

TAYLORMAKING

A New Era of Modern Branding
and Customer Connection



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INTRODUCTION

A New Era of Modern Branding and Customer Connection

Introduction

I have been a Taylor Swift fan for a long time. As a straight man born in the 1970s, I am aware I sit somewhat outside the profile of the traditional Swiftie, but I remain unapologetic in my fandom. If the diversity debates have taught us anything, it is that we all have the freedom to be who we are, and I'll wear the red sparkly glitter hot pants if I want to (not that I do — but I *could*).

After more than two years of researching this book, my social media 'for you' pages now resemble that of a 14-year-old girl. My feed is all Taylor, all the time. I am now an indoctrinated Swiftie.

I admire Taylor Swift for many reasons — her ability to capture a generational zeitgeist with a poetic lyric, her passion and hunger for musical composition, her live performance vision and sheer athleticism on stage, her attention to detail and creativity as a producer/director, her work ethic, and particularly her entrepreneurial savvy.

Listing her awards, accolades and industry records would likely take an entire book of its own. She's the only artist ever to win Album of the Year four times at the Grammys. She was the first woman to receive the Global Icon Award at the BRITs, and the only woman to appear twice on the cover of *TIME* as Person of the Year. She's been named Artist of the Decade, Artist of the Year (multiple times), the first artist to dominate the entire top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100, and she's won MTV's Video of the Year four times — more than anyone else. You get the picture.

Her recently completed global *Eras Tour* is the highest grossing tour of all time, earning over \$2 billion in revenue. When the concert movie hit cinemas, it was the fastest-selling concert movie ever, grossing over \$260 million. It is the most-streamed music film on the Disney+ platform, with over 16m hours of collective viewing in just its opening weekend. She holds the records for the biggest streaming days and most streamed artist across both Spotify and Apple Music. As an artist, she seems to have the Midas touch.

But while all these records and accomplishments are impressive, it is her mastery of customer connection — my own area of obsession, that I have always found fascinating. She is an artist and individual who has always understood the importance of an **authentic customer connection**. To me, she is the Queen of Customer Experience (CX).

For years, in my keynotes with brand and business audiences all over the world, I had already been using Taylor as a metaphor for better customer connection. Her insight into how to leverage social media, build tribal brand communities, harness the peer-to-peer network, and do it all with authenticity, was something I felt every brand could learn from. She was often

a 4–5-minute segment in my keynotes, until 2023 when her brand became a global phenomenon.

At the time of writing, Taylor’s stardom has reached stratospheric proportions. Specifically, over the past five years, she has become a global icon, not only for her fans, but someone of both cultural and social significance. Her *Eras Tour* arrival in any given city resulted in significant economic spend (estimated at anywhere between \$100-\$300m), her purchase of any product or service has an instant effect on its global demand, and her very physical presence in any neighbourhood immediately gridlocks streets. Her impact is seismic, literally. During her Seattle *Eras Tour* performance, the energy from the 72,000 fans registered as a 2.3 magnitude earthquake, quickly dubbed ‘Swiftquake’.

This book sets out to explore why Taylor Swift has managed to rise above a sea of talented competitors to become a true cultural icon. There are plenty of famous singers and entertainers who’ve had similar exposure, opportunities, Grammy wins, and career trajectories. They operate in the same industry, with access to the same producers, marketing muscle, and industry advisors. And let’s be clear — they’re all talented.

So why Taylor? What did she do differently that made her star shine brighter — and last longer — than the rest? Also, what has she missed and what more should she be doing in terms of customer connection? And since this is a *business* book, (glitter hot pants still optional), what can brands and businesses learn from her approach to build their own customer loyalty and tribal belonging?

This book is written for marketing directors of large global brands – those with the same scale, presence and reach as

Taylor herself. It will show you how to better connect with your audience at a personal level, without losing the power of your global presence.

It is a book for anyone working in a customer or consumer-facing role, curious about how to optimise the potential for emotive connection.

It is also for every small business owner and local brand. Think of this book as your cheat sheet to becoming famous in *your* community. It will help you to harness your unique proposition and benefit from the genuine presence you have in your local market.

This book is for marketing and entrepreneurship students, eager to develop a better understanding of brand fandom and the essence of the customer experience.

Ultimately, this book is for anyone who wants to build stronger, deeper human connections with their customers — whether you're in Business-to-Consumer, Business-to-Business, or something in between. It is also for all the Swifties. They need no excuse to read anything even remotely Taylor-related. The values and approaches we will discuss are applicable to all.

Instructions Not Included... Except Right Here

But before we dive in, a quick note on how this book should work.

I am going to assume that you, like me, probably have about 6-8 business books on your bedside table right now. Some of them were bought and never read, others you started and never got

past chapter three. As an aside, a publisher once shared with me that most business or self-help books are only read as far as chapter three, enough for the reader to get the main idea and some application examples and then quietly abandoned to the bookshelf. Looking at my own stack, I can testify to the truth of that statement. One day, I swear I'll write a three-chapter business book. It won't be this one, but it's a great idea.

So why do we abandon books we were once excited to read? Assuming we were interested enough in the topic to start, why do we drift off once we get through some of the initial general information? Sure, we've got shorter attention spans now, and distractions are everywhere. But I think it also comes down to how we like to consume ideas these days — quickly, in short bursts. It's why TED Talks took off when they were first launched.

Eighteen minutes. That was the rule. If you couldn't explain, explore, and wrap up your big idea in under 20 minutes, maybe your idea wasn't that sharp — or maybe you just weren't telling it well enough. And now, thanks to social media reels, we've gone from 18 minutes to 60 or 90 seconds. That's the new storytelling window.

So, here's my commitment to you. I'm not going to write the typical 80,000-word business doorstop. Each chapter is designed to be a bite-sized piece — something you can read on a flight, a train ride, or in the back of an Uber. One satisfying, easy-to-digest, morsel at a time.

And so, I have challenged myself with writing this book in a way that will benefit you, the reader. So here is the promise. I will try to keep things short.

I have also written it in a light, quirky and conversational style throughout. Personally, I have little time for authors who complicate their ideas with overly-obscure and clever language, putting dense writing ahead of the most important element of any publication – that it should be easily understood and inspire some thought or action.

Flip, Think, Scribble: This Is Your Blank Space

At the end of every chapter, you will notice some note-taking pages. What good is reading a business book unless there are some actions arising from the inspiration therein? At the end of every chapter, try and take some time to note your own reflections to the questions posed. The real value of this book comes when you connect its ideas to your own brand and business challenges. We read to reflect, and writing things down helps make that reflection stick. Keep a pen handy and write directly in the book margins and notes pages. Unless you're reading this on a Kindle, in which case... maybe don't.

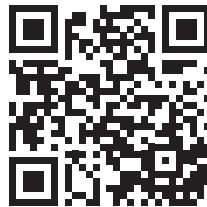
On the front page of each chapter, you will also find a chapter relevant Spotify playlist link.



This book is a multi-sensory experience and so of course, there is a soundtrack. How could you write about Taylor Swift and *not*

suggest some musical accompaniment? Each chapter comes with its own curated Spotify playlist — tailored for you to listen to and timed to the length of the given chapter. Dancing and singing along is totally optional but of course encouraged. Simply open your Spotify app, hit the search option on the bottom, click the camera icon on the top right and scan the code to unlock that chapter's playlist. If doing this for the first time, you will have to give the Spotify App camera access, obviously.

There's also a companion website where you'll find any video content referred to throughout the book. We live in a deeply audio-visual world, and sometimes words on a page can only take us so far. Please take the time to watch the video stories and examples, as it will bring you closer to the values and themes than my writing ever can. Simply scan the QR code at the beginning of the given chapter, and this will immediately display your video content.



Any video watching recommendations are marked in the text with a 📺.

The structure of this book mirrors Taylor's *Eras Tour* — twelve chapters, each named after one of her studio albums. Each chapter explores a key value that contributes to building strong customer connections and lasting business success.

Originally, this book was going to have an even ten chapters, matching her ten albums. Then she released *The Tortured Poets Department*, and so a new chapter was born. And, in true Taylor fashion, just as I'm about to sign-off on the final manuscript for printing — literally today — she announces her twelfth studio album, *The Life of a Showgirl*. At this pace, if I don't publish soon, we'll be at thirteen chapters before I can even get the cover printed.

In each chapter, we'll use Taylor as our jumping-off point to explore values through a social science lens. Expect a little psychology, a touch of sociology, some anthropology, and even a bit of cyber-behaviourism. We'll also examine how other brands have succeeded by embracing these same values and how to build long-term emotive brand loyalty. And I'll leave you with some reflective questions to help you think about how your own brand or business can incorporate them in meaningful ways.

So, as Taylor so eloquently puts it on her *Reputation* album, 'Are you ready for it?'



ALBUM I

The Taylor
Swift Era
Building Your
Connection

Set the mood.

Open Spotify, tap Search, then tap
the camera icon to scan.



In 2006, while still in high school and just 16 years old, Taylor Swift released her debut album — simply titled *Taylor Swift*. Rooted in country, with a touch of pop-rock, the album sold 40,000 copies in its first week. But instead of fading from the charts after the initial buzz (as debut albums often do), it began a slow and steady climb. Within a year, it had sold a million copies and earned her a platinum certification.



Now, compare that to today. Her recent studio album, *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), was streamed over 1 billion times in just the first five days. What once took a year now takes under ten minutes.

That's the dream for any brand: to launch something and have instant, overwhelming demand. But what's remarkable is that even back in 2006, Taylor already showed a deep understanding of how to create and nurture that demand.

At just 15, while recording that first album, she was already in control — completely driven by her belief in her music and her vision. She personally chose her producer and had a clear sense of how she wanted each track to sound, down to the instruments used. At a time when most teen artists were handed fully packaged songs, Taylor was actively shaping her own product. She believed in it — and knew others would too.

MySpace Diaries & The Rise of Digital Authenticity

Back then, social media was just beginning to take hold. MySpace and Facebook were competing for the attention of American teenagers. MySpace, launched in 2003, was built to help people connect around music. Facebook, still a college-only platform, had launched a year later. By the time Taylor's debut dropped, MySpace had become the dominant social platform, capturing about 80% of weekly visits to social networking sites. And this was pre-smartphone — everyone was still logging in from their laptops or desktops.

Taylor was quick to spot the opportunity in this new connection technology.

She embraced MySpace as a new way to connect with fans, creating one of the earliest examples of online artist-to-audience engagement. While she still undertook the traditional radio station promo tour (the tried-and-true method at the time), she also blogged regularly, posted behind-the-scenes stories, shared early song clips, and built direct relationships with fans — well before “social media marketing” was even a thing. She was a digital marketing pioneer, understanding that this technology wasn't just a broadcast tool — it was a two-way

street. She understood the potential power of mass digital connection, its authenticity and its role in building community. She was building *connection*.

Her online marketing built a strong following and amplified her popularity. The third single release from that first album, “Our Song”, was chosen based on the positive feedback and conversations that had developed online about the track. Even the record execs, watching from the sidelines, started to grasp the power of online communities in shaping demand and influencing brand direction.

Of course, we now look back at that era — 2006 to 2008 — as the wild west of social media. YouTube had just launched. Twitter and Reddit were finding their footing. Platforms like Bebo and Friendster were still in the game. It was early days.

Taylor was an early adopter of any platform that gave her better connectivity to her customer.

She immediately focused on Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, seeing their potential for her to connect with her fans, build a brand following, and tear away the line between ‘producer and consumer’. By inviting the fans into her life, she stepped out from behind the ‘Wizard of Oz’ curtain, breaking the old mould of the untouchable celebrity and replacing it with something far more powerful: *authenticity*.

If we look at Taylor Swift as a brand — and she most certainly is — a global brand of cultural significance — then a few values immediately stand out, chief among them: **authenticity** and **openness**. While many brands still treat social media as just another channel — a way to blast out their messaging, generate noise, and push for sales — Taylor has always understood it

differently. She's seen it for what it truly is: a tool for genuine, two-way authentic connection.

In a video interview for *TIME* magazine in 2019, she described Tumblr as *"a window into what my fans are going through. They post about their lives, they post about what they are into, what they think is cool, what they think is unjust ... it makes me feel like I can know them better."*

Don't Be the Guy with the Fish: Social Media Done Right

Even today, most brands still miss the point. They use social media as a broadcast channel, a megaphone: *Look at me. Swipe up to shop. Don't forget me. Buy me.* If social media were Tinder, most brands would be the shirtless guy holding a fish, petting a tiger, and standing in front of a rented sports car. *"Look how awesome I am. Pick me."* Please, don't be that guy — or that brand.

Social media should be a conversation. A relationship. A two-way street.

Taylor has built her incredible tribe of devoted fans by consistently showing up for them — with time, energy, and sincerity. And she's been doing it from the start. In fact, if you dig back into her original MySpace bio from 2006, there's a line that reads: *"I'm a fan of fans. You are absolutely wonderful to me. I've got your back just like you've had mine."*

Even as a teenager, she understood the value of making her audience feel like they were part of something — part of *her* story. Co-creators, not just consumers. Her long-term success

is rooted in two decades of intentional, authentic customer connection. She has been sharing her journey since the very beginning. 🍷¹

There was a time when celebrity culture was designed to feel untouchable. Think red carpets, bodyguards, glossy magazine exclusives, and limousines. That distant, dazzling image was the point. And sure, every teenager dreams of fame and the spotlight. But from day one, Taylor refused to hide behind that velvet rope. While she now finds herself in a surreal world of bulletproof vehicles and police escorts, it's clear that wasn't the brand she set out to build. In her own words, those are just "champagne problems."

In those early days online, fans followed her through sleepovers with her teenage friends, nights out with other rising celebrities, cozy evenings at home with her cats, beach vacations, relationship ups and downs — you name it. But more than watching her life unfold, they *interacted* with her. They messaged her, commented, joked, vented, and she responded. She spent hours each day on social media, not just performing, but *connecting*. That mutual openness laid the foundation for what would become one of the most powerful fan communities in the world. She didn't know it at the time, but she was already drafting the early ranks of the Swiftie army.

She even became known for "Taylurking" — her habit of quietly following her fans' posts. During a 2014 appearance on *The Graham Norton Show*, she admitted: "*I would go online and look at their Instagram pages, or their Tumblr, or their Twitter or whatever and just watch them for months and months — just sort of cyber-stalk them.*"

She would pop up unexpectedly in comment sections, join fan livestreams, and even send surprise care packages to help heal

their own broken hearts. In doing so, she flipped the script on the stan phenomenon (stalker: fan), challenging the norm of the celebrity parasocial relationship.

Let me take a moment to explain that last term — *parasocial relationship*. It describes a one-sided psychological connection, where one person (usually a fan) invests emotional energy, time, and attention in someone who doesn't even know they exist. These relationships are especially common today, particularly with celebrity podcasters, where the medium feels intimate and conversational. A listener might feel like they have a real friendship with someone, simply because they've spent hours hearing them speak every week.

Anyone with even a hint of celebrity status attracts parasocial relationships. It's the idea that the fan thinks they *know* the celebrity. Social media — especially the personal, behind-the-scenes kind — has made this dynamic even more powerful and believable. At the extreme, parasocial attachment can become dangerous. Tragically, it has sometimes led to stalking and violence. Robert Bardo murdered actress Rebecca Schaeffer after obsessing over her. Mark David Chapman believed he had a kind of personal connection to John Lennon — before shooting him outside his home.

Taylor Swift, unfortunately, has had her share of serious stalkers. One man, Roger Alvarado, broke into her New York apartment not once, but twice, in under a year. On one occasion, he was found napping in her bed after using her shower — like a deeply disturbing, real-life version of Goldilocks. I imagine his next stop involved a very different kind of porridge, served in a correctional facility. But I digress — back to parasocial dynamics.

What made Taylor's approach so different, especially in the early years, was that she flipped the traditional parasocial model on its head. Instead of remaining aloof and unreachable, she welcomed fans into her world — and stepped into theirs. Before social media, this kind of two-way interaction at scale just wasn't possible. But as the platforms evolved, so did her ability to deepen that connection.

The “girl-next-door” persona wasn't just a branding strategy. It was a core value. She genuinely *wanted* her fans to feel close to her, no matter how famous or inaccessible she became. Her belief was simple but powerful: a brand thrives more when it's about “*we*” rather than “*me*.”

To her, customers weren't anonymous buyers or faceless followers. They were people — individuals she cared about and wanted a relationship with. And as her influence skyrocketed, growing from thousands to millions of followers, she held tight to that value of authentic connection.

She still does.

From Champagne Problems to Grocery Store Dreams

Even just two years into her rise to fame, back in 2008, Taylor already seemed aware of the challenges ahead — particularly how fame could make it harder to stay authentic on social media. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she said: “*All I can do is put up a MySpace video where I don't have any makeup on and am wearing a periodic table of the elements T-shirt.*” She knew early on that brand accessibility wasn't just a marketing tool — it was a critical part of her relationship with her fans.

That same year, she closed a charity performance in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with a line that captured her ethos perfectly: *“I am so proud to live in Nashville, Tennessee, and I hope to run into you at the grocery store.”* Now, obviously not every fan is going to bump into her near the frozen peas — but through social media, she made it feel like they *could*. She created that sense of intimacy and proximity, no matter how big her platform became.

Fast forward to 2014, and in an interview with Barbara Walters for ABC, Taylor gave even deeper insight into why connection matters so much to her. *“I am really in touch with my fans, and I know what they like. I want to come up with as many ways that we can spend time together and bond because it keeps me normal. It keeps my life feeling manageable.”*

For her, this wasn’t just a business strategy — it came from a real place of belonging and community. *“It is the only thing that keeps me not feeling overwhelmed by the abnormality of my life.”*

And that’s something we often forget — fame, for all its glitz, can be one of the loneliest human experiences. It’s craved by many — until they experience the cost. I’ve yet to meet someone with significant fame who truly enjoys the constant attention or the complete loss of privacy.

Taylor’s commitment to connection seems to go beyond brand strategy — it’s simply part of who she is. That value is deeply ingrained. Her parents, who frequently travel with her on tour (both as parents and as part of her management team), are known for being equally warm, genuine, and approachable. Those core family values — centered around kindness, humility, and authentic connection — have clearly shaped how Taylor approaches her career and her fans.

Yes, she may be one of the most famous people on the planet. But it still feels like a family business. And that family — unlike many in the spotlight — are more than happy to spend time with fans, pose for photos, and share the magic. Authentic connection is a core family value.

From a customer experience (CX) perspective, she was ahead of her time — an early adopter of gamification to connect with fans. Now, this tactic isn't new — the Beatles, after all, were slipping cryptic messages into album sleeves decades ago, but she's taken it and run with it. To this day, she drops hidden clues in liner notes, music videos, and even breadcrumbs future release dates across her social channels. She gets it — the thrill of mystery, a bit of mischief, and the magic of anticipation.

Connection > Communication: Welcome to the Conversational Economy

So, what can your brand or business take away from 16 to 18-year-old Taylor Swift? In a word: connection.

Don't treat your marketing like it's just communication. And stop seeing your social media as a mere channel. If that's your mindset, you're already missing the point — and the power. These aren't just routes to market or platforms to shout about how amazing your product is. People don't want to be advertised to, and they certainly don't want to be talked *at*.

Let's be real — on Tinder, no one's swiping right on the shirtless guy leaning on the sports car yelling, "Look at me!" (Okay, *some* people might — and that's fine. There's someone for everyone.) But most of us are looking for something more genuine.

It has to be less about you — the brand — and more about *them*, the customer.

And here's the wild part — today's marketers have what was once pure science fiction. A direct line to every single customer. If you told a marketing director in the 1950s that someday they'd be able to have personalised, one-on-one conversations — using text, image, video, and voice — with *millions* of people, every single day, through a device that lives in their pocket... they'd wet their trousers. Collectively.

These days, there's really no excuse for any brand not to be the girl next door.

The *Wizard of Oz* is still a great movie, but too many brands are clinging to that outdated idea — that to be respected, they need to be the all-knowing, all-powerful wizard behind the curtain. Omnipotent. Untouchable. Infallible. If that's still your mindset as a marketer today, you're about as lost — and as pitiful — as the lonely old man pulling levers behind the curtain in Oz.

Let's look at how it *should* be done.

In the US, Ben & Jerry's is a brilliant example. Even after being bought by Unilever in 2000, they stayed true to their social and environmental values. Their flavours were wild and wonderful, their tone was playful, and their connection with customers never wavered. They didn't just *sell* ice cream — they invited people into a quirky, values-driven brand world, and cultivated a brand with an *accessible personality*.

Same goes for Innocent Drinks in the UK. Remember those cheeky little messages on the bottles? They told you to ring the banana phone for a chat. Why? Because they understood that

being a brand doesn't mean being cold or corporate. It means *starting conversations* and being genuinely human.

Yet, we're still teaching university marketing modules with titles like "Marketing Communication," as if that's all it is — a broadcast. But communication, by definition, is supposed to be two-way. Most brand messaging still feels like a one-way megaphone: loud, relentless, and totally ignoring the person on the other end.

Here's the thing: Taylor Swift stumbled onto something powerful at just 16 — the *Conversational Economy*. She understood the value of fan dialogue, community engagement, and peer-to-peer buzz. And that dating analogy still holds: if you spend the entire first date talking about yourself, there's probably not going to be a second one. Brands are no different.

In fact, for B2B businesses or local markets, this should be even easier. You're not dealing with millions — it's hundreds or maybe a few thousand. Which means the opportunity to build real, personal connections is massive, if you just use the right approach.

So, here's your first checkpoint

I know how tempting it is skip this next bit. I do it too. The "thinking work" is always harder than the reading. But take five minutes — scribble down your thoughts. If you do this at the end of every chapter, by the time you're done, you'll have an 11-part action plan for your business. That's a solid return on a book.

So go on — invest in yourself.

Take a minute. Read through these five questions and jot down whatever comes to mind — messy notes, rough thoughts, half-formed ideas, all welcome. Don't overthink it. This isn't a test; it's a conversation starter.

Once you've had a go, think about pulling in your digital marketing, social media, and CX teams. Workshop the answers together. Make it fun. Channel your inner 16-year-old Taylor — bold, curious, and a little mischievous.

The curly hair is optional but encouraged.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS ALBUM 1

01. How are you generating **authentic** and deep **customer connections** today? Be honest. What are you actively doing that creates any deep and meaningful connection on a day-to-day basis beyond the product/service?



02. Is your social media strategy too focused on selling and on your own brand proposition, and not leveraging the power of the customer conversation? How can you shift toward a more **Conversational Economy** approach?



03. How can you **reach into your customers' lives** in a way that is relevant, meaningful and will be celebrated by them (balancing the personalisation/privacy see-saw)?



04. How can you communicate your own **unique brand values** and authenticity with customers to build loyalty and connection? How can you use authenticity as a point of differentiation?



05. Overall, how can you shift the conversation **from ME to WE**? How can you use communication with customers as a pivot point for developing deep and meaningful relationships?





ALBUM III

The Speak
Now Era
Beyond
Expectations

Set the mood.

Open Spotify, tap Search, then tap
the camera icon to scan.



And here we are — the dreaded third chapter. Get past this, and we’ve officially made it beyond the bedside-cabinet graveyard of abandoned business books. No pressure.



But hey, it was the same for Taylor. A third album can make or break a career. David Bowie’s *The Man Who Sold the World* was a commercial flop. So was the Kaiser Chiefs’ *Off with Their Heads*. A debut album can ride on raw talent and years of pent-up creativity. A second album might find success through momentum — fan demand, media attention, and the creative fumes of that first effort. But the third? That’s the real test. If you can still hold fans’ attention, keep the critics nodding, and convince the label to stay invested, then you’re not just hot — you’re here to stay.

Speak Now, released in 2010, was Taylor’s third studio album. Originally titled *Enchanted*, the name changed pre-launch — perhaps to better

reflect an artist stepping into her own, finally speaking out with more confidence about love, life, and fame.

By this point, I've given up listing every accolade. Just assume each album went multi-platinum, swept up awards, and turned every single into a headline. Swift's brand was enormous, and her releases had become major cultural events. Still, one stat stands out: *Speak Now* sold over a million copies in its first week, in 2010. Thirteen years later, *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)* did the same. That's not just longevity — it's lightning in a bottle, twice. To have the same level of excitable demand and commercial success for a product re-release thirteen years later is something neither the industry, nor Taylor herself expected.

And that's what we're diving into in this chapter: **expectations**, and how Taylor's ability to consistently exceed them has laid the foundation for her tribal brand fandom. If we can learn from her ability to exceed expectations, maybe we can edge our own brands closer to that level of devotion seen in the Swiftie universe.

Marty Neumeier, in his book *The Brand Gap*, introduced a simple yet powerful model: the Brand Ladder. It illustrates how customer satisfaction evolves into tribal brand loyalty, step-by-step. The ladder climbs from mere satisfaction to delight, and ultimately to an empowered, engaged customer.

The idea is straightforward: each step up the ladder deepens engagement. At the top, you find your dream customer — the advocate. They're not just buying your product; they're *selling* it for you. In today's peer-powered marketplace, that kind of advocacy is gold.

The lower levels of the ladder map the relationship between expectation and experience. I've added my own unofficial Level 0: the Dissatisfied Customer.

Context is Everything (Even for Pubic Hair)

No brand wants to start — or end — there, which is exactly why it gets a zero. Here, the customer's actual experience of your product or service falls short of their expectations. It's that moment you walk into your hotel room and discover someone else's pubic hair in the shower tray, a luke-warm starter in a restaurant, or a rude customer service interaction. The experience is below expectations — and that gap is what creates dissatisfaction.

But the key point about dissatisfaction is this: it's all about the relationship between experience and expectation.

That hotel room example? It holds water if you're staying in a mid-range hotel — say, three stars or more — in a developed country. But if you're paying next to nothing or staying in a modest place in a developing economy, your expectations shift. I've stayed in hotels in Africa where there was no running water or bathroom at all — low hygiene standards were not a surprise; it was part of the deal. Likewise, if you're backpacking and paying \$3 a night in a shared hostel, finding a bathroom sprinkled with body hair is par for the course. *You get what you pay for.* It always comes back to expectations.

That's why consumer dissatisfaction isn't absolute — it's contextual. A lukewarm starter would be unacceptable in a modern bistro, but nobody blinks twice in a school canteen.

Take Karen's Diner in the UK. Their entire concept is based on delivering comically rude service. Orders are barked at you, food is slammed on the table, and insults are part of the menu. But because customers know what they're getting into, it's entertaining — it flips the script on the forced cheerfulness of standard service culture. Still, bring someone who doesn't know the concept, and their shock is half the fun. They expect normal hospitality and instead get roasted with their burger.

But here's the key: you don't leave a Karen's Diner feeling upset about the poor customer service — because *that's exactly what you came for*. Ironically, when my 17-year-old daughter and I ate there earlier this year, we left feeling slightly let down... because they weren't rude enough. I'd expected full-on theatrical abuse. Instead, the experience felt oddly tame. In a strange twist of logic, I later gave them a three-star review because the service was "a little too polite."

It's a reminder that dissatisfaction arises when the experience doesn't match the specific expectations you walk in with — even if those expectations are for deliberate mistreatment.

So how do we avoid customer dissatisfaction? There are two routes:

1. Meet or exceed customer expectations through great experience.
2. Lower their expectations from the outset.

Ryanair, Europe's most successful low-cost airline, is a master of the second approach. They don't hide what they are: a no-frills, budget airline. You've paid a rock-bottom fare, so don't expect champagne and warm towels.

They don't always land in Paris, Brussels, or Barcelona — but rather *near* them. They fly into smaller airports — often converted military bases — well outside the city and then sell you a cheeky bus ride into town. But this isn't corner cutting. It's strategy. Avoiding major airport fees helps keep fares down, and their messaging makes it clear: you get a seat, you get there (eventually), and you get what you paid for.

Are you really dissatisfied that you had to get a bus into the city? Probably not — you only paid €20 to fly to Paris. What did you expect?

Ryanair's seats don't recline. Why? Moving parts break, and broken seats mean lost revenue. So, you sit upright. There are no seat-back pockets either. Those just collect rubbish and slow down the turnaround time. Gone. Want a drink onboard? Buy it. Want a seat near the front? Buy it. Want to bring hand luggage into the cabin? You guessed it — pay for it.

Their whole model is built around one unspoken contract: *the fare is cheap, so lower your expectations*. And the *pièce de résistance*? Their customer service line charges a premium to call. You literally pay to complain.

And yet, Ryanair is one of Europe's most profitable airlines. Why? Because they've done what most brands avoid: they've educated their customers to expect less — and deliver exactly that.

Taylor, like many successful entrepreneurs, has built her success on meticulous attention to detail — a laser focus on every element of her brand and product. She's hands-on with everything: production, messaging, fan engagement. But what happens when you're forced to outsource part of the customer

journey? Worse still, what happens when a partner fails — and your customers may hold *you* responsible?

When Trust Crashes at Checkout

In November 2022, pre-sale registration opened for Taylor's US *Eras Tour*. A record-breaking 3.5 million fans registered — making it the largest pre-sale for concert tickets in history. But when the tickets went live, Ticketmaster's infrastructure buckled under the pressure. Fans who'd waited for hours made it all the way to checkout, only to have their tickets vanish. The fallout? Chaos. Tears. Online meltdowns. Swifties in full emotional freefall. 🌀⁴

The result? Over 300 fans filed a class-action lawsuit against Ticketmaster, each seeking \$2,500 in damages. A congressional antitrust hearing followed, accusing Ticketmaster of abusing its monopoly position in the industry.

Taylor, clearly rattled, didn't hold back. In a public statement, she said: *"It's really difficult for me to trust an outside entity with these relationships and loyalties and excruciating for me to just watch mistakes happen with no recourse. I'm not going to make excuses for anyone because we asked them, multiple times, if they could handle this kind of demand and we were assured they could."*

It was a brutal reminder: even when you outsource, your brand might take the hit.

The system crash and overwhelming demand led to the main ticket sale — scheduled just two days later — being cancelled entirely. There simply weren't enough tickets left to sell. Even after Taylor added 17 more stadium shows across the U.S., it barely scratched the surface of demand.

In its public apology for the “*terrible experience*”, Ticketmaster claimed that, based on the volume of ticket requests received during pre-sale, Taylor would have to perform a stadium show every single night for two-and-a-half years to just meet the demand. Let that sink in.

A few months later, the international dates dropped — another 70+ stadium shows across South America, Asia, and Europe. For the six Singapore shows alone, 22 million people pre-registered. That’s 22 million fighting for just 330,000 seats.

It was hysteria — a digital-age *Hunger Games*. Swifties swapped tips like survival strategies: multiple devices, clean your cache, delete cookies, don’t switch wi-fi, don’t move — anything to stay in the digital line. To prevent a repeat of the U.S. meltdown, Ticketmaster implemented a lottery system for international sales. Fans entered their name and email for a chance to win a “purchase link” — a golden ticket in the truest Willy Wonka sense.

Even this wasn’t simple. The registration page itself could take hours to load, despite being open for seven days. And although Taylor ultimately scheduled 149 *Eras Tour* shows, each averaging between 55,000 and 75,000 seats, that still only adds up to around 9–10 million tickets in total. Which sounds like a lot — until you remember that hundreds of millions of fans wanted in.

For example, 500,000 fans registered for the 165,000 available seats in Dublin. That alone meant at least two-thirds would walk away disappointed. But the numbers get even harsher when you factor in group purchases: most fans lucky enough to win a purchase link bought 2–4 tickets. So those 165,000 seats translated into only 40,000–50,000 actual purchase opportunities. Suddenly, your chances of getting a link

dropped below 10%. In other words, over 90% of hopeful fans were going to be disappointed.

Now let's apply the same math to Singapore. With 22 million fans registered and just 330,000 seats available, a full 95% of those eager fans were never going to get in. To put it in perspective, that's close to the entire population of Australia chasing concert tickets for a single city.

When Love Isn't Enough (to Get You a Ticket)

If you're looking for a case study in large-scale customer dissatisfaction, this is it. Every city. Every market. Same issue.

And it's a strange problem to have: your brand is so successful that demand vastly outpaces supply. But this isn't a short-term production bottleneck. We're not talking about selling Dubai chocolate or fidget spinners. Economics would typically say: increase supply to meet demand and maximise revenue.

But that model doesn't quite work when your product is a three-and-a-half-hour, high-energy live performance — delivered by a human being. Taylor's not about to perform every night for a decade straight just to balance the ledger. I'm sure she'd like a life too.

And so, millions of her fans — the ones who stream every song, buy every album, and defend her on Twitter at 2am — couldn't get a ticket to the concert of a lifetime.

A brand is often defined not by how it treats its happiest customers, but by how it responds to the dissatisfied ones. In Taylor's case, most fans didn't blame *her* for not getting tickets.

But customer delight is about addressing friction anywhere in the customer journey — regardless of whether the problem stems from your brand, or a third party. The experience matters either way.

It's every brand's nightmare: a moment where your success creates mass disappointment. Inside those *Eras Tour* stadiums, fans were living their dream. But what about the ones who didn't make it inside? That's a missed opportunity. Those fans — frustrated but loyal — should have been treated as the valuable brand assets they are. A little CX magic directed their way, and the resulting Customer Lifetime Value boost could have been enormous. We will unpack that missed opportunity in Chapter 11. (See what I did there? Now you *have* to read past Chapter 3.)

No matter how big, successful, or adored your brand may be, there's *always* room to improve.

Take bol.com, the Dutch online retailer that dominated the Netherlands long before Amazon showed up. A father once contacted their customer service team, angry and disappointed. A trampoline he ordered for his daughter's birthday hadn't arrived on time, and the party was ruined.

Bol.com's team wanted to make it right. A few weeks later, they asked the family to leave their house for a few hours. When they returned, their entire backyard had been transformed into a full outdoor premium trampoline park — installed by bol.com.

The smile on that little girl's face said it all. 🙏⁵

Every dissatisfied customer is a chance, an opportunity for deeper connection.

Beyond Satisfaction: Raise the Bar

The next level of that brand ladder is Level 1, satisfaction, and sadly is where many brands stop. This is where the customer experience simply meets expectations. Nothing more, nothing less. And yet, businesses obsess over it. They pour millions into tracking customer satisfaction and building out Net Promoter Score (NPS) dashboards.

I know this firsthand. I ran a market research agency for 15 years and serviced some of the world's biggest brands on their customer satisfaction tracking (and, yes, happily accepted their above-mentioned millions).

But here's the problem: satisfaction is a low bar.

You're just measuring how many people got what they expected. A customer who says they're "satisfied" is saying, "Yeah, this was about what I thought it would be." That's it. And yet, we celebrate these numbers like they're victories. "85% satisfaction this month — great job, team!" Sure, 85% is better than 50%, but it doesn't mean 85% of your customers are loyal, emotionally invested, or even planning to return. It just means you *didn't mess it up*.

NPS tries to take it a step further by identifying customers who might "promote" your brand—those who seem really engaged. But even NPS often misses the emotional nuance of the customer relationship. It simplifies a complex human connection as a single number.

Don't get me wrong: satisfaction tracking has its place. It's important. But it should be the starting point, not the finish line. It's the foundation, not the goal.

So, let's agree to move beyond satisfaction. Meeting customer expectations? That's table stakes. Every decent business should be doing that as a baseline. I'm going to assume yours is too — and if it's not, that's your first fix.

So, what comes after satisfaction?

Delight Me, Surprise Me, Hide It In My Sandwich

Level 2: Delight.

Delight is what happens when you exceed expectations — when a customer gets more than they thought they would. Every time that happens, you deepen the emotional connection. Keep doing it, and over time, you climb toward Level 3 and Level 4 on the brand ladder: engaged and empowered customers. But we'll save those for the next chapter.

For now, let's stay with delight.

Picture this: your partner gives you a birthday card. In it, they've written how much they love you and how you make them feel (hopefully good things). You're touched; you smile. You feel... satisfied. It's a thoughtful gesture — but it's also something you expected on your birthday.

Now imagine this: It's three months later. It's lunchtime. You're sitting at your desk, opening the foil on the sandwich you made this morning. And tucked inside is a handwritten note — your partner must have slipped it in while you were grabbing coffee, half-asleep. It tells you, again, how much they love you and how you make them feel.

That moment? That's delight.

It's the same message you received in your birthday card three months ago — but this time, it hits differently. It's delightful. Why? Because it's a **surprise**. You expected the note in a birthday card. You *didn't* expect it in your sandwich.

That's the power of unexpected kindness. When good things happen outside of a predictable moment, they land harder. They feel more meaningful. *(Note to reader: write someone you love a little note and hide it somewhere. Remember — love is a verb.)*

This is the essence of Delight & Excite — a core tactic for emotionally engaging your customers. Make them feel seen. Make them smile. Surprise them. Make them laugh or blink twice in wonder. Because once you spark emotion, you start building a real connection. And from there, you're on the path to brand loyalty.

And so, back to Taylor — the Queen of Delight and Excite.

She has always understood the power of surprise. At every touchpoint, she finds ways to go beyond what fans expect. The *Eras Tour* itself was a masterclass in exceeding expectations. Even fellow celebrities who attended her three-and-a-half-hour show commented on how she redefined the stadium concert experience — blending musical theatre, choreography, visuals, and cutting-edge tech.

But that's delight within the product. What I'm more interested in is the emotional connection she builds outside of it.

Roses, Reputation, and Ripleigh

Take a simple, yet brilliant example: Ripleigh Maring, a 16-year-old entrepreneur and proud Swiftie. During the pandemic, she launched *Ripleigh's Creamery*, a “destination ice cream shop” known for her ‘we dare you’ flavours like buffalo chicken and buttered popcorn. A few years later, she’d expanded to three locations — and when the *Eras Tour* rolled into Philadelphia in May, she saw her chance.

In true Swiftie fashion, Ripleigh launched eight new Taylor-themed ice cream flavours to coincide with the concert dates. Fans could try a scoop of *Bad Blood*, a cone of *Lavender Haze*, or go all-in with a tub of *Wildest Dreams*. Her stores were decked out with Eras-themed decorations and even included a cardboard cut-out of Taylor for fans to pose with.

It was clever marketing, yes — but more than that, it was a love letter from one Swiftie to another. A nod to community, creativity, and connection.

After sharing her ‘Eras Collection’ flavours online, other Swifties picked up the post and started resharing it — tagging Taylor repeatedly and inviting her to stop by the shop while in town. The tribal network kicked into gear. It didn’t take long before the message reached Taylor herself.

Now, thanks to her reputation for *Taylurking* — and her genuine desire to connect — Taylor likely receives thousands of personal invitations every time she visits a city. From fans, businesses, charities, and well-meaning causes, the requests pour in. And while she obviously can’t meet everyone’s expectations, she still goes out of her way to delight a chosen few.

While Taylor couldn't visit Ripleigh's Creamery in person, she sent four dozen red roses to the shop, along with a message wishing Ripleigh success in her business. The video of Ripleigh's reaction — realising her idol had personally acknowledged her — is powerful. There are tears, disbelief, and pure joy. 🌹⁶

That's delight in action.

In that moment, the distance between product and fan disappears. Between brand and customer? Gone. That small act went beyond every expectation — and in doing so, forged a lifelong emotional connection.

These are the moments where Customer Lifetime Value isn't just created — it's reinforced.

At live concerts, many performers offer fan meet-and-greets — often packaged as part of VIP ticket tiers. Superfans pay for a few precious moments of face-to-face time with their idol. But Taylor Swift? She's never taken money from a fan to meet her.

At her core, she doesn't believe in profiteering from delight. It's not a transaction — it's a connection.

Her mother, Andrea Swift, a former marketing executive and a key part of Taylor's management team, understands the value of exceeding expectations. At Taylor's concerts, Andrea is often the one scanning the crowd — pulling fans backstage, chosen for their spectacular outfits or simply at random. It's a pure delight moment — one that gets shared in peer networks, replayed, and remembered forever.

Similarly, Taylor Nation, her official fan club, keeps close tabs on the community. They frequently select fans for special

treatment at events based on their social media activity — rewarding engagement with meaningful, in-person moments.

In 2018, during the *Reputation* tour in Chicago, a group of fans were invited by Taylor Nation to record personal messages about what her music meant to them. They believed they were filming for a concert documentary. What they didn't know? Taylor was hiding behind the backdrop, listening to every word. The moment she steps out and hugs each one of them is unforgettable. 🎭⁷

Of course, such videos go viral. Because delight spreads. When customers are surprised in the best way, they share it. They share the story, the emotion, the feeling. Taylor doesn't need to send roses to every fan. She doesn't have to surprise *everyone*. But when she delights just a few, the whole community feel it.

There are plenty more 'delight' examples to come — but I'm saving those for later chapters. They connect to other themes, and, well... I like to tease.

So, we've arrived at question time.

I know the temptation — just turn the page and dive into the next era. But trust me — taking a few minutes to reflect on these six questions, and jotting down some brief answers, will make this chapter far more likely to shape your next CX strategy conversation.

Reading a book should change something. This is your moment to make sure it does.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS ALBUM 3

01. How do you currently handle **dissatisfied customers**? How could you turn moments of dissatisfaction into opportunities for surprise and delight?



02. In what ways do you already go **beyond customer expectations**? Look at every touchpoint — product, production, packaging, retail, delivery, customer service. Where do you already shine? Where could you go further?



03. How could you create shareable **moments of delight**? What could you do — big or small — that customers would feel compelled to share with their peer networks? What would bring your brand to life through storytelling?



04. How can you **empower your team** to deliver delight consistently? What systems or culture would enable them to spot customer pain points — and solve them with flair? How do you make sure these stories are shared internally, so they inspire the whole organisation?



05. Who will be your **Excite & Delight Director**? Not just a mindset — make it a role. Give someone ownership, along with the time and budget to embed “beyond expectations” into your company’s daily rhythm. Don’t let delight be an afterthought.



06. What do you do as a **leader** that illustrates the importance of going beyond expectations? What could you do to show your employees and customers that 'excite and delight' is one of your own core values?



