson as information relevant only to the context within which it was learned.

In this letter, I will ask you to tap into and “recode” many of the lessons you have learned in your customer interactions with retailers. It is my hope that you will consider the relevance of such lessons (the “Rules of Retail”) to your first-year success, since many of the factors that drive exceptional retail success also will accelerate your journey down the path to becoming indispensable.

Think of your workplace as a shopping mall and yourself as a retail store in the mall. Each day you will be responsible for delivering products and service to the customer called partner or manager. Like any great retailer, your goal is simple. You want to create such an overwhelmingly positive experience for each customer that when they leave your store following the completion of each assignment, they commit to doing two things on your behalf: returning to your store and encouraging others to shop your store.

With this letter, I will reintroduce you to a well understood set of retail rules and invite you to tap into your experience as a customer to leverage your insights in your journey to become a top performer.

RULE OF RETAIL #1

Customer loyalty, not simply selling product, is the retailer's end game.

The customers who wait outside the Apple store overnight in anticipation of the release of the newest product are something much more than eccentric iPhone owners. Rather, they constitute one of Apple's most valuable customer segments. Apple recognizes that these evangelist customers do things and make contributions that average customers typically do not.

For example, shortly after returning home with their new device, the typical Apple evangelist will immediately log on to Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, or another social media platform to share and engage in online discussions about their early user experience. Later in the week when Apple sends an online survey, these evangelists are eager to share insights and offer suggestions for improvements. The power of such postings and feedback is priceless for Apple. Apple loves (and encourages) its evangelists to post user experience information; Apple understands that the very act of a positive referral binds the referring Apple customer more tightly because such positive posts both deepen the customer's credibility in the Apple community and make it less likely that the customer will defect.

For Apple, the benefits of loyalty do not end there. It turns out that these evangelist customers are much more likely to buy other Apple products and are up to seven times more likely to recommend an Apple product to others. Surveys have shown that over 90% of all iPhone evangelists couldn't imagine having a different kind of phone right now. Truth is, in all markets loyal customers buy more, recommend more, forgive more, and provide the highest value feedback. Having a great product is certainly important, but what ultimately drives commercial success is building loyal customers. Consequently, it's loyalty, not simply a great product, that is the successful retailer's end game.

What This Means for You

In your first year, customer loyalty, not customer satisfaction, should be your end game. Partners who are simply satisfied with you and your work will certainly be willing to work with you and support you in the day-to-day execution of your work responsibilities. What partners who are simply satisfied will not do, however, is make a deep and sustained investment in you. When other leaders ask about you, they will say you are capable — a “solid” performer. The partner who is simply satisfied probably will not spend much time actively thinking about the “next level” assignments you need, is unlikely to be a reliable source of quality feedback, and is unlikely to feel motivated to expend much relationship and reputational capital sponsoring and advocating for you. Like any satisfied customer, a partner who is merely satisfied will simply consume your product. (See Table 1.)

Table 1.

Loyal Customer	Loyal Partner
Recommends your store to friends	Tells other partners to work with you
Shops at your store regularly	Is a consistent source of work
Will try your new products	Will give you “next level” work
Offers customer feedback	Provides quality performance feedback
Is more forgiving of a product defect	Views a mistake as an exception

Building a few loyal customers is your performance end game because your relationship with partners, managers, and colleagues will ultimately shape: (1) how your inevitable mistakes are treated; (2) how developmental opportunities are distributed; and (3) your customer's willingness to invest discretionary time and energy in your growth and improvement — most notably in feedback, mentorship, and sponsorship.

The first step in building loyal customers is developing an understanding of the customer benefits you must offer.

RULE OF RETAIL #2

The best retailers identify the benefits that are most important to the customer and then work to differentiate themselves on those dimensions.

The best retailers understand that customers are not simply seeking a good product. These retailers understand that most customers are actually buying the *customer benefits* they hope to receive with and through the product — delivered in the context of a predictable and effortless experience.

To understand how customer benefits drive customer preference, we need look no further than sector-leading companies like 7-Eleven, Amazon, and Uber.

7-Eleven is a convenience store that sells products, all of which can also be purchased in drug stores, grocery stores, and big box stores like Walmart and Target. Interestingly, customers continue to shop at 7-Eleven even though the products are premium priced, marked up substantially over the prices found at other retailers. 7-Eleven can compete for customers while charging higher prices because they offer a set of customer benefits that are highly valued by certain customers — most notably, speed of service, extended hours, and grab-and-go food.

Similarly, Amazon sells products widely available in many other stores. So why is Amazon so successful? Answer: customer benefits. Amazon addresses a common pain point in the shopping experience — the shopper's desire to feel they are paying a fair (preferably the lowest) price. By allowing the customer to comparison shop, Amazon provides tremendous value and utility to its customers. Customers, in turn, continue to return to Amazon, viewing it as a trusted resource for comparison shopping.

Additionally, Amazon's customer rating system and customer reviews offer the customer the benefit of the experience of other customers. Amazon offers overnight and same-day delivery of many of its products. This speed of service has rendered unreasonable any expectation that a customer who visits a brick-and-mortar bookstore only to find the book sought is out of stock

will wait for the store to special order the book for purchase several days later.

Amazon, like 7-Eleven, is really in the convenience business, offering time-constrained customers several highly valued customer benefits not offered by its brick-and-mortar competitors, including 24-hour access, user-friendly search and browsing experiences, the speed of sale execution (one-click purchasing), a product rating system (preference enablement), and speed of service.

There is no shortage of cabs and limousine services in major cities, yet companies like Uber and Lyft are becoming dominant players in the business of point-to-point transportation. Uber and Lyft offer a compelling set of customer benefits, including a predictable pickup time, effortless payment, large coverage areas, and choice of experience (luxury or basic car). Like Amazon and 7-Eleven, Uber and Lyft compete based on unique customer benefits, not simply product. (See Table 2.)

Table 2.

Company	Products	Customer Benefits
7-Eleven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candy • Gasoline • Toiletries • Soft drinks • Beer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed of service • Extended hours • Fast transactions • One-stop shopping • Grab-and-go food-service
Amazon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Books • Music • Electronics • Clothes • Toys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24-hour access • User-friendly browsing • Preference enablement • Speed of sale execution • Product rating system
Uber/Lyft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Car transportation • Limo transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effortless experience • Ease of payment • Predictable pick-up time • Large coverage area
First-Year Performer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects • Research • Assignments • Presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive attitude • Convenience • Work ethic • Initiative

What This Means for You

The best retailers critically examine how their products and service *improve* the lives of their customer. With a deep knowledge of their customers, their priorities, needs, and constraints, retailers are able to fully discern their customer's needs and the benefits the customer hopes to gain by selecting the retailer's product or service. For example, most retailers design products and service experiences that reflect an understanding that today's consumer is very busy and, as a result, seeks simplification, convenience, and speed of service.

The partners and managers in your store are similarly time constrained — with more tasks than time. They are juggling two roles, that of timekeeper-producer and that of manager. Like the retail customer, the customer in your store craves convenience, extended hours, and speed of service.

Coaching Tip:

Each day you need to focus on what you are doing *beyond what you were asked to do*, with a particular focus on the contributions that help partners do their work faster, and with less effort.

You cannot make the mistake of viewing yourself as a highly responsive task doer — another passive implementer at whom partners throw tasks. Rather, each day you need to focus on what you are doing *beyond what you were asked to do*, with a particular focus on the contributions that help partners do their work faster, and with less effort.

Remember, Amazon does not view itself simply as an online store that sells stuff, and Uber does not consider itself simply an on-call transportation service. Rather, these successful companies define themselves by the *range of customer benefits they create* (speed of service, 24/7 availability, predictability) — benefits coveted by their customers.

Similarly, you should not view yourself simply as a worker cranking out product. Rather, you must remain focused on increasing the range of customer benefits you offer — most notably the benefits called positive attitude, work ethic, and initiative.

RULE OF RETAIL #3

Positive attitude, convenience, and initiative are the customer benefits that drive customer loyalty.

It is important to remember that in the workplace, most partners have only episodic exposure to first-years, yet after a few interactions with you, they may be very comfortable making early (though not permanent) determinations about whether you are an A, B, or C performer.

Positive attitude, convenience, and initiative are among the key attributes that are perceived by many partners to be predictive of a broader range of attributes found in top-performing associates. These are the attributes leaders will look for and consequently seek to *confirm first* in your first year.

What This Means for You

You must have a positive attitude. Exceptional service delivered by someone with a positive attitude is a universal desire of all customers. In restaurants, we like pleasant wait staff, and in grocery stores we prefer upbeat and helpful checkout clerks. We are convinced that positive people are committed to helping us, and their positivity and enthusiasm improves the quality of our overall customer experience.

The workplace is not an emotionless environment. A positive attitude functions powerfully in the early partner-associate relationship because, in the mind of a partner, associates who possess a positive attitude likely also possess several other important attributes, including coachability, productivity, confidence, optimism, a capacity for contribution, and a service orientation.

Coaching Tip:

A positive attitude functions powerfully in the early partner-associate relationship because, in the mind of a partner, associates who possess a positive attitude likely also possess several other important attributes, including coachability, productivity, confidence, optimism, a capacity for contribution, and a service orientation.

You must be convenient. As a new associate, think of yourself as a convenience store, since much of your value is tied to partners' perceptions that you are accessible and "open for business" at all times. Truth is, partners' perceptions of your commitment to them is tied to their belief that you are accessible when they feel they need you — even when it's inconvenient for you.

- **Be flexible.** The depth of your genuine commitment to any workplace relationship will be measured by your willingness to adapt and make personal sacrifices in the face of inconvenience and challenging or unreasonable requests — requests that require you to reset priorities, juggle, and perhaps reschedule or cancel personal plans. People look closely to examine the extent to which you react to such circumstances with understanding, focus, and a positive attitude.
- **Keep your smartphone on at all times.** If you have been issued a BlackBerry, iPhone, or other device that sends and receives email, there is an expectation that you will routinely check for incoming emails and will be accessible at all times — including weekends.
- **Be available at your partner's convenience.** When you receive a partner's voicemail, leave a message indicating that you are available *at any time* that is convenient for the partner.

Become known for your initiative. Your most important customer benefit is initiative. It is the single biggest differentiator between good and superstar first-year performers. Initiative

means you routinely make positive contributions *beyond what you've been asked to do*. Yes, initiative requires extra work, but the payoff for you is huge because initiative is scarce in the workplace. Each act of initiative says to those who assign you work: *You are a priority for me. I deeply value you and I care enough to put in a level of effort well beyond what has been asked and expected.*

Coaching Tip:

Each act of initiative says to those who assign you work: *You are a priority for me. I deeply value you and I care enough to put in a level of effort well beyond what has been asked and expected.*

- **Actively seek out work.** Never wait to be assigned work. You are expected to actively seek out and maintain a work inventory. Anticipate next steps. You demonstrate initiative when you ask the following questions:
 - What comes next? What needs flow from my work?
 - Where might there exist opportunities for proactive problem-solving?
- **Engage in "deliberate noticing"** — Practice high levels of "noticing" — increase your knowledge of what partners want to spend more time doing and less time doing, that is, the "nagging stuff" in the work life of a partner.
- **Pitch in** — Adopt someone else's challenges as your own with enthusiasm, felt responsibility, and a sense of urgency; pitch in to help make partners more productive.
- **Create timelines, checklists, and plans** — Create timelines and checklists that help partners and teams plan more effectively, prioritize, allocate resources, and anticipate future milestones and needs (or constraints, delays, and time needed to course correct).

RULE OF RETAIL #4

No customer is neutral about shopping. Customers evaluate each interaction in the context of their best previous experiences, their expectations, and the available alternatives.

Each time we visit a new restaurant, we subconsciously compare the food and service to our favorite restaurant offering similar cuisine. Any discrepancies between the new restaurant and our favorite restaurant become immediately noticeable and impact our perceptions and future dining decisions.

What This Means for You

The best retailers recognize that customers do not shop in a vacuum. Consequently, these retailers work hard to understand the *comparative* expectations of their customers. They recognize that all customer perceptions of value are shaped by (1) expectations, (2) past customer experiences, and (3) available alternatives.

Though your firm likely has a robust performance evaluation process, it is important that you recognize that your partner's evaluation of you is almost always comparative.

Coaching Tip:

You will need to develop an understanding of the comparative expectations of the customer called partner.

When evaluating the behavior of others, we are all wired to first ask ourselves: *How would I have acted if it were me?* Behavioral scientists call this “egocentric default.” So, *what does this mean for you?* It means that for most partners, their primary reference points for top performance are themselves — their recollections of the things they did in their first year to add value. It's the performance behaviors to which a partner attributes *her* first-year success that will influence how she observes you and carry great weight in her assessment of you. For example,

if the partner believes her communication skills were a unique source of value in her first year, she will likely take special care to observe and carefully evaluate your communication skills.

To better understand the primary reference point for evaluation, ask each person who assigns you work the following: *When you were in your first year, what were some of the things you did (although not asked) to add value?*

The second reference point partners will use to evaluate your performance is other top-performing first-years. Partners are *destination shoppers* and have worked with dozens of associates throughout their careers. Their experience with other top-performing associates gives partners a clear understanding of what constitutes an indispensable associate — a reference point for the quality of work product and service, interpersonal skills, confidence, and level of self-investment the partner expects.

To better understand the second reference point partners will use to evaluate you, ask each person who assigns you work the following: *What are some of the things your best first-year performers do (although not asked) to add value to you?*

I recognize that asking these questions may be outside of your comfort zone. Do it anyway. Remember, the more you know about the customer, the easier it is to sell.

RULE OF RETAIL #5

Partners prefer to eat in busy restaurants.

In the world of behavioral psychology, “social proof” stands for the proposition that a decision or behavior seems more appropriate when we observe others making the same decision or displaying the same behavior. We experience the power of social proof in virtually every area of our lives.

Social proof, like word-of-mouth, simplifies decision-making because when we act in accord with social evidence (what others are doing), we are convinced we are less likely to make a mistake and more likely to make a good decision. Interestingly,

the power and impact of social proof on our decision-making are particularly strong when we are observing the behavior of people like ourselves. We generally believe the behavior of people like ourselves gives us the greatest insight into what constitutes *correct* behavior. We are all influenced by social proof.

Think about the last time you dropped into a very busy restaurant without a reservation and without any prior knowledge of the restaurant or its cuisine. The first thing you likely noticed was the fact that the restaurant was very busy — a fact that was confirmed when you were told there would be a 30-minute wait. You likely did not consider other nearby restaurants with immediate seating. Like most people, you elected to wait to be seated at the busy restaurant. The busy restaurant was social proof that the food must be good.

What This Means for You

Social proof similarly impacts the decision-making of partners. Partners like to shop busy associates for the same reason we all prefer to eat in busy restaurants. Partners quickly identify (and talk about) the associates who are in demand. When you become known as a top-billing associate, you become the busy store where the partners in your practice group want to shop, since partners want to “shop” in the “stores” frequented by other partners.

A track record of high billable hours also serves as social proof of your value and commitment. Conversely, chronically low productivity (low billable hours) too often gives rise to an inference that (1) you are not producing reliably high-quality work and thus are not in demand, or (2) you are not vigilant about seeking work. This is particularly damaging to brand because individual performer productivity reports are widely disseminated among partners, and thus the stigma of low hours can go viral and attach if not reversed quickly.

Coaching Tip:

A track record of high billable hours serves as social proof of your value and commitment.

RULE OF RETAIL #6

You can tell a lot about a retailer based on how things are handled when things go wrong.

When you lose a credit card while on vacation or on a business trip, your interactions with the credit card company constitute a moment of truth in your customer-retailer relationship. Similarly, when you are en route to an important meeting but your outbound flight is delayed and, as a result, you miss your connection, your rebooking interactions with the airline constitute a moment of truth. Your perception about the credit card company and airline will likely change — for better or worse — as a result of how they respond to your needs.

The best retailers understand that instances of customer failure or mistakes are inevitable. They also recognize that moments of truth, handled correctly, offer a unique opportunity to *deepen* customer perceptions of value — boosting levels of loyalty. A moment of truth can become an opportunity to generate customer goodwill, because superior handling of a customer crisis is likely to be remembered fondly and to confirm for the customer the retailer’s deep commitment.

It is for this reason that the best retailers identify in advance the most likely high-stress moments of truth and take the time to develop response protocols designed not only to meet the expectations of the customer but, if possible, to exceed them.

What This Means for You

You will observe the same “moment of truth” phenomena in the workplace — circumstances that provoke high levels of emotion, challenge, or uncertainty. Such moments of truth are inevitable in your first year.

The moments of truth you will encounter include:

- Unexpected changes
- Tight deadlines
- Last-minute requests
- Limited resources
- Vacation disruptions
- Critical feedback

First-year performers who are skilled at showing professional maturity in each of these moments of truth engender partner trust, confidence, and loyalty, because it is in the context of a moment of truth (not in normal day-to-day interactions) that partners quickly form their assessments of your *commitment* (to them and the firm), *dependability* (your ability to consistently carry out your responsibilities), *confidence* (your ability to project and inspire confidence), and *judgment* (your ability to make sound decisions).

When you find yourself in a moment of truth, consider the following:

- **Take a deep breath.** It is when you are under the greatest stress (multiple deadlines, limited resources, demanding clients) when partners are likely assessing your commitment, dependability, confidence, and judgment.
- **They know exactly how you feel.** Partners who make last-minute requests know exactly how you feel because they were once first-year performers and were likely on the receiving end of such requests. View this as an opportunity to show just how committed you are.
- **Embrace the “ugly duckling.”** Often the best opportunities to build trust are disguised as the “ugly duckling” assignment that traps you in the office overnight or over the weekend. These “ugly duckling” assignments offer a great opportunity to demonstrate that you are a team player.
- **Remember the Peak–End Rule.** Do you remember the petri dishes used in your high school science class? If you

put a few drops of critical feedback in a petri dish, add a drop of defensiveness, denial, and blame, the critical feedback will grow out of control, consuming everything in sight — including you, since you have created the perfect environment for critical feedback to become damaging. On the other hand, if you add a drop of self-awareness, self-regulation, acknowledgment, and strategy, you can actually convert critical feedback into a learning experience that can strengthen your relationships. When critical feedback is incoming, remember the Peak–End Rule. The Peak–End Rule suggests that the giver’s memory of a critical feedback event will be most influenced by the severity of the pain at its end — that is, by how badly or well the feedback experience ends. Do not get distracted by how the negative feedback begins. You must focus on how it ends — preferably with your apology, pledge of corrective action, and commitment to restoring trust.

The first-year experience reflects many of the “Rules of Retail,” a few of which I have highlighted in this letter. Remain focused on the customer experience you create, and I am confident you will achieve your full potential.

About the Author



Werten Bellamy is the President of Stakeholders, Inc., a company founded in 2007 that provides training, coaching, and conference resources directed to the learning and active career management needs of top performers in corporations and service firms. Werten has trained in over 100 Am Law 200 law firms and global law departments. In 2010, Werten was selected by the Leadership Council for Legal Diversity (LCLD) to design and help implement its talent development efforts directed to top-performing diverse professionals. He launched Stakeholders following 16 years of practice as an associate, partner, and in-house counsel. Werten can be reached at wbellamy@mystakeholder.com.