



# Raise the Bar: An Action-Based Method for Maximum Customer Reactions

By Jon Taffer

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"A fascinating and practical guide to what actually makes a bar into a great bar (and much can be applied to any service business). Jon doesn't present 'canned' answers, he provides a way of methodically evaluating and challenging every aspect of what lies behind a great bar. He seamlessly blends data-backed insights with hard earned experience to create a template of how to construct a plan for success. It is so refreshing to read something which doesn't present standard answers to non-standard issues." —Nick Shepherd, CEO Carlson restaurants/TGI Fridays

"When I was young and still learning the nightclub and bar business, I always went to Jon's seminars and learned so much. Jon Taffer really had a big impact on me and my success and I still think of things he taught me. This book can do the same for you. It's fun but make no mistake, Jon is all business as he fills the pages with great stories, practices and his proven formula for success." —Jesse Waits, Managing Partner of XS Nightclub, TRYST Nightclub, Botero Restaurant, Las Vegas

#### About the Author

**JON TAFFER** is chairman of Taffer Dynamics ([www.tafferdynamics.com](http://www.tafferdynamics.com)), president of the Nightclub & Bar Media Group, and host of Spike TV's wildly popular *Bar Rescue*.

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#### 1

### You Sell One Thing: Reactions

People expect a certain reaction from a business, and when you pleasantly exceed those expectations, you've somehow passed an important psychological threshold.

—Richard Thalheimer, founder, Sharper Image

My wife, Nicole, and I were staying at a big-brand hotel for a couple of days while I was on the road shooting *Bar Rescue*. I'm laughing at myself as I write this, but I did nothing but complain from the moment I arrived. Our room was the size of a postage stamp, while the bed was too high off the ground, all of which left me feeling like an awkward giant. It was obvious that the flaccid bacon on my dinnertime sandwich had been cooked the previous morning. And why were the knife and fork the size of airline flatware? Even though I'm a positive person, it's very easy for little disappointments to bum me out. Nowadays, it's hard not to automatically home in on low hospitality standards. It's frustrating because everything I see is easily preventable. I have to force myself to blow these annoyances off—otherwise, I'd never be able to enjoy a dinner, or just about anything I do in my life.

Admittedly, I am a bit cocky when it comes to guest standards, but not without justification: I have more than thirty-five years of experience working in every aspect of the hospitality business. I *know* hotels, restaurants, bars, dives, burger joints, and nightclubs are capable of best-of-class excellence. I wasn't always this sensitive—standards didn't make it onto my radar until I was a few years into the business. I'll never forget walking through a major hotel with the vice president of product development for Hyatt International, Frank C. Ansel III. Youthful exuberance made me come off like a big shot even though I was nothing of the sort. We were holding a management and entrepreneurship seminar for the company's East Asia employees.

The food and beverage director of the hotel knew we were coming, so he had spruced up the place. Everything at the hotel looked amazing to me, but twenty minutes into the walkthrough, Frank looked at his manager with obvious displeasure. I asked Frank why he was upset.

“You think he’s doing things well because you look but you don’t see,” Frank said. He pulled me over to a table and pointed out that the service plates weren’t turned the same way, nor was the flatware placed consistently at each setting. Frank nodded toward a waiter who was pouring out of the side of a pitcher instead of the spout—a real no-no in table service. These are subtle things, but they demonstrated a lack of standards and attention to detail. When “little” things are off, it means more important standards are also probably lacking. That line, “You look but you don’t see,” has stayed with me ever since. After that day, I have never been able to walk past a dirty carpet or a cracked wall without reacting. I notice everything. Businesses are defined by their details. Now, when I look, I see.

Think about this: Two people get dressed in the morning. One person throws on whatever clothes are available; the other takes the time to select an outfit and make sure it’s clean, pressed, and put together. Who makes the better impression? The carefully dressed person is thought of as calmer, more powerful, smarter, and more thoughtful than the sloppy one. In an experiment to test perceptions and appearance, teaching assistants who wore formal clothes were perceived as more intelligent than those who dressed more casually. A Harvard study found that women who wore makeup were considered more competent and likable than their barefaced counterparts. (I love this kind of science because it has practical applications for business owners—that’s why I use a lot of it in *Bar Rescue* and in my work as a consultant.)

These lessons are as relevant for businesses as they are for individuals. In a joint study conducted by Cornell and Columbia Universities, consumers who encountered either a delay in being seated in a restaurant by a host or a delay in getting a check from their server evaluated *overall* service more negatively than customers who didn’t experience those two specific delays. Maybe this seems like a no-brainer to you, but obviously many restaurants don’t think enough about it, considering how long it often takes someone to seat you or to bring over the bill once you’ve requested it.

Think about it. When a customer’s expectations for your business don’t match reality (e.g., “They are slow when they should be faster, ergo they do not care about me or my time.”), his or her perception is effected, oftentimes permanently. Shoddy business presentation and practices affect how much value a customer places on your brand.

In short, your customers notice “off” stuff—don’t you? They (justifiably) believe that your less-than-stellar details are “business as usual” and therefore an accurate measure of your entire business. Generally, though, you won’t hear that negative feedback because nine out of ten people who have a negative experience with a business don’t mention problems (even on social media); they just never return. Pretty frightening statistic, isn’t it? I doubt that’s the reaction you’re looking for.

So let me try this one out on you. When someone asks what you do for a living, how do you answer? Whatever it is, however you describe it, you’ve probably got it wrong. That’s because you aren’t in the service, food, beverage, beauty, law, accounting, merchandising, retail, hospitality, sales, facilities, entertainment—had enough?—fashion, media, education, technology, or whatever other industry you define as your business. I believe you’re in the *business of customer and employee reactions*. And I have four rules that govern that belief:

1. Everything we do is part of a process, never a result.
2. Every business process, step, or communication must create a positive customer reaction each and every time.
3. That reaction *is* the product.
4. Any business, no matter what it is, lives or dies by the customer reactions it creates.

My overarching philosophy is this: *all* successful business is about creating the right reactions in customers. The way you present yourself and your business, your curb or Web appeal, your logo, where you

put your products or how you place your content, the color of your marketing pieces, price points, dress code—everything you do in your business—creates reactions. The best reactions always make the most money.

I live to create employee and customer reactions. Whether you're in San Francisco, New York, or Exeter, New Hampshire, the product or “vehicle” you use to get a reaction may differ, but the feelings perpetuated by the way you do business are universal.

The theory of reactions is part of cultural anthropology—it's in our DNA. The concept of creating a response is as primal as it gets, a constant that has existed throughout time and across cultures. The leader of an African tribe has the same dynamic set of management skills, confidence, and leadership ability as the head of a corporation in Cleveland. The priest who works hard on his Sunday sermon is not that different from the Saturday night DJ who creates a playlist; after all, they both want to energize and inspire people to keep coming back week after week. Both have to understand pacing: peak too early, people get fatigued and leave; peak too late, people get bored and leave. The delivery of the “message” has to be just right. All thoughtful people achieve their objectives by creating the appropriate reactions.

Likewise, virtually every aspect of your business depends on your customer and staff experience. Everything from the financials to the décor or the look and “vibe” of a bar represent foundations from which you can build an amazing experience-reaction dynamic that translates into money. If any one of these elements steals from a positive customer experience, it robs your business and you of potential (not to mention cash).

As soon as you start to see your business as a reaction-making machine, you begin to make decisions very differently. Think of it this way: A chef isn't preparing an entrée; he is, in fact, preparing a guest reaction. The entrée is the vehicle, not the product. *The product is the customer reaction.* When that plate hits the table, one of two things will happen: (1) the guest *reacts* by sitting up and taking notice, or (2) the guest does *not* react. If nothing happens, that restaurant or bar is “stuck.”

If a restaurant customer doesn't stop talking to her companion and notice the food when it arrives at the table, the establishment is in trouble, or soon will be if the chef doesn't redesign the look of the food on the plate to get a sit-up-and-take-notice customer reaction. I will see that the plate is redesigned five hundred times if necessary—as long as it takes to get it right and get a reaction when it is presented to a guest. Customers either notice you in a positive way or they don't. *And you can control those reactions to a very large degree.* It works whether you're running a storefront operation or a Web-based company, manufacturing widgets or providing a service. In fact, I'm so passionate about this concept, I invented and own the term Reaction Management.

## **Your One Must-Have: Positive Reactions**

The connection between reactions and revenue is often overlooked by hospitality and management schools. There are five “musts” every business professor teaches: an establishment *must* be convenient, clean, offer quality service, offer a great value, and be safe. That's all true, but these “musts” are a beginning, not an end point. Achieving them are where customer reactions come in. If all you need are these five basic elements to create a winner, then why do people park ten blocks away from a hot nightclub, step over puddles in its bathroom, squeeze into tiny corner tables, accept rushed service, pay three times more for a drink than the place next door, and walk through a dark parking lot in the middle of the night to get back to their car? How can a spot be so popular if it violates all five “musts”?

A “hit” is transcendent—it offers patrons an experience that produces a powerful, emotionally satisfying reaction. Successful reactions are not about logic; they're about emotions. When you hit a customer's emotions, you reach the Promised Land. That's what this book is about—sound business management may be straightforward and logical, but connecting with people isn't. Don't let the logistics overtake the human touch in your business.

To prove my point, indulge me while I take you on a short trip back in time—to 1983, when hair was big

and shoulder pads were broad. I was running a new and now legendary dance club called Pulsations in Glen Mills, a suburb of Philadelphia. The concept for the club was a bigger-than-life, high-tech light and music experience. The excitement started before you even got inside. A large neon sign and mirrored building and doorway were the first indications that you were in for something special. There were weekends when people started lining up in the morning just to be the first inside when the doors opened in the evening. It wasn't unusual for the line to stretch around the building and into our rear parking lot.

Once inside, club-goers experienced heavy-duty sensory overload: we offered eleven different levels, bars that moved around the main room, a well-stocked gift shop, an extensive snack bar, a VIP room, and an Alternative Music Room (the "A" Room). Choreographed dance shows performed by pros were highly anticipated nightly events. Pulsations also had one of the most spectacular lighting and sound systems in the world, designed by Richard Long and Associates (now Gary Stewart Audio), the same designers who worked on the Paradise Garage and Studio 54 in New York City.

The club's main attraction, and the one I am proudest of, was a robot named Pulsar (Pulsar was leased for use in *Rocky IV*). At midnight, this \$400,000 technological wonder would descend from the ceiling in a twenty-two-foot spaceship, *Genesis I*, to flirt and dance with a random female patron. There are only two times I have cried at work, and the first was when I saw Pulsar make his debut on the dance floor of Pulsations. (You can still catch primitive video of Pulsar doing his thing on YouTube; it made an indelible mark on the scores of people who loved the club.) Pulsar reminded me of the reason I got into the hospitality business: to evoke great emotional responses. Making people smile is a pretty cool way to make a living, wouldn't you agree?

Did it matter that people had to stand in line for hours to get in? No. Were there complaints on Sunday Teen Nights about the watered-down sodas? Never. Was anyone concerned that they couldn't hear themselves think let alone have a conversation because the music was so loud? No. Were people disturbed that the main dance floor was packed with twenty-five hundred people and the Alternative Music Room, intended for twenty people at a time, was generally jammed with two hundred—some of them literally bouncing off the upholstered black walls? Not a bit. Could the bathroom floors have been a little cleaner on a busy Saturday night? Probably. Did anyone care that they weren't? Nope.

Pulsations probably broke the five "musts" on a nightly basis. And yet it was the hottest, most talked about club in the Northeast at the time. People would drive three hours from New York City, which had plenty of hot nightclubs in the 1980s, to experience the fun and excitement Pulsations provided. It created some of the most amazing reactions in customers that I have ever been a part of. The club lasted and thrived for fifteen years—longer than Studio 54 or any of its other world-class peers. (When new owners took over, the disco era was ending, and they tried to update the place by bringing in exotic dancers—a tragically misguided effort that failed. We'll talk more about missteps like that in chapter nine.)

Like many businesses, bars and restaurants aren't always logical, but they're always emotional. There is a science to Reaction Management, but you're always appealing to people on a visceral level. Patrons of hot bars are getting something over and above convenience, cleanliness, quality, price, or safety. They're getting something exciting, enthralling, and fun. Of course it all starts with the ambience, the music, the décor, and the look and behavior of the staff—a lot of tangibles that, taken together, create an intangible feeling, the heady heyday of Pulsations being a case in point. The important thing to understand is that if you aren't creating great customer reactions, it doesn't matter how clean and convenient your place is—it's going to be a snore. However, if you don't have those basic five "musts" *and* you're losing revenue, well, you better clean up your act.

## Users Review

### From reader reviews:

**Mary Logsdon:**

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**Carl Adams:**

Spent a free the perfect time to be fun activity to do! A lot of people spent their sparetime with their family, or their friends. Usually they undertaking activity like watching television, gonna beach, or picnic in the park. They actually doing same task every week. Do you feel it? Would you like to something different to fill your current free time/ holiday? Might be reading a book can be option to fill your cost-free time/ holiday. The first thing that you will ask may be what kinds of book that you should read. If you want to attempt look for book, may be the guide untitled Raise the Bar: An Action-Based Method for Maximum Customer Reactions can be very good book to read. May be it is usually best activity to you.

**Farah McCune:**

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