

SAMPLE

inside your customer's imagination

**5 Secrets for Creating Breakthrough
Products, Services, and Solutions**



Chip R. Bell

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CUSTOMERS AS PARTNERS*

Advanced Praise

“There’s a big difference between a company thinking like a customer, and actually listening to one. It’s only when you add in the latter that the magic can really happen. *Inside Your Customer’s Imagination* helps chart the way to achieving the innovative spark central to a company’s success.”

— **Keith Barr**, CEO, IHG (Intercontinental Hotel Group)

“Innovation through partnership is the blueprint for business growth in the future. Chip’s newest book, *Inside Your Customer’s Imagination*, provides the instruction and inspiration to make it a success.”

— **Marshall Goldsmith**, world’s leading executive coach and author of three #1 *NY Times* best-selling books.

“Chip Bell’s unique perspective, lively illustrations, and practical advice results in one terrific resource for anyone eager to tap your customer’s ingenuity for creating breakthrough results.”

— **Jeanne Bliss**, “Godmother” of Customer Experience and cofounder of the Customer Experience Professional’s Association

“*Inside Your Customer’s Imagination* is a journey into a powerful idea: that innovation is a fundamentally social process—and the more people you invite in and involve as creators and contributors, the greater your innovation capacity. The book is packed with a rich mix of mindsets and methods for unleashing imagination, architecting contribution, generating original insight, and cultivating genuinely enriching relationships.

— **Polly LaBarre**, co-author, *Mavericks at Work* and founding member Fast Company magazine

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Dominic Skinner sat in a coffee shop in Surrey, England, with his sketch pad and hot tea. He overheard a customer at a nearby table commenting to a friend on how great it would be if their hot tea cups could warm their cookies. From inside the customer's imagination, Dominic fashioned the breakthrough cup pictured on the book cover and here on this page, and he sold the idea to Mocha UK. This book is dedicated to all who partner with the ingenuity of their customers to create breakthrough products, services, and solutions.





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CHAPTER 6

Be the Partnership Warranty

Responsibility changes everything. The moment we decide that we are the ones who are capable of and responsible for changing things, everything shifts.

—JOHN B. IZZO

“If you don’t love it, sir, I’ll buy it back from you!”

I stopped at the Farmview Market in Madison, Georgia, a few miles from my home—they specialize in homegrown produce and products from locals. I was on the hunt for a spicy sauce to use as a mop when grilling baby back ribs. The person who waited on me recommended Judge Cline’s No. 9 sauce produced by a sauce maker a few miles away. When I expressed concern the sauce might have ingredients that could keep me awake at night, he uttered the opening line of this chapter. It was a rare “*I am the warranty*” moment.

“*I am the warranty*” is a clever caption for a T-shirt. Yet living an “I am accountable” attitude in relationships is a whole different matter. “*I am the warranty*” screams the unmistakable message that the buck stops with me. It trumpets to your customers, “I will personally take full responsibility for

championing your request or need, and I will remain in total charge until your need is met to your complete satisfaction.” It is as rare as hen’s teeth. Yet it is mission-critical in a co-creation partnership.

Help Your Partner “Own” the Partnership

A friend attended a wedding for a relative. When it came time for the bride and groom to exchange their wedding vows, the minister turned first to the groom. It started the usual way: “Samuel, will you take Sharon to be your lawful wife . . .” Then the minister added to the “in sickness and in health” part the line “Will you take full responsibility for this marriage?” My friend’s first reaction was to think it was the olden days when the man was head of the household and the little wife’s primary role was to “obey.”

But then the minister turned to the bride and repeated the exact same vows, complete with the “full responsibility” part. My friend was relieved we were still in the twenty-first century. He later would relate the powerful sentiment expressed in those vows. What if both parts in a relationship took full accountability? What if they both thought, “*I am* the warranty; the buck stops with me”?

Think of the confidence that would come if you never had to worry a second about partner abandonment or deliberate actions that would jeopardize the longevity of the relationship. Consider the bravery that could emanate from that kind of solid foundation. Most customer relationships are temporary, with a focus on scarcity; co-creation partnerships focus on abundance, whereby giving takes precedence over score-keeping. And this attitude is about more than just fair dealings. It is fundamentally an expression of grace.

John Patterson and I have partnered for years on projects and assignments and even coauthored three books. We made a pact many years ago that sounded like this: You never have to wonder if I am privately angry or irritated at you. You never have to read my nonverbals and be concerned they reflect a subtle blaming message. If I am cross or peeved at you, you will know it. So if you experience me in a bad-tempered mood, never worry that the subject might be you if I have not told you. Did we have angry moments? Of course. But there was never pouting or smoldering irritation. Once we worked through an interpersonal skirmish, we moved ahead as a productive, happy partnership.

“I own the place” is more than a statement of proprietorship pride; it is a clarion call for buck-stopping. Years ago, when my wife and I borrowed money for a second home, there was a three-way telephone call between me, the representative of the title company, and the loan officer from Merrill Lynch. The title company representative kept demanding our loan officer talk with someone at Merrill about this essential or that requirement. Finally, the Merrill Lynch loan officer assertively told the title company rep, “*I am Merrill Lynch.*” Long silence followed. “Oh,” said the title company rep meekly, completely surrendering her accusatory attitude.

The attitude behind this kind of stance is one of accountability; it is also an orientation of culpability, as in “I will take the hit.” When applied to a co-creation partnership, it is an invitation to jointness and a plea for oneness. Actions look like bold assertions, vibrant safeguards, and a dogged determination to make it work, and work well. Give to your partnership the best that you have; the best will come back to you.

Be the Net of Inspiration under Your Partnership High Wire

The emergence of your customer's imagination requires a safe landing and a protective context. Think of them as being like a parent in a pool encouraging a child's first plunge into the water with the words "Don't worry, I got you!" With that assurance, most children courageously jump into the deep end before they can swim. Before the invention of children's water wings, it was a giant leap of faith. Words help; attitude and action do even more. And the "*I am* the warranty" attitude personified looks like proactivity, caretaking, defending, and championing. It can be providing your customer with fairness choices that promote egalitarian behavior. When my sister or brother and I had to split a candy bar, we had a fairness process: whoever cut or broke the candy bar in half got to choose their half second.

One powerful way to be the full-warranty net for the high-wire, take-a-risk side of your partnership is to be an inspiration to your customer. One of the most innovative trapeze acts in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus is the daring performance of the "Candelabra," where nine women hang in the air by their hair. On one occasion, an O-ring snapped and they all fell to the ground. Fortunately, they all lived. When circus performer and aerialist Elaine Alcorn was interviewed by CNN, she commented that nothing is ever fail-safe. Circus performers know they work in a high-risk world. But then she made the following comment . . . a powerful rationale for the power of inspiration on the path of innovation.

"They don't call it death defying for nothing. As a circus performer it is our job to do the impossible, to stare death in

the face and conquer it,” Alcorn said, adding that it’s not all about the thrills. “We don’t just do it for entertainment. We do it to inspire people, to inspire them to conquer their own fears or overcome their own obstacles. If you are the office worker and you have a deadline or trying to make ends meet or feed your hungry children, whatever your obstacles are, you can come to the circus and be reminded that nothing is impossible.”¹

Showing up to inspire places you in a special spirit of greatness. It telegraphs you care about influencing your partner to embrace the same orientation. More than self-talking your way to invincibility, it is a signal to all around you that you came to innovate. Invite your customer to take risks in the pursuit of inspired innovation, and be your customer’s net when they step onto that high wire.

Accountability has two sides: “you can count on me”
and “there will be an accounting.”
Both require promises that need to be kept.

Always Communicate You Really, Really Care

Customers too often get served by people focused on their task like an item on a checklist, instead of someone who understands the customer’s goal and champions its achievement by caretaking it all the way to the end. Co-creation partnerships require that same type of proactive advocacy. It is more than taking care of your customer; it is taking care of your relationship by being an activist for its cause. It is wall-to-wall, end-to-end caring.

Discover is a large credit card company. My friend Shep Hyken, author of *The Convenience Revolution*, had an opportunity to present a series of customer service speeches at the customer support centers. To prepare, he visited the support center to listen and observe reps at work. One impressive area was collections, which Discover had smartly put in customer service and support. Shep watched reps talk with customers who had missed a payment. They showed empathy and concern for their customers as they discussed why the payment was missed. Some customers were willing to share reasons; others were less open. But that did not deter the reps from taking charge of the conversation to uncover an amicable solution.²

The Discover reps were helping customers generate mutually agreeable ways to handle a sensitive situation, and they were doing it with tact, diplomacy, and grace. Most of all, they were demonstrating a commitment to helping customers discover (pun intended) a creative solution, not just a pay-a-past-due-bill outcome. What could have been an adversarial situation became a partnership as the Discover support reps worked with their customers to come up with a payment solution that would make everyone happy.

Use “we” instead “I” and “you” whenever possible. Take time to listen, take care to understand, and take responsibility for the relationship. Be complimentary and affirming in your tone and language at a level that reflects your true feelings honestly conveyed to the customer. Be your customer’s sponsor, as well as his or her advocate. Turn credit to your customer at every opportunity. Keep anchoring your discussion to the ultimate focus. Be gracious in your hosting and thoughtful in your remembering.

Focus on Your Customer, Not on the Procedures

Loyalty to a great laptop computer got totally trashed by a lousy replacement part! And this is a computer company from whom I had purchased several laptops. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I bought a new laptop and immediately ordered a backup power pack—one for the office and one for the road! The cord that goes from the wall outlet to the power pack arrived in a couple of weeks. But I learned the power pack with the cord to plug into the laptop was on back order. A call one month later was met with the same response—on back order.

Two months out, another call, same answer. Three months out, another call, same answer. But April and May were super busy, and I did not call. Not, that is, until an emergency happened. I was on a three-day client engagement and discovered I had accidentally left my only power pack in the office. A colleague suggested I check with the local Radio Shack. Miraculously, they had a universal in stock, and it worked perfectly. I also learned it was an item they had been carrying for a couple of years.

I made one more call to the computer company—now five months after the replacement part had been ordered—to cancel the order. But the “bad boy” in me came out during the call. “If I gave you personally one million dollars to come up with a solution to my power pack problem,” I asked the parts clerk, “what could you recommend?” His answer: “I would have given you the tracking number so you could check on the back order yourself.”

I was stunned. But I was not finished. “Were you aware that Radio Shack had a universal power pack for this particular

laptop?” I asked curtly. “Yes, I was,” he replied, “but we cannot guarantee their parts.” I made one last lunge with my complaint sword. “So, you let me go five months waiting on a part that probably will never come because of *your* guarantee policy? What about customer service?”

“Is there anything else I can help you with today?” he asked.

The parts clerk-spokesperson for this well-known, global computer company focused exclusively on “the part” and not “the customer.” He could say with great confidence that he had “done all his tasks” perfectly. Professor Levitt would say, “All the ‘drill bits’ were counted as my ‘hole’ was disregarded.” Despite my affection for the laptop and its predecessors, my next one would be a different brand. Customers don’t want providers that complete tasks—even if they do it perfectly. They want solutions. And innovating with customers should be solution focused, not task fixated.



Be the Partnership Warranty: The Partnering Crib Notes

You give your customers great security when you demonstrate you are deeply committed to their welfare. It is all the little things you do in a partnership that add up to demonstrable commitment. While we all know relationships can’t always be a perfect 50-50 split, good relationships have a kind of floating reciprocity—some days 60-40, other days 40-60. People in relationships believe there will be an “it will all balance out in the end” type of fairness. But what if you inspired accountability from your partner by assuming responsibility for all of it, not just your half? When we lead with a search for absolute fairness, we also start with a scorekeeping orientation.

Partner with abundance, not reciprocity. Think of it as the “lover” standard of care. It would mean never giving up on your partner, and hanging in there through thick and thin, for better or for worse. It would mean going all in.

A Look Ahead: Discovery

We have started to unpack the process of getting inside your customer’s imagination. A way to consider it is this: there are two approaches to your quest, invitation and attraction. Invitation revolves around who you are (curious, trustworthy, and passionate); attraction revolves around what you do (grounding and discovery). You have now explored an invitation approach in curiosity and an attraction approach in grounding. In the section to follow, another attraction is coming: how to use discovery and learning in a way that attracts your customer’s imagination to come join you on the playground of ideas.

*There are only two options regarding commitment:
you’re either in or you’re out. There is no such
thing as life in-between.*

—PAT RILEY

About the Author



Chip's life as a writer began when Mrs. Ridley gave him an A+ on his eleventh-grade essay titled "The Sex Life of a Coat Hanger." He spent much of his youth in the woods of his family's farm in South Georgia masquerading as a little boy since he was a superhero in his imagination.

He charmed his graduate school professors into giving him good grades (Vanderbilt and George Washington University), thus preparing him for a career as a renowned keynote speaker. Global Gurus in 2020 ranked him for the sixth year in a row in the top three keynote speakers in the world on customer service. Chip's keynotes focus on innovative service, customers as partners, and mining your customer's imagination. His clients have included companies known for great customer service, including the Ritz-Carlton Hotels, USAA, Capital One, Southwest Airlines, Verizon, GE, Bayer, Cadillac, IBM, Marriott, and Harley-Davidson.

He spent about twenty years on a one-year tour in Vietnam as an infantry unit commander with the elite 82nd Airborne. He returned to the States with a chest full of medals for valor and enough really cool war stories to occupy a lifetime of

dinner parties. Chip also served as a guerilla tactics instructor at the US Army Infantry School.

After eight years in the corporate world as the director of organization development and training for a large bank, Chip launched a consulting practice in 1980 focused on creating cultures that support long-term customer loyalty. Many of his award-winning, best-selling books center on innovative, value-unique customer experiences, including *Take Their Breath Away*, *Magnetic Service*, *The 9½ Principles of Innovative Service*, *Managing Knock Your Socks Off Service*, *Service Magic*, *Sprinkles*, and *Kaleidoscope*. He worked with legendary Academy Award-winning Warner Bros. cartoonist Chuck Jones to coauthor *Beep Beep! Competing in the Age of the Road Runner*. He also coauthored *Magnetic Service* with his son, Bilijack.

He still thinks he might be a superhero or at least a rock star since he once opened for the Backstreet Boys. Chip's favorite color is purple; his favorite food is Mexican; his favorite music is Italian opera and classic country. He has been married for over fifty years to Dr. Nancy Rainey Bell, an attorney and graduate school professor, and has a son, a daughter-in-law, and three gorgeous, really smart granddaughters.

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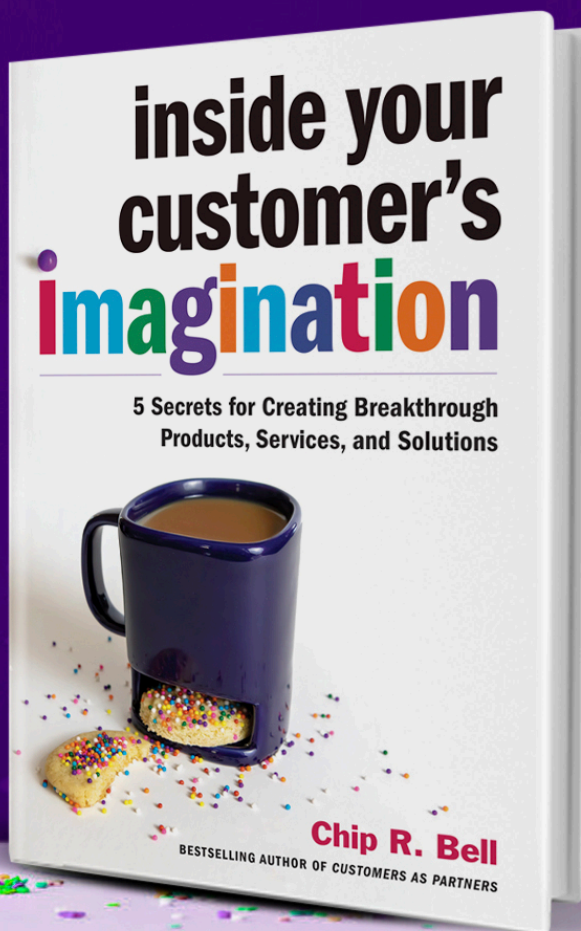
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