



RT: Ted Stone is the Chief Executive of Customer First UK. He's an American expat, a Texan who has now ended up living in Doncaster in the UK. More on that important story coming up shortly.

Ted is a leading speaker and consultant in the field of customer service and customer experience developments. As an organisation, Customer First is the awarding body for putting the customer first standard. It's a national standard for customer service that has been adopted by over 600 organisations from across 20 industry sectors, ranging from sole traders to multinationals.

Ted's going to be sharing a lot more about Customer First today and what is learned from a career working in customer service improvements. We're here at the Stand Comedy Club in Newcastle. We should share first of all, why we're here on a Bank Holiday Monday. How did this come about?

TS: When you need a location, you contact the people that you know. One of my good friends is in that management team here at The Stand. I came to know them through other friends. I'm friends with Alfie Joey, who does BBC morning radio in Newcastle, and then I met his comic partner, Cal Halbert, who's incredibly talented.

And then I met his best friend, who's on the management team here, and they're all quite happy to share their space and encourage any type of artistic or creative outlets. We're going to hope that we're going to be artistic and creative!

RT: Let's address something that I mentioned first of all, which is the accent – that's not a British accent. You've got a quite a fascinating backstory, and I do want to get to Customer First and customer service and all of that shortly. But your story is too good to pass up. How on earth did a Texan end up living in Doncaster via Las Vegas?

TS: Clearly, I did something wrong in a prior life! No, not really. I've kind of always been of the belief that you just follow your gut and you go with things as they come up. I had moved from Dallas (because the accent is clearly Dallas, Texas) and was living in Las Vegas.

I encountered someone who is in senior management for one of the major banking companies over here who were trying to change their service offering at the time, and looking to do something uniquely different.

They were interested in me coming over to apply an American customer service approach toward their business in a limited contract, which I thought, 'OK, I'll do that'. It was a really big decision at the time because I had a brilliant job in Vegas that I loved.

Like any good American, I didn't even have a passport, but I thought, 'Well, I'll dash over there. England's not that big, so in a year I could get around and see all of it, surely.' I haven't, but you almost could.

And, as happens with life, 14 years, multiple jobs and several homes later, things just progressed and here I am. I'm progressively feeling more and more British in my outlook and my understanding and appreciation of the British people in the British culture. I just don't sound like it!

That's OK, because really, nothing against the lovely people of Doncaster who've taken me to their heart, if I had to get rid of my accent, am I going to pick up that one? No, I think I'll stick with mine.

RT: You're Chief Executive of Customer First in the UK. Explain, for people who are not familiar with Customer First, what the ethos is there and how do you help organisations?

Customer First is the owner of a standard called "the putting the customer first standard" and it was originally the research was commissioned by the government to establish the 30 segments within that standard, which were going to demonstrate a mandatory service level.

At the time that they first established it, they used it as a tool to establish who could get and continued to receive grants and funding. The government wanted to make sure that whoever they were giving their money to was delivering a service level that was acceptable if they were receiving that money.

Once the standard was breached and approached and built, it was so successful that there were people who weren't getting any funding who wanted to be able to take up the standard.

And at that point the government said, 'Hold on, we don't need to own it because it's not really appropriate for us to be using it as a tool to establish funding over here and then charging somebody else to use the same tool over here.'

They sold it off and it became a privately-owned entity, but it was set initially to be specific enough to really give you significant help with your service offering, but at the same time be broad enough to allow comparison between organisations from multiple sectors. It really does build with what I call the foundational principles of customer service, but lets you then bespoke that approach to get into the detail of what your business needs.

RT: Give me some ideas of companies in the UK that have taken the Customer First approach and who've gone through the standard.

TS: To be fair, when I first encountered Customer First, I was a customer. Before I was ever the Chief Exec and I'd had an opportunity to do some contract work for a major utility company. I'm not trying to upset any utility companies out there, but at the time they weren't exactly known for exemplary service levels.

I went in and I was very excited to get started on the work and they just didn't want to know. As a matter of fact, people get very offended that the American was telling them what was wrong with their customer service. And I thought, 'OK, even though I know that my ideas, and intent is right, they're not taking this well from me.' So, I went out to look for a British standard that I could just be the mouthpiece of rather than the one who said, 'You must do it this way', and they took it much easier. I found the standard that way.

I looked at multiple standards that were out there, and the reason I picked Customer First is there was a sustainability piece in it that I didn't see in the other options. And frankly, if I was going to do that much work, I didn't want to have to keep doing it, I wanted something that would build on itself.

I became joined with Customer First as a customer. At that point I was working through the utility company, but since then, one of the things that we work with heavily is in the higher education and further education section. It's our largest sector of organisations that are accredited with us right now.

In those I think we've really seen a development in how they're approaching it and the reason why they need it. I try not to name off the specific companies who had it because I don't like people to believe, 'Oh, if it's OK for them, it's not OK for us. And that's why I don't name the specifics.'

When someone contacts us and says, 'Are there businesses like ours?' we're more than happy to tell you yes which ones are, as clearly there are going to be. Good luck if you contact me with a business that's so unique and specific, we don't have anything related. But I try not to pigeon-hole it for people just so that they won't feel it's out of their grasp and not appropriate.

RT: I know that you work with all manner of organisations: small ones, all the way up to a massive multinational. What do you think is the driving reason that people seek you out?

TS: I think because the very first thing that I did on day two when I took over as Chief Exec was change the entire approach of how we helped customers. I did this because as a customer I knew what I wished they had done better, and I suddenly had the ability to change that, because I was the CEO! Who else can change it?!

I went in and said, 'It's a brilliant product, it absolutely helps, but you've got to help me quicker.' I found a way for it to be easier. This is the most common reason that we hear for why people are coming to us for help. We use a diagnostic assessment approach, so it doesn't require any paperwork or preparation.

Why do you want to spend 12 to 15 months trying to fix your service and then come to me to have me say, 'Yes, you either got it right or you got it wrong'? If the answer is 'you got it wrong,' you've wasted 12 to 15 months.

If you come to us and use the diagnostic, even if your initial outcome is that you're not compliant, we're going to immediately narrow down on where your time will be best spent and give you a tool to move forward. And that's what everybody really appreciates, that we're very conscious of wanting to save your time, your money, and your resource.

RT: So, the value in going through it is going through it.

TS: Absolutely. I always tell people, if what you're looking for is something to beautify your letterhead, we are probably not your best bet. There are things out there where you can do it easier than through us. If what you're looking for is an actual sustainable improvement, that's going to make you a sector leader in your organisation and the people that you compete with, we're absolutely the one.

Don't come to me for pretty letterhead. We have a really nasty logo, but it's after you've got the benefit of it. The benefit is literally the journey as much as the destination.

RT: Let's rewind a little bit then. Let's talk about customer service itself. What is customer service?

TS: I think these days it's something that people are more familiar with than they were when I first moved here 14 years ago. Customer service really is about not just doing what the customer came to you for, but doing it well, easily, politely and friendly.

Any business, whatever service you're offering, whether it's an actual product or it's a service, that is how you're asking someone to come and engage with you as a customer. *How* you deliver that to them is what matters more than the product. People buy from people more than they just buy a specific product.

RT: Forgive me for interrupting. I'm fascinated, so give me an example that you've seen recently of customer service being done quite well, that fits in with your ethos.

TS: I think the universities, and how they have literally raised their game. But if I can just be honest, they didn't have a choice. In the past, people were often choosing the university

financially. There were lots of decisions that were made because something was close to home or it was less expensive.

Once tuition got levelled off and there's going to be a minimum amount, we couldn't even answer the phone fast enough for the universities that we were already working with who realised, 'Oh, we have to take it to the next level.' Now, people are deciding based on how it feels to be a customer of the university.

What they finally realised is that the customer isn't just the students, it's the parents of the student who were also reaching for the chequebook, it's the extended group around that student. Students know what they want for their money, and if you're not giving it to them, there's a university down the street or around the corner that will.

That sector has really raised their game when they had to and it was hard for them. They didn't want to say 'customer', and they're very resistant to using the word customer, they want to call it 'student.' That's so restrictive, and I'm really proud of the robust, active-thinking changes I've seen going on in that sector, that people are going to benefit from.

Thousands and thousands of students are going to benefit from these changes. and then we as a result, as a community, are going to benefit from them having a better education. I'm really proud of that. I'm proud of the fact for them, that they raised their game and we helped them do it.

RT: I like it. Now, the predominant audience, the people are going to be listening to our interview here, is the owners of IT businesses or people within the IT industry. I've often made the equivalence between IT companies and the police force. Bear with me on this one - I'll explain why!

The owners of IT businesses here, who work with small businesses, don't ever get a pat on the back, because they just keep things running for their clients, they keep the systems up and running. In the same way that you would never pick up the phone to the police force and say, 'Hey, I've not been burgled overnight. Top job, thank you very much,' it's very rare for any of our customers, as IT business owners, to pick up the phone and say, 'You know, things are just running'.

Customer service, in my opinion, is something that seems to fall fairly low on the totem pole of importance for IT business owners. Why should it be really important to them? How can it be a differentiator?

TS: Frankly, what else is going to differentiate them? As someone who's not IT, if you give me this IT company and that IT company, and these are relationships and decisions I've had to make, the one I'm going to go with, more than price-driven, is how comfortable it is for me to deal with them and how confident I am that they're going to keep everything I need running, running.

If my stuff goes down and I can't get to it or I can't access the information that my clients and my customers need, then what are we doing? What am I paying our people to do? How am I going to make it up to that customer?

For me it's completely service-driven, and I don't think that's just because I'm a service professional. I think that's how a lot of people feel about IT. We're looking for somebody who's going to come in with the answer other than turn it off and back on again.

I really hate that one and we've all had that one before from the IT desk in a large company, 'Have you turned it off and turn it off again?' I always think, 'Oh my gosh, really? Don't make me get down under my desk unless this is really going to fix it'.

RT: What are some common touch points that people in all service industries overlook that perhaps more important to the customer than we as the service industry give credit for?

TS: I'm sorry, explain that question to me again. You kind of went in two directions.

RT: I will rephrase that as best I can. I think a lot of IT companies that I deal with think the only time they really interact with customers would be telephone call or an email coming in.

In my opinion, there's lots of other touchpoints that they're just not really aware of. What's the most overlooked touchpoints within the service industry perhaps that get underserved.

TS: I think the thing that almost all businesses miss out on is the opportunity to give their customers more choice when they want it, not just when they need it. For example, as an IT company, the customer calls in and there's a problem. If we're in a perfect world, you're giving them several solutions to the problem and not just, 'You must do this and you must do it immediately'.

What I would really love to see people do, if you want that positive relationship when nothing's wrong, it's the responsibility of the IT company as well as the client to have that relationship.

When everything's going well, that's a great time to contact the customer. They IT company might say, 'Everything's going well and we're considering some new developments within our business. Which of these would be the most beneficial to you?'

Not only does that help you with your development of your business moving forward, but it also is going to tell you what's important to that client before they call you with the problem. You get a lot of information out of a positive, proactive, easy question, instead of just when you're in recovery mode.

RT: I think that touches on a quote that I've heard you say before, which I absolutely love, which is, 'All of your customers do not want the same thing'. Can you elaborate on that quote a little bit for me?

TS: I can and, trying to keep your audience in mind, let's go into it from that perspective, and something that, if I have the audience of the IT professionals across the UK for a minute, this is the point I want to get across.

We all like to think that progressively we're getting a little bit more tech savvy, because we all have more devices and we have more things that we're using on a regular basis, but it's just not true. We all *think* we're more tech savvy than we are, and it only takes about 30 seconds for an IT person to remind you exactly how stupid you are. That's when your customer experience has gone clear to the toilet!

Understand the way that your client is talking to you and do not talk above them. And I tell people in every customer service environment this same mantra, which is: if I have somebody who calls in, who's is verbose as I am, that's going to be a long call, but there is nothing where that's more challenging for me than calling and talking to a client who's from the financial sector.

I'm not trying to group everybody together, but typically they like things in more bullet point format, and my verbose approach is really grating for them and they find it really off-putting. I have to remember to rein it in and give back the same approach that they're giving to me.

This is what I wish IT professionals would learn. Knowing a lot of technical terms doesn't impress me as a customer. It makes me feel stupid and I don't like to feel stupid. At that point, I don't want to talk to you anymore. Even though we might get the problem fixed right now, at the first opportunity I'm going to find somebody who doesn't make me feel stupid and can fix that problem.

I think that IT professionals are particularly prone to get that wrong. Some customers want that, and feel like you've earned your money and proven how valuable you are by your technical expertise. Other ones really want you to talk to them in a way that helps them fix the problem without feeling like an idiot.

That's my way of telling people that they all want the same thing. If you want to go away with something that you can keep with you forever to never forget this point, the one I use when I'm doing workshops for clients is go for coffee.

RT: OK. Tell me more.

TS: If I tell you, 'Oh Richard, let's go have coffee'. You can say yes, but I have absolutely no faith that I can walk in and order it for you. It's coffee. But if you stand in the queue at any of the major coffee shops and listened to five orders, given the opportunity. at the very first point, they're personalising that coffee order to ridiculous degrees.

They're having fat, soya camel milk something – I don't even know! The options that are out there now is just crazy, but we all say we're going to have a coffee, and yet very few of us just have a coffee. It's a latte, a cappuccino a soy this, an almond milk that.

There's no way I can know that unless I give you the opportunity to let me know what's important to you and what you like. You should remember that with your clients. You couldn't go to their coffee for them, so don't assume you know exactly how they want you to approach this. Keep them as an active participant in the conversation.

RT: That makes a lot of sense. Let's rewind a little bit. To paraphrase you, and correct me if I'm wrong here, it's almost like mirroring what you hear. So, if somebody's very verbose, I love to talk. You may not have gathered that yet, Ted, but I know when I'm talking to some business owners they just want to get straight to the point.

How can we instill that in customer service, for instance in IT companies, people who work on the help desk or the front-facing people who speak to clients more often? How can that be taught to almost mirror the people that are speaking to?

TS: I think in the IT sector, it's very important to have them actually practice it when they're not on the phone with a real client, that you do that kind of role play scenario of having them talk to somebody who's less proficient with technical issues and somebody else who's very proficient and see where they sit.

Once you know what the skillset of your staff is, if possible, and if you're phone company will allow it, then there are ways that you filter that call so that there's someone who's really adept at determining how the clients are responding and pops the calls out to the right person.

You have some people that are very technical and very right-there, and you have other people that are very friendly and very approachable and going to bring everything down a level to make sure you understand. If you can have one person who filters it, then that would help you.

RT: Certainly, in our industry, for managed service providers, we call that the dispatcher, the person who would answer the telephone call, be an advocate for the customer and say, 'Let me put you across to the person who's best served to help you'.

TS: And then what really helps you moving forward is that there should always be a follow-up call to that client. You get their feedback on what they thought of that engagement piece and the next time that client calls in, if possible, give them back to the same person.

RT: Yeah, makes absolute sense. What also makes sense to me is, and I think as an American, you're well placed to answer this, many folks, myself included, point to US customer service as being the best.

'Have a nice day. Thank you' and all the things that go along with it, they will say it's vastly superior to UK customer service or anywhere else in the world. In your opinion, as a Texan now living in Doncaster, is that true or not?

TS: I'm going to give you a twofold answer here. Yes, I absolutely believe that US service is superior to UK service, but I'm not saying that US service is necessarily the ultimate, because I've been at other places in the world where the service was exceptional.

I've noticed what I always thought was the reason our service is better in the States than the UK service, and I can back it up with the other countries that I've seen where they have exceptional service. You won't believe where I believe it comes from. It's the tipping society that we have in the States with our waiters, the bartenders, etc.

Starting at what I call base-level customer engagement with those people that are front-facing roles, we tip so much. People don't realise in the UK that whereas we have a minimum wage that you're required to pay anyone in the US, that does not apply to service personnel.

Bartenders and waiters can be paid a fraction of the minimum wage. Legally. The primary part of income comes from the tip. So, the service levels that you get are off the chart, because if they don't give you that service, you don't tip them, and they can't pay their rent, they can't pay their phone bill.

When I first moved over here and I went to have drinks at people, we ordered a round of drinks and I got ready to tip the bartender and this woman next to me slapped my hand and literally said, 'Don't screw up our whole economy. We don't do that'. And I was like, 'Honey, maybe you should, because after a while you're going to be dehydrated and I'm going to get a drink!

And it was a fact that as it went on I didn't ever have to wait for a drink at that bar. They would knock people out of the way when I would approach the bar, for a pound coin. It was like everyone was going to need a lesson.

When it starts, and you have the elevated service levels in what I call base-level service positions, then in any professional organisation, you've got to raise your game above that, because that's what I'm used to having all the time. Anywhere, everywhere.

You've got to bring it up a notch. When you don't have that over here, then you're starting from a lower point. Now, service has picked up dramatically in the 14 years I've lived here and I put that heavily on the fact that more people travel abroad and they have finally understood that having that stiff upper lip does not mean that you can't tell somebody when the service was bad. You're never going to get improved level of service if you didn't identify the opportunity to improve it.

You're all notorious for telling a waiter that your meal was fine and then you're whinging in the car on the way home and that didn't help anybody. The waiter doesn't know the person riding with you didn't serve you, so I don't know how you think that's going to help!

Once you started travelling abroad and getting good service and then coming back and thinking, 'Wait, why can't I have this service at the restaurant down the street from me?' You started making people aware of your expectations, and it has improved.

RT: So, for us with our stiff upper lip as Brits, how do you complain about things politely? If a meal comes out, it's not to your standards and the waitress comes across and says, 'Is everything okay for you?' Of course, we as Brits go, 'Yes, yes, it's fine'. And then complain about it later. How do you address that situation?

TS: What you have to remember is that she did not make the meal. How could you possibly be hurting her feelings to tell her that the meal isn't okay? Yes, it's going to give her a few extra steps, but that's the best way to do it. You preface your statement by saying, 'I know

you were not stood over the grill, but this isn't quite right. Is there any way you could have them look at this for me?' You let her off the hook. You acknowledge, 'You didn't do it'.

Whenever I talk to companies, whenever I go out and I'm working with a business, one of the cards that I play hard at the very beginning is tell me the truth. You could not possibly offend me, because whatever concerns you have between yourself and your employer that are restricting the service levels, they didn't come from me because I don't work here, so you couldn't possibly hurt my feelings. Tell me the truth.

That is something that you should always go toward - making people aware when it's their fault, when it isn't their fault, but that you're just using them as a partner to get an improved outcome.

RT: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense.

I'm also intrigued about customer service for one specific industry, and this is a podcast and a video for IT companies, but we cannot go past this - the rail industry. You've done work in the rail industry and I'm not making any wild accusations here about the levels of customer service in the rail industry, but surely that must have been a challenge for you.

TS: It was a challenge, and do you know, what people are always depressed to hear is I courted that industry. I contacted the major owners and providers proactively because I saw an opportunity there. Frankly, I thought, 'You could use the help!' I travelled all over the UK via train – I came up here today from Yorkshire on the train.

I honestly felt it's in everybody's interest for me to get involved in this sector and it's not going to do me any harm either because I ride on the train. So, I went out, and it took some work to get them to understand, because one thing about the rail sector, they all tend to do the same thing. If they're all doing any one thing, they all do the same thing. When they all got very involved with lean and six sigma, they all did lean and six sigma, they all get ready to do one thing then they all do something else.

It's always because there's a future franchise bid coming up and they all went to tick the same the box. I had to make them understand you've got to stop being reactive. The rail industry lives and dies by the NRPS scores, which are from the National Rail Passenger Survey, which come out twice a year.

When they do come out, what you find is that in any given rail industry, they'll have little red dots where they're not getting it right and in six months, if you look at their scores, those red dots have shifted up to amber, or maybe green if we're lucky and they have brand new red dots. They just fix one lot and the next lot pop up. It's like the songs with the little ball that bounces over the words. It's just like that.

I said, 'You've literally got to get on top of this. You have to do it proactively yourself'. Here's the truth. I got three of them that came to the table and got really involved and went through the entire accreditation. All three of them had their highest National Rail Passenger Survey scores *ever* after we had finished working with them.

All three of them did it because they had a franchise bid or something that was coming up and the moment that decision was made, all three of them pulled out and wouldn't continue and all three of their scores went lower than they were before we started.

I am so frustrated with the rail industry being in this constant war with the unions and nobody paying attention to the impact of what you're doing to the customers. I'm really sorry, I understand the rail industry as well as anybody, but you cannot raise your ticket prices every January like clockwork and be having the same service problems you had the year before.

People are going up in their loft and dusting off the same placard that they had the year before and going back to that protest at their local station, and rightly so. When they were doing something more proactive I saw the improvement and it was heart-breaking to see them getting it right and then shift back into neutral.

I make these calls and send these emails out every week where I still want to work with them. I still think that there's an opportunity there. I think that the public would appreciate knowing that they're trying to do something to improve, not just timetables and performance, but actual understanding what's important to the client. I don't see it.

RT: And to touch upon something that you said there, that it goes right back to the start of our conversation, where you said the real value in the Customer First journey is the journey.

I think that also points to the fact that this isn't just a tick box exercise, this is not just a one off, get an accreditation and everything's going to be A-OK. Customer service is an ongoing journey, isn't it?

TS: One thing I am really proud of is that anytime that a franchise turns over in the rail industry that you normally find is that the most senior people in the organisation leave and somebody brings in new people. Even if the previous owner keeps the franchise, the senior roles tend to turn over.

The people who were in the senior roles when we were working with the three tops that we worked with, have all contacted me to work with them in the industries that they're in now, because they saw the value of the standard. I'm really proud of that - that people who actually went through it, understood and appreciate the value that.

You have to take solace where you can, so that even though we're not getting to help the ones that I think would help more of the public right now, that the people who actually benefited from it at the time saw the actual value and have contacted me.

One of them is not working in Australia and has contacted us and said, 'Can you help us over here?' And I said, 'Absolutely'. So that's great. They went to the other side world and still contacted us. So, I bet everybody who's on the train right now is doing the best they can. Actually, they're probably on a rail replacement bus right now...

RT: Well this is a good segue into my next question, which is to do with bureaucracy and red tape and I think we're in the right ballpark there with the train companies. you and I have talked before about workarounds and the fact that if you as an organisation wants something

done in an exacting way and your customers want to do things in another way, they will find a workaround for it.

It can be ridiculous. It can be frustrating. The obstacles that were put in front of people. Can you share a little bit more about workarounds and some of the ones you've seen, in any industry really, which, now that you look back on it, you think, 'Why would we ever try to get customers to do things that way?'

TS: I'll tell you my favourite one recently, especially because we're right here at the end of August and everybody has just had a holiday, and it's people booking their seats, especially because every airline makes you pay to pick the exact seat.

Seriously, I can't believe that they think it would be better if they made you just go charging onto the plane like a football scrum. It's got to help them for you to have a precise seat, but they're trying to make an extra pound so they charge you to pick the seat.

People find this so offensive - that they've paid for the ticket, most of the time they're paying for the luggage, they may be paying for the meal and paying for all kinds of stuff now. What they're tending to do, when you have a seat that has a configuration of three seats past the aisle, people book aisle and window on purpose.

They're paying, so they're going to book aisle and window. You go out and you look at a plane right now where people are making the seats and you see these two stripes all the way down in the centre seats are empty. This is people saying, 'I'm so appalled by the fact that you're making me pay to pick the seat, I'm going to make it harder on you.'

'I want more space for my money and nobody is ever going to voluntarily put themselves in a centre seat. If this goes the right way for me to end up with all that extra space.'

This should tell the airlines, they're not happy about having to pay to book the seat, they're not happy with the amount of space you're giving them. There are two opportunities here that you need to consider. Do we need to address this? Is it something that's in our interest to try and improve this customer service experience?

That's an example, that not only do I think it speaks volumes, but a lot of people watching this podcast will have done it. It's a literal work around. You know the way anybody else would expect to do it, but you're just trying to get more for your money, more for your experience and kind of pressing the point.

RT: I've also heard you talk before about the airline industry, which I think is a great example of some of the best customer service that you can find and some of the absolute worst customer service you can find, to do specifically with meals on airlines.

I want to talk about how people try to maximise the value that they get from something. And you gave me a story about why there's been a sudden upswing in the number of people who've suddenly got intolerances.

TS: All of a sudden people have got these incredible dietary restrictions, and it's because they're figuring out how to work around the airline system so that they don't feel like cattle that was shoved onto the plane. The moment that you put in any type of those special meal requests, which anybody on a plane can do, that meal gets made fresh for that flight.

All the other meals might have been on that plane going back and forth twice if it's a shuttle flight that goes back and forth. But dietary-restricted meals are made fresh for the flight that you're booked down. So, if you tell them you're lactose intolerant or to have gluten free or you can't have nuts or whatever it is, that meal is made.

So for example, the diabetic meals are really popular. We never had such an outbreak of diabetes as when people are ordering their meal, and it's because the whole rest of the meal is basically the same as everybody else, but it's fresher, it was made just for you.

The only thing that you're not getting is that dessert, which is often suspect anyway. I could build a house out of those brownies! But all of a sudden you have fresh fruit, because as a diabetic you can have fresh fruit, but even better yet, it's the first meal they serve, no matter where you're sat on the plane.

Those dietary-restricted meals have to come out first because they have to make sure it gets to the right person. They can't afford to have you had some big medical emergency at 37,000 feet, so you're going to get yours first.

Now, the bad news is you're not going to get a drink with that, so don't choke, because if you're not sat near the front of your cabin, the meals coming out first, but you're going to be dehydrated before that drink gets there, because they're not going to serve you that first.

That workaround hasn't come up yet. You better bring the water on board with you, but you have to buy it after you've gone through security, otherwise they're going to take it off. You see, there's a lot of things to consider here. But the meals are definitely something where you can see this massive swing, and how many people are requesting those.

RT: There's an analogy here for all businesses, because these workarounds exist in all businesses. Why haven't the airlines said, 'This is crazy. We know that the vast majority of people are now saying they're diabetic, or I heard somebody refer to pesco-pescatarian the other day – they can only eat fish that eat fish!

Why aren't the airlines saying, 'Right, let's do away with this charade. Why don't we just raise the level of value we place on something?'

TS: Who are you going to tell, as an airline, 'I don't believe you have an allergy. I'm just going to give you some food and let's see how that works out'. You're not going to do that. You can't afford to do that. The next option would be no meal.

It's that lowest common denominator isn't it? You have to be very careful when those workarounds start getting excessive. One of the possible outcomes is they bring it all down.

RT: Let's talk on that theme a little bit further then. Instead of bringing it down, we're talking about bringing it up. Airlines again - a great example, when you get 'the tap'. Explain what the tap is for people who are unfamiliar with it and the whole idea of plus ones upgrades.

TS: 'The tap' is when you see somebody who's back in economy and they're sat there in their seat, and then right before the plane gets ready to take off, here comes one of the trolley dollies down the aisle, and they lean over and just tap you: "Excuse me, just get your bag and follow me."

What has actually happened is that trolley dolly is the next-door neighbour of the cousin of the postmistress of the person that used to live down the street from you three years ago, and there happens to be one seat up in premium economy or business that's empty.

And somebody had emailed somebody who's called somebody and at the very last minute when they're sure it's going to be empty, that person gets the tap and then they get up and they walk very smugly up through the plane, dragging their little luggage behind them.

They're suddenly about to have a different experience than everybody else on that plane, even the people who were sat in the same class of travel, because this person is about to get an incredibly higher level of service than they paid for or expected. All of a sudden, this is way beyond their expectations and what they had actually worked out to get by telling you which ticket they bought.

The ticket determines how important is service to me, but now all of a sudden, they're going to get a higher level of service, so that's what I call a plus one. Plus ones are something that every business should look for anyway, but this is the most obvious one.

Now what I tell people is, unless that plane crashes, that person who got tapped and walked through the sainted curtain to the next one, that person is tweeting before the plane leaves the ground about how fabulous this flight is.

They're going to get the last meal option in that cabin because they didn't pay to be there. They're going to get the last drink option in that cabin, and it's still going to be the greatest flight they've ever had in their life, because it's more than they expected.

That's what really exceptional service should always feel like - that I've satisfied all of the things that you need from me as a customer and done something extra for you and that's the whole mentality of the one plus one service.

RT: How can we take this and apply this to businesses that are not airlines? How can we look for plus one and what would be a good plus one for instance, for an IT company? You're working *with* someone instead of just looking after their IT. What would a good plus one that like? I know you're not familiar with the industry, but I'm sure there's some really basic, easy examples that you can think of?

TS: Do you know what? There're some easy examples, but I'm always afraid that I'm going to get this question from any sector about what's a good plus one and what I always tell somebody is, 'There's your first problem', because you should never give somebody a plus

one. You should give somebody several options of what a plus one is. You've got to have the customer involved in the active decision-making of what they find to be important.

You need to know what you can comfortably offer them and what you can then deliver against. But there should always be several options. I'll give you an example of where for men it's frequently wrong and for women it's better, and this is something that goes on in retail. I've talked about this, you've heard me talking about this – it's cologne.

You go out in the summer to buy a bottle of cologne, they sell you the cologne and say thank you very much - if you're lucky – then you take your cologne and you leave. Then you go out and buy the same blooming cologne in December, and they sell the cologne and say, 'Oh, and here's your gym bag'.

I don't know why they do it and it really makes me mad when they do it. Because first of all, I might not like that kind of gym bag, I might not even want a gym bag. Third, are you implying that I need to go to the gym? Because that's just rude!

And this is where they get it wrong. With women, they go out and they buy perfume or they buy cosmetics and they're usually given several options of, 'Would you like to have this or this or this along with your purchase?' Do you see out automatically that's better?

The woman's an active decision-maker in the plus one. So what I tell any business, whether it's IT or somebody else's, you need to know what's available, but there should always be a range of options and please don't go out and start reinventing the wheel.

If you have a client that's at a certain contractual level with you, you want to offer them a plus one, look at things that are automatic pieces of an elevated contract level, customers that are a bit higher up the chain. You've already got it over here, so to offer this client, one of several options that are out there, not only does it make them feel special, but hopefully you're going to grow that client into the upper level contract that you can also offer.

That's why I don't struggle to tell people precise plus ones, because I don't even want you to do that. I want you to give them options of plus ones and they usually come from your elevated service levels that you're offering two different clients.

RT: It makes absolute sense. What's the worst example of customer service that you've ever seen?

TS: There's a lot! I can tell you one that I personally experienced and I was just astonished, even while it was going on, and it was an airline. I was flying back from the States into the UK, and I almost always fly direct.

But on this particular occasion I had a connection and my flight that was departing was delayed by over two and a half hours leaving. I knew emphatically, and could show you on my ticket, that my connection with an hour and 15 minutes. So unless we're somehow going to get some Concord level of speed, I know before I get on the plane, I'm missing that one.

What are you going to do to help me with this? And can we talk about it now because we have nothing else to do during the two and a half hours while I'm sitting here being delayed, and they just refused, as if, until you get there, it hasn't happened.

I was like, 'But you know it's going to happen. There's no way you're getting me there in time for this connection now'. And unfortunately, that flight that I'm connecting to is the last flight out this evening from there. I'm about to be stuck and I know I'm going to be stuck. Why won't you help me?'

Do you know whether it would help me? Because even though I had booked the ticket through one of airlines they were using to be their providers, as they often do and it was their principle that, that flight that I missed was on the other airline so it was their problem to figure out what to do. Even though *they* made me miss it. They knew if they made me wait til I got to the other end, everybody was going to wash their hands of the problem.

And it was so frustrating to have somebody standing in front of you who could clearly see what you're saying, 'This is going to be a problem. We can all agree that this is going to be a problem' and still not help you.

RT: What would you have liked them to do in that situation? What advice would you give them to say, 'I know the situation was probably out of your control, but you could have handled this a lot better and here's how you could have handled it better.'

TS: What I would like for them to do is give me an option of rebooking the whole thing. Don't make me get on this first flight when I know I'm going to get stuck halfway. Letting me stay here because I'm going to have an easier time finding some place to stay where I am right now and then start over tomorrow with a fresh set of flights.

I wanted that airline to make that call. Now, to be fair, I was departing from Las Vegas and nobody gets upset about one more night in Vegas, do they?! I would have rather had that than be stuck at the New York airport all night, which is where I was connecting through.

But more importantly, it would have just made sense. You've just come from the location that you're leaving. It would have been easier to go back and find a place to stay and come back. Even if I had to find that myself, let me do it all tomorrow and they wouldn't do that either.

They said that if I skipped the flight that I had to pay for any flight the next day. They forced me to get on the plane and stuck me in New York. It was bad.

RT: We're here in the Stand Comedy Club, um, I'm pretty sure the stage we can see behind us has seen more than a few hecklers. Complaints for organisations on that subject. How should we as organisations effectively deal with complaints from customers?

TS: I'll tell you my first rule of thumb: do not get defensive. Everybody's going to make mistakes, or everybody's going to feel like a mistake has been made at some point. It's entirely possible for you to get a complaint and you haven't actually screwed up any part of

the customer experience. There's an interpretation on the customer side that you've got something wrong.

Don't get defensive. Listen to what they're saying. I tell everybody dealing with complaints, and you can imagine how hard this is for me personally, to talk half as much as you listen. I find that very hard because my mother swears I have a DJ gene in me and if there's open air time, I feel the need to just keep talking.

I'll tell the Complaints Team, don't get defensive, talk half as much as you listen, confirm back with the client exactly what they're telling you they think is wrong and then start from there.

You've got to be really clear on what the complaint is and if possible, and this is not always possible, but if possible, it's best to let them tell you from the beginning what fix they would like to see.

Because you might not be able to do it, but at least you know where you're starting, where their expectation is compared to what you have available to you to offer. Once you get the initial complaint sorted and have a resolution on how you're going to move forward and that client is accepting that resolution, the other thing that's equally important is to later sit down with an open mind and consider the root cause of that complaint and make sure that it gets addressed more than the individual situation.

You don't want 12 more of the same complaint. It might be somebody who just took offense to something which is normally how it should've gone and you're just making them happy and dealing with their situation. But you always need to consider that.

You need to consider the root cause - is this something that's going to keep rearing its head? Very important is deal with this, then consider the root cause and then, if at all possible, communicate back with that customer to tell them, 'Thank you so much. I hope you were happy with the way we resolved it. We looked at this afterwards and realised that this was something we could do better and this is what we're planning to do and moving forward. How would that feel to you as a customer?'

They know you've taken them very seriously, that you've tried to make a long-term improvement from their situation and that then you brought it back to them, which again means you weren't denying the fact that the situation ever existed.

RT: That's fantastic advice and I think a lot of that goes to this human need to be acknowledged, doesn't it? I get frustrated more than anything else where I feel as though I've been hard done by, by an organisation, I take the time to feed back to them and say, 'Here's what went wrong, here's how I would have liked it to be treated', and that just disappears off into a black hole.

You think they could not care less than that makes you feel really small, doesn't it? How can we make sure that the people within our organisations take the attitude of, you know, we're here to take on that advice and to make things better, for continuous improvement?

TS: Do you know what I've done in the past? Whenever I had an organisation that just couldn't seem to get it? It was a large organisation, so I had this opportunity available to me. Once the situation was resolved with the client and we were at root cause analysis, it was sent to a senior manager over at a different part of the business to make sure there wasn't a defensive stance taken.

Somebody who was not involved in this situation but who was senior enough to have a strategic point of view, got to consider whether or not this was something that needed to be addressed by the business in a larger capacity.

Then those conversations were held from one senior manager to another senior manager, to the customer service and complaints team, all involved, so that everybody was going to share that responsibility.

You might be the one who's making the judgment call right now because you're the senior manager I gave it to, but later there's going to be a root cause complaint from your area that's going to go to someone else.

It stayed very balanced and people didn't want to bring down the hammer because the hammer was going to swing at them one of these days, but by taking it out of their personal level of responsibility, people didn't get precious about it and so it was easier to get to a long-term kind of sustainable fix.

RT: Makes lot of sense. Something else that springs to mind as well is when I've been dealing with people in these situations, that seems to be a lack of common sense, if that makes sense. How do we give people the leeway, the latitude within our organisations to say, 'Hey, if it's good common sense, make it happen'?

TS: I always tell people that the best approach when it comes down to something like that, where you're having to make a judgment call about a customer engagement piece and what you need to do about it, is ask forgiveness, not permission. If it's the right thing to do, do it.

But then by asking forgiveness, what that means is, after you've done it, you have to let someone know. Now it may be the case that you've overstepped and that one resolution is a little bit further than we want to go all the time, but that one resolution was the right thing right then.

That will be the opportunity to talk about, 'In future, let's just step back a bit because I think that was a little bit overkill,' that that's one decision is typically not going to break or bankrupt any business. If it's the right thing for *that* client, make the decision and then consider later whether or not if perhaps you went a step too far.

RT: Yeah, but it's important to back up the employee, so they don't get this fear of, 'I can't make a decision, let me just speak to a supervisor'. Common sense is common sense.

TS: That is so irritating to a customer to think, 'OK, why are you on the phone if you can't do anything?' and that's what customers think. I'm a customer of lots of people, and if you're on

the phone and you can't do anything, why are you on the phone? Unfortunately, I've asked more than a few people that question.

If I'm on the phone as a customer and I'm talking to somebody - I was on the phone with an organisation last week and I literally stopped and said, 'Would it help you? If I pause for a minute and let you read further ahead in that scrip you're reading?'

It was so clear that the outcome was going to be what was ever on the piece of paper because if you can't read well, don't read. Memorise it, do something, but it was so obvious that it was being read to me that, with dripping sarcasm, I said, 'Would you like me to stop for a minute so you can read ahead and see where we're going to end up on this?' which just totally screwed up the call, frankly.

It didn't go well after that. I'm probably in a training bloop now. There are people in a new group holding hands, singing Kumbaya and listening to my call. Maybe they'll have an improvement later!

RT: So my script tells me, but they're coming to the end of our time together. I can't let you go without asking, if you could wave a magic wand for organisations all across the world, small ones, big ones, multinationals. If you could wave a magic wand to help them to make that customer service better, what would you do?

TS: I would tell you that you have to remember what the intent behind customer service is. Your service or your product or whatever is is one thing, that's why you're in business. Customer service is about how does it *feel* to do business with you, not what is the outcome of that engagement and how does it feel to do business with you.

Perfect example, when I moved here, initially, I needed a phone in my home. I'm not going to use any company's name because that would just be rude, but the company's name just had letters in it, I'll just say that. I have not lived here my whole life, so I don't know these people and I've never had any actual engagement with them.

There's no reason for I me to think that this is going to go any way but well. Except for the 19 people who couldn't help themselves, but something tells me it was going to go bad. Everybody said, 'Oh, it's going to be awful, you're going to go to war, it's never going to end.'

Having to make that first call. I had like a canteen and a bed roll and I was ready to be there so long I needed to shave, because I knew this was going to go bad. What I tell people is that's customer service, and I'm already having the experience and you don't even know I exist as a customer.

Understand this. We none of us can go back in time and rewrite history. Whatever has gone on before in your business is where it is. You have to give yourself the opportunity and permission to draw a line in the sand and say, 'We're going to start from where we are and we're going to learn, and we're going to improve and we're going to get better.'

'Because the service expectations that somebody has from us tomorrow, or based on what we did last week, we can only really affect that in the future. If we start to improve tomorrow.'

I think that's fair and people just have to allow themselves to adopt that outlook. Understand the final suggestion, and this is what I tell anybody who asks me 'What is good service?'

I think the one thing that I will tell anybody who just wants the easy reminder of what is good service, this is your basic rule of them to move going forward. Imagine that the client that you're dealing with is your grandmother, and approach that interaction the same way that you would do with her.

We all have a certain way that will talk to colleagues, friends, partners, parents, anybody like that, but when it gets to your grandparents, it changes. Our tone changes, how far we'll go to explain something and make sure that they understand and they're comfortable with it changes. So, if all else fails and you don't know if you're getting it right, use that as your litmus test.

If this is the way I or anybody would treat their grandparent, then that's the best you can do. Treat them with consideration, concern, respect, making sure that they're clear, that they're happy with the way it's going forward and that it feels comfortable to them. That is what's beyond the product or service that you offer.

It's how it feels to do business with you. I should be completely comfortable picking up the phone or walking in to deal with you, not having a feeling of dread. If it's causing people to feel that you're getting it wrong.

RT: Fantastic. This entire time I've spent with you, has been fantastic and I suspect we've only just scratched the surface of that knowledge that you've got up there in your head about customer service. For anybody listening or watching this and wants to get in touch to have a conversation with you, or to find out more about Customer First UK, how can they get in touch with you?

TS: There's a couple of ways that are really easy. Clearly, you can go to our website, it's www.customerfirst.org and it's really clear, you can see immediately. You can find us on twitter: @CustomerFirstUK. You can find us through LinkedIn, or clearly, because they're all linked to you, they can contact you and you can pass on the information to me. Who knew that when I sat down you were going to become my PA. That's just the way things go. I'm always looking for people to provide me additional service, and there you go.

RT: I love what you did there, Ted! I love what you've done for this last hour speaking to me. Thank you so much mate.