



Driven to Delight

Delivering World-Class
Customer Experience
the Mercedes-Benz Way

Joseph A. Michelli

#1 New York Times bestselling author



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hicles but it must also represent the people behind them. Given to delight. it is not just a phrase. it is a path, a promise, belief. it is a commitment to creating positive relationships. making people smile and to leaving them with a sense of complete trust. driven to delight means exceptional personal treatment. it is a reminder that the journey is never done. that there is always a more thoughtful way. and throughout each



A customer is the most important visitor on our premises.

He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He

is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of

it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it.

We are not doing him a favor by serving him. He is doing

us a favor by giving us an opportunity to do so.

—Mahatma Gandhi

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Introduction



Customers crave consistently outstanding experiences and expect businesses to deliver them. When companies provide exceptional experiences, customers become loyal advocates for their brands.

This is the story of leaders at a legendary company who realized that the sales and service interactions their customers were having weren't in keeping with the quality that was engineered into the company's products. It is a story of transformation and what it takes to move a legacy brand in the direction of true customer obsession. It is the story of an audacious vision, a seismic culture shift,

driven to delight means exceptional personal treatment. it is a reminder that the journey is never done. that there is always a more thoughtful way. and throughout each interaction we must remember that *the best or nothing* cannot just be a description

sustained sales growth, and measurable/award-winning customer experience improvements. Most important, this is your guide to help you drive delight throughout your organization and to your customers.

Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz were founders of the company we know today as Daimler AG. Daimler is one of the largest producers of premium cars and is the global leader in commercial vehicle production. Its divisions include Mercedes-Benz Cars, Daimler Trucks, Mercedes-Benz Vans, Daimler Buses, and Daimler Financial Services. From his company's inception in 1886, co-founder Gottlieb Daimler promised that the company's vehicles would be "the best or nothing."

For well over a century, Daimler products have lived up to Gottlieb's preeminent quality promise. This has been accomplished largely through an unyielding commitment to engineering excellence along with a passion for safety and innovation. In fact, Karl Benz invented the automobile itself (Benz "Patent Motorwagen") and invented the first commercial vehicle. Since then, Daimler vehicles have contributed to breakthroughs well beyond the internal combustion engine. A few of the areas in which Daimler has either introduced or advanced technological innovation include the development of the first drop chassis, building the first diesel-powered passenger car, the creation of direct fuel injection, the introduction of the first generation of the antilock braking system, the development of air bags, the creation of an electronic stability program, Active Lane Keeping Assist enhancements, and most recently, autonomous driving. In fact, in 2015, Daimler's Mercedes-Benz brand was named the most innovative premium brand of the last decade after a comprehensive review by the Center of Automotive Management and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Accolades for Mercedes-Benz products extend to the brand's commercial line as well, with the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter earning three consecutive Vincentric Best Fleet Value in America awards

and the 2015 Mercedes-Benz Sprinter receiving ALG's Best Residual Value recognition.

But in 2011, despite the company's innovative engineering, the organization was facing a challenge in the United States. Customer studies conducted by outside research firms validated what leaders inside the company were already recognizing: the dealership experience of Mercedes-Benz customers was falling far short of being "the best."

As the problems with the customer experience were becoming more apparent, the senior leadership at Mercedes-Benz USA (MBUSA) was also changing. On January 1, 2012, Stephen Cannon moved from vice president marketing for Mercedes-Benz USA to president and CEO. From the onset, Steve gave priority to the Mercedes-Benz sales and service experience. As he explains, "In the first 60 days, I sat down with people in every department to identify our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. What crystallized to me from those conversations was that we had an extraordinary opportunity to improve the experience customers encountered when they purchased or received service on their vehicles. As a leadership team, we believed that an investment in this area would result in a disproportionate return."

In order to generate that level of return on investment, leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA had to overcome two rather large obstacles: (1) an existing and dominant product-centric culture and (2) limited ability to exert control over the experiences delivered by their more than 370 independently owned and operated dealer partners.

It has been said that a company's greatest strengths are often its greatest weaknesses. From the perspective of Daimler, engineering excellence, safety, and innovation were the foundation that had led to a very product-focused mindset. Many Mercedes-Benz dealers in the United States (many of whom had been in business for decades) relied heavily on product quality to build customer loyalty

and hadn't addressed the overall experience of customers in their dealerships. Because Mercedes-Benz had such a strong product focus, new competitors entering the marketplace added value to their products by creating a better dealership experience.

Peter Collins, retired area manager for MBUSA and current general manager of the Mercedes-Benz dealership in Alexandria, Virginia, puts it this way, "When I started with the brand in 1984, there was no Lexus. There was no Infiniti. There was no Acura. Heck, there wasn't even the Internet. Truthfully, whatever Daimler sent us, we sold. That was the luxury market. That clearly was an era where you were privileged to get a Mercedes-Benz. However, as the age of consumerism, competition, and technology advanced at warp speed, we became vulnerable if all we offered was a great product."

Mercedes-Benz of Virginia Beach service manager Pat Evans highlights changing consumer attitudes as a risk factor encountered by the Mercedes-Benz brand over the last several years. "I've been with Mercedes for 30 years. In the 1980s and early 1990s, we were selling 50,000 to 60,000 cars a year, and our customers were so in love with our product, it didn't matter what happened to it. Just fix it and get me my car back. Now we're selling 400,000. There's a clientele buying our product who simply don't want the cars any longer if there is even the slightest problem, and that includes a simple rattle or squeak. Mercedes-Benz leadership is faced with positioning the brand in a changing consumer marketplace. Newer customers—especially those who haven't been committed to the product for 5 to 10 years—not only want the best cars in the world, but they also want the best reliability and the best consumer experience in the world, too."

When Lexus entered the luxury automotive marketplace in the United States in the late 1980s, the Lexus USA newsroom website signaled how that brand was going to differentiate itself based on the desired experience of customers: "A single consumer

complaint launches a special service campaign, earning the brand recognition as the new standard in personalized service.” The site added that in 1990, “Out of thousands of parties interested in a Lexus franchise, only 121 top-notch dealers are selected for Lexus’ first year of business.” Those dealers were required, among other things, to agree not only to comply with strict and enriched dealership design guidelines but to behave in accordance with a “covenant” that includes the statement “Lexus will treat each customer as we would a guest in our home.”

Rather than designing an optimal customer experience from the outset and selecting distribution partners who were contractually obligated to deliver that experience (the foundation of the Lexus brand), Mercedes-Benz USA, under Steve Cannon’s new leadership, faced the challenge of transforming the mindset and behavior of longstanding dealers beyond an established product-centric perspective entrenched through generations of dealer ownership.

Exemplifying the types of negative experiences occurring in U.S. Mercedes-Benz dealerships, one customer shared, “I used to get the impression that I should feel grateful that I was allowed to purchase their product.” By contrast, the best Mercedes-Benz dealerships were producing extraordinary and memorable customer experiences commensurate with the quality of the vehicles sold. Therein lay the problem. The Mercedes-Benz retail/dealership experience was uneven and lacked a well-defined objective with attendant accountability. A customer could go into one dealership and have an unsatisfactory experience, then drive a short distance and be treated in an extremely positive and memorable way. Fran O’Hagan, CEO of Pied Piper Management, also characterized the overall Mercedes-Benz experience as detached and lacking warmth: “In 2007, visiting a Mercedes dealership was like visiting a museum. Salespeople were friendly and answered questions, but they did not take the next step of actually selling the car. They

stopped short of saying, ‘I know you want to buy a car, and I want to work with you on figuring out how to make that happen.’”

Mixed results from independent consumer satisfaction research also highlighted the disengagement and variability of the Mercedes-Benz dealership experience. For example, the research group Pied Piper (which utilizes a mystery shopper strategy) placed Mercedes-Benz at the top of the luxury automobile category for the experiences it provided in 2010 and 2011, while J.D. Power (which measures the satisfaction of customers with the sales and service functions at dealerships) placed Mercedes-Benz in the middle to lower segment of luxury automakers.

Against this backdrop of increasing customer expectations, variable consumer experiences, and competitors that provided high-quality customer sales and service interactions, the leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA set out to foster new systemwide competencies to look at the entire business from the customer’s perspective. Their goal became to map the customer journey, solicit customer feedback, rapidly resolve customer issues, and deliver emotionally engaging experiences “Driven to Delight” customers.

To make their challenge more complex, leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA knew that they would have to not only change the attitudes and behaviors of their own employees but also affect similar changes across the more than 370 authorized Mercedes-Benz dealerships nationwide. Additionally, to ensure a seamless and integrated experience through the financing and payment stage of a vehicle lease or purchase, MBUSA would also need to work in collaboration with its sister company, Mercedes-Benz Financial Services (MBFS). While approximately 1,700 corporate staff members receive their paychecks from Mercedes-Benz USA, the employees of dealerships (small, medium, and large independent enterprises) and Mercedes-Benz Financial Services staff total more than 29,000 (1,100 at MBFS and 28,000+ at dealerships). In essence, if the customer experience at Mercedes-Benz was going to

be transformed perceptibly, the leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA would have to both collaborate with Mercedes-Benz Financial Services and *influence* the way the owners and managers of dealerships ultimately leveraged people, processes, and technology to fully satisfy and engage Mercedes-Benz sales prospects, buyers, and owners.

As if shifting from a product-dominant to a customer-obsessed strategy (dependent largely on employees who do not report to you) wasn't a sufficient stretch goal, president and CEO Steve Cannon and his team at Mercedes-Benz USA decided to set the bar even higher. Rather than defining "best" to mean becoming the premier customer experience provider in the luxury automotive category or even becoming the best customer experience provider across all car manufacturers (luxury and mass market), Steve notes, "Our priority was to become the global leader across all brands in customer service and in customer experience." In essence, Steve and his leadership team set out to rival other businesses about which I have had the good fortune of writing—companies like The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Zappos, and Starbucks. In contrast to Mercedes-Benz, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company is perennially known not only for its product excellence (outstanding hotels, spas, resorts, and residential living facilities) but also for the consistently elevated customer experiences that it provides.

Driven to Delight was written to address how Mercedes-Benz leaders sought to make the company an experience provider that was on a par with—if not better than—other iconic service brands. To that end, this book has two principal objectives. The first is to give you an exclusive view inside the strategic vision, tactical planning, victories, and setbacks along a multiyear journey at Mercedes-Benz USA. In addition, this book offers a road map that you can use to steer your team and your business toward a customer-obsessed culture and a provider of innovative customer experiences.

Before we analyze how Mercedes-Benz USA's leaders went about addressing the primary focus of Steve Cannon's visionary

customer experience objective and before I offer tools for you to use to elevate your customer experience, let's first take a look at the foundation of excellence that served to underpin Mercedes-Benz USA's customer experience journey.

A World-Class Product and a Legendary Marketing Brand

World-class products produce throngs of raving fans! Along my journey with Mercedes-Benz, I have encountered countless zealots who talk about the brand image, safety, and product quality. Here are but a few of their voices:

Mercedes-Benz owner Lawrence Jakobi notes, "I fell in love with the car. It was an emotional buy. I made the mistake of test driving it. I had to have it. I was told when I was test driving, I had a smile on my face."

Mike Figliuolo, managing director of THOUGHTleaders, LLC, shares, "I've owned my car since 2005. I'm sitting here looking at it sitting outside my window. I repainted [it] this past year, and I still love it, even with 170,000 miles on it."

Mercedes-Benz owner Steve H. states, "I have a 2009 C300. It's my first real luxury car. When I think of Mercedes, I think of luxury comfort. Just driving a Mercedes feels like an accomplishment and makes me feel more confident. When I first got the car, it was one of the more exciting moments of my life."

Susan Jennings notes, "I wanted a vehicle that was safe for my family. Mercedes-Benz provides me with peace of mind,

roominess, and the extremes of comfort. I took a lot of time to research the car that would best meet our needs, and our ML350 has exceeded every expectation.”

Mercedes-Benz owner John R. Modric, a professional pianist, states, “Driving a Mercedes is like playing Mozart with the sophistication of Bach.”

Not only by the accounts of owners but by virtually every U.S.-based and global metric, Mercedes-Benz is recognized as one of the most powerful companies in the world when it comes to brand awareness, marketing, and product quality. For example, in 2014, Interbrand (the world’s largest brand consultancy group) placed Mercedes-Benz tenth among the top 100 of “the world’s most valuable brands” based on the company’s longstanding excellence in performance, styling, and engineering. Interbrand has also noted that Mercedes-Benz has achieved the number one luxury manufacturer position in the United States and Germany as well as cultivating strong popularity in Russia and China through a balance of traditional and forward-looking styling. Interbrand suggests that the future brand strength of Mercedes-Benz hinges on “its 2020 growth initiative focused on building the best customer experience,” along with a new product lineup geared toward future generations of Mercedes-Benz buyers. Similarly, Harris’s 2014 EquiTrend Automotive Scorecard of consumer sentiment placed Mercedes-Benz as the lead luxury auto brand. Reflecting on the EquiTrend Scorecard, Nielsen’s automotive solutions consultant Mike Chadsey suggests that in the “brutal” competition of the sector, “As the luxury category reaches feature, performance, and style parity, brands that fail to create connections and affinity with target customers will be left behind.”

Mercedes-Benz’s appeal transcends the European and North American markets, representing a truly global phenomenon. In

2013, the editors of *Forbes* magazine ranked Mercedes-Benz as the World's 16th Most Powerful Brand. In a 2013 study conducted by research firms Brand Equity and Nielsen, Mercedes-Benz was viewed as India's ninth "most exciting brand" across all industries and the number one automotive brand in India. In November 2013, the Mercedes-Benz S-Class was named the car of the year in China. Additionally, Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev gave Mercedes-Benz vehicles to each of his country's Olympic medalists during the 2014 games.

While the Mercedes-Benz brand is powerful around the globe, its leaders in each region of the world face different challenges. For example, in 2015, Daimler CEO Dieter Zetsche told the *Wall Street Journal* that in China, sales growth was a primary focus, "The more we catch up in China, the faster we will be No. 1 [globally]." To that end, Zetsche notes that in China, "We have increased our dealer body. We've added 100 dealer[s . . .] last year."

For the purpose of this book, the challenges addressed by Mercedes-Benz will be limited to the customer experience and culture decisions made by leaders in the United States. However, while the content of the book focuses on actions designed to affect U.S. customers, clearly this transformational process has an impact and relevance globally. As you will see later in the book, progress made on customer-centricity in the U.S. market is contributing to customer-centric improvements at Mercedes-Benz worldwide. Conversely, global advances in customer experience at other Mercedes-Benz locations have reciprocal benefits in the U.S. market.

Prior to Steve Cannon's ascent to president and CEO at Mercedes-Benz USA, the brand's accolades and written recognition centered on marketing, engineering, and innovation. *Driven to Delight* is the first book to suggest that any of the Mercedes-Benz regional leadership teams should be held out as worthy of emulation in the area of design and execution of the customer experience.

Mercedes-Benz USA—Seizing a Window of Opportunity for Customer Experience Excellence

The strength of the global Mercedes-Benz brand, coupled with a variety of favorable economic and situational factors, has allowed Steve Cannon and his leadership team to actively pursue their desired customer experience transformation goals. As Steve puts it, “Our leadership team benefited greatly from a number of quality, environmental design, and employee engagement strategies deployed prior to my positioning as CEO.”

In 1998, Mercedes-Benz’s parent company, Daimler-Benz AG, merged with the Chrysler Corporation. In an article for *CNN Money* around the time of the merger, Jürgen Schrempp, then chairman of Daimler-Benz, noted, “Today we are creating the world’s leading automotive company for the 21st century. We are combining the two most innovative car companies in the world.” Despite these aspirations, the merger of Daimler and Chrysler was dissolved nine years later. In a 2008 *Automotive News* article, Dieter Zetsche, the Daimler-Benz CEO who replaced Jürgen Schrempp, noted, “We couldn’t actually achieve global integration because it was at odds with the image of our brands, the preferences of our customers, and many other success factors—all of which were far more diverse and fragmented.”

After the failed merger, in 2005–2006, Mercedes-Benz leaders worldwide were given the task of addressing a series of product quality issues. Coming off of those quality challenges, leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA identified workplace morale as a significant business need and set out to elevate the engagement level of employees at the corporate office. As Hendrik “Harry” Hynekamp, general manager customer experience at Mercedes-Benz USA, notes, “After 2005, leaders championed the importance of all

Mercedes-Benz managers driving employee engagement in their departments. It was through those efforts that Mercedes-Benz USA was the first and only automaker to make *Fortune* magazine's *100 Best Companies to Work For* list in 2010 at position #49. This emphasis on employee engagement continues at Mercedes-Benz USA, and the brand has made the *Fortune* list regularly since 2010, ranking as high as the 12th position. In addition, we are consistently the only original equipment manufacturer (OEM) on the list." These accomplishments suggest a sustained emphasis on the importance of providing a dynamic and purposeful experience for MBUSA employees. The same steadfast leadership that resulted in these enviable employee-centered recognitions served as the foundation for achieving the lofty customer experience goals outlined in this book. Leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA are committed to providing a work environment for their people that allows them to serve the dealership community so that those dealers can, in turn, serve Mercedes-Benz customers and prospective customers.

In addition to a highly engaged MBUSA workforce, Steve and his leadership team inherited a network of more than 370 dealers, who recently invested in a substantial upgrade to the look and feel of their dealerships. In 2010, the leaders at Mercedes-Benz USA began construction of a 333,000-square-foot flagship dealership on Eleventh Avenue in Manhattan. The design of that facility, referred to as "Autohaus," became the style standard for all other Mercedes-Benz dealerships throughout the United States. Writing in 2011 for the *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, Jonathan Michaels, a lawyer who specializes in the automotive industry, explains the rationale and substantial investment involved in transforming Mercedes-Benz dealerships in the United States to the new Autohaus standard: "The point of all of this is to create a uniform look among a sprawling dealer base and give their product brand identity. In years past, manufacturers only required dealers to use conforming trademarks and proper signage, but those days are long

gone. Automakers now have complete design plans, and regulate which architects and vendors must be used and what type of furniture may be bought.” According to Jonathan, “The cost of construction is borne almost entirely by the dealers and the costs are staggering. . . . To be fair, manufacturers do contribute to the cost of construction by providing incentives to dealers who participate in the programs. Mercedes pays its Autohaus dealers \$400 per car sold over a three year period.” To affect this enhanced consistency in brand presentation across the physical environment of Mercedes-Benz dealerships, Mercedes-Benz USA invested approximately \$230 million in partnership with the \$1.4 billion investment of its dealers.

The Autohaus transformation of U.S. dealerships was well under way by the time Steve Cannon took the reins at Mercedes-Benz USA. This consistent facility design allowed Steve and his leadership team to focus on the service experiences inside those dealerships. The focus of those experiences needed to be worthy of Mercedes-Benz automobiles and the environments in which they were sold and serviced.

An additional foundational component that enabled Steve and other leaders at MBUSA to set a bold customer experience agenda was strong overall new car sales. As Steve assumed responsibility for the company, year-end new car sales for Mercedes-Benz USA were up 13 percent from the prior year, with sales of 245,231 units. Since dealerships were thriving, the leaders at MBUSA could challenge the dealer network to co-create a differentiated, exemplary branded sales and service experience that would set the standard within the automotive sector and beyond.

Finally, Steve and his team had the benefit of a fresh customer service training program that had been rolled out in the dealer community the September before Steve made the transition from vice president of marketing to president and CEO. That program, titled Driven to LEAD (LEAD is an acronym for Lis-

ten, Empathize, Add value, and Delight), emerged from three MBUSA general managers—Frank Diertl, Harry Hynekamp, and Niles Barlow, colloquially referred to as the “three amigos.” Frank had seen Lior Arussy, president of Strativity, speak at an outside function on the topic of creating customer-centric cultures. Subsequently, Frank, Harry, and Niles met with Lior to explore the possibility of developing a training program on customer experience at Mercedes-Benz USA. Lior recounts, “Frank was basically raising the case that Mercedes-Benz vehicles are excellent, but the customer experience was not. In Frank’s words, ‘We’re not as great as we think we are.’ Frank shared with me some of their efforts to improve customer satisfaction in the past. From that discussion, it was clear that Mercedes-Benz USA needed a different approach in order to build an awareness of the customer experience problem and create a sustainable solution through culture. Frank, Harry, and Niles managed to forge a budget for the training, and literally we charted the first full day of the Driven to LEAD program on the back of a cocktail napkin.” Driven to LEAD (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2) was launched in September 2011 and was Mercedes-Benz USA’s first intense foray into raising awareness of the need for change in customer service delivery and identifying quick-fix opportunities to improve the dealership experience.

The chapters that follow track the evolution of Mercedes-Benz USA’s strategic and tactical approaches to customer experience excellence. They examine the creation of a mission statement declaring that Mercedes-Benz USA aspires to be the “premier customer care brand in the world.” The title of this book is based on the internal vision statement through which corporate employees and dealership staff are encouraged to lead all those they serve to be “Driven to Delight”—suppliers, team members, and customers.

Shortly you will encounter the early visioning process for this ambitious “Driven to Delight” culture shift and learn how

Mercedes-Benz USA benchmarked the brands that provided the best global customer experience. You will understand the key strategic targets identified by the leadership team and how the team measured the voice of the customer, both internally and through outside sources. You will read about a wide range of operational and cultural initiatives that were undertaken and promulgated within the dealer network. You will also see the measurable successes and challenges that occurred, as the transformation had to be achieved by influencing the staff at MBUSA, Mercedes-Benz Financial Services, vendors, and the leadership and frontline staff at dealerships.

Before you launch into your journey with Mercedes-Benz USA and gain lessons for your customer experience elevation journey, let's hear how a commitment to customer obsession affects Mercedes-Benz prospects and owners. Beyond the slogan, the vision, and the strategies that follow, *Driven to Delight* becomes real in the lives and stories of customers like these:

Cheryl Birnbaum: “I am a social worker by trade, and what I do for my job is take care of people. It is really important when you find someone who takes really good care of you to pass that along. Tom is the salesperson from White Plains Mercedes that I lease my car from, and it was not six weeks later—I didn't have a thousand miles on the car—that I picked up the phone in my car and I said, ‘You won't believe this. I just had a horrible accident, and I don't know what to do.’ Tom said, ‘I am going to take good care of you; don't worry about it.’ He walked me through calling the insurance company. He walked me through every step of what I needed to do and really made me feel taken care of. It was outstanding.”

John L. Alper: “It was November of 2011. I got diagnosed with lymphoma (B cell non-Hodgkin's lymphoma). We go

into the dealership and people start coming up to me. They gave me this card that is signed by everybody in the dealership: ‘We are with you.’ ‘We support you.’ ‘God bless you.’ We did not know what to think. It was unbelievable. These guys are for real. It is not just about fixing your car. They are interested in you.”

A customer whose Mercedes-Benz limousine sustained substantial damage in 2012 from Hurricane Sandy: “For two months we had very hard days. For two months I didn’t smile because I needed to work. I needed my car to work. Mercedes got us back on our feet, as we were really experiencing a hardship. Thank God for my Mercedes-Benz dealership! You helped me. You brought me back to my life. You helped me start back to work to support my family.”

To see these customers share their stories, please visit www.driventodelight.com/customerstories.

Most of us aren’t content with our customers being simply satisfied. We want to hear our customers sharing stories like the ones given here. We know that those stories are the foundation of customer loyalty and referrals. Given the importance of having “delighted” and emotionally engaged customers, let’s accelerate into an exploration of what Mercedes-Benz USA has done to consistently transform the way each person representing the brand is Driven to Delight.

