

Silencing the terror cells

I'm writing this aboard JetBlue flight 63. Didn't intend to write a column today. I'd planned by now to be halfway through John Grisham's latest legal thriller, *The King of Torts*. It was not to be.

Arriving at JFK an hour before departure, I checked in, went to the gate, took a seat and opened my book.

I was on page one when a middle-aged man plopped down next to me, whipped out his cell phone, and started talking loudly. VERY loudly.

"Hi. Huh? At the gate. You wouldn't believe it. At security, they opened my bag, rummaged through, pulled my nose hair scissors out and asked what they were. I said, 'nose hair scissors'..."

Unable to concentrate I moved, choosing a seat opposite an overtanned brunette traveling with a Yorkie in a doggie carrier.

No sooner had I opened my book than she took out her phone, dialed and started screaming into the mouthpiece. Imagine the voice of Joan Rivers here.

"Where were we? Oh yeah, I got it at Nordstrom's. Harvey says it makes me look as skinny as... what the hell is her name? You know, the one on 'The Practice' who used to date Jack Nicholson? Oh yeah, that's right"

I moved again, this time directly behind a teenager whose phone rang before I could get to page two.

I decided to visit the men's room. A wacko stepped up to the urinal beside me, talking to himself. "Yep, Pfizer's been up and down all week but right now from where I'm standing it's looking good."

Pfizer, it occurred to me, was a strange nickname for what he was holding. Zipping up, I noticed he was wearing one of those hands-free cell phones with an earpiece and microphone on a string.

The waiting area was nearly full by now. I took one of the remaining seats, next to a man wearing a Yankees hat. His phone rang within a minute and he started talking golf.

In self-defense, I began reading aloud, under my breath, to drown him out. That's when inspiration struck. Why not read as loudly as he was talking to see if he would take notice and shut up?

So I did. "CHAPTER 1. THE SHOTS THAT FIRED THE BULLETS THAT ENTERED PUMPKIN'S HEAD WERE HEARD BY NO LESS THAN EIGHT PEOPLE."

The man turned away, and continued talking. I kept reading. "THREE INSTINCTIVELY CLOSED THEIR WINDOWS..."

A 50-something blonde sitting opposite me put down her *New York Post* to watch. Next to her a Kathy Bates look-alike in a black running suit was screaming into her cell phone.

Flashing me a grin, the blonde started reading from her *Post* loudly, attracting the attention of our fellow travelers. "DEMI MOORE'S NEW BOY TOY, ASHTON KUTCHER, THE KING OF YOUNG HOLLYWOOD..."

Kathy Bates put her hand over the receiver and turned to the blonde angrily. "Do you mind? I'm trying to have a conva-say-shun heah."

The guy next to me got up and walked away. Ignoring Kathy Bates, the blonde continued. "...IS LIKENING HIMSELF AND HIS BUDDIES TO FRANK SINATRA'S RAT PACK..."

"Stop it!" Kathy roared.

Ratcheting her voice up a few decibels, the blonde kept at it. "...WITH KUTCHER'S FRIEND P. DIDDY AS CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD."

"I've gotta move!" Kathy yelled into her phone, undoubtedly puncturing the eardrum of the unfortunate soul to whom she was speaking. "I'm sitting next to a crazy woman!"

She jumped up and, yakking away, ran out of the gate area. The blonde winked at me. Several people clapped.

A voice over the PA announced, "In a few minutes we'll begin boarding Flight 63 from the rear of the aircraft, so if you'll look at your boarding pass..."

I think I started something here.

Next time you're in the checkout line at Stop & Shop and the person behind you is yelling into a cell phone, pick up the *National Enquirer* and start reading it loudly. If it happens in a doctor's waiting room, read *National Geographic*. On the train, read something nonsensical from the *Times* like Maureen Dowd's column.

They'll either shut up or disappear. Trust me on this.

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DOUBTING THOMAS

by Thomas Dryden



Jack Mitchell of Wilton is the chief executive officer of Mitchells in Westport and Richards in Greenwich. His first book, *Hug Your Customers - The Proven Way to Personalize Sales and Achieve Astounding Results* is drawing rave reviews from around the country. —Bryan Haeffele photos

JACK MITCHELL

Embracing family, business, customers with great passion

by DEVIN COMISKEY

Jack Mitchell of Wilton has always wanted to write a book about his family business. He likes to share and tell stories, and enjoys public speaking. He loves to learn new things, is an athlete at heart, and he also loves games.

"This was a whole new game for me. I like to call it the 'game of book,'" he said in a recent interview. "And I wanted to play it well."

Judging by the quick success of his first book, *Hug Your Customers - The Proven Way to Personalize Sales and Achieve Astounding Results*, he's done just that. He said he is thrilled about all of the positive feedback he's received.

"I've been getting calls and e-mail from people all around the country. Lots of people are buying bulk copies as well," he said as he pointed to a stack of nearly 20 boxes in his office full of books he was planning to sign.

In the two months since his book was published, one would think an appearance on the Today

show, numerous book signings, including one in Rockefeller Center, public speaking engagements on Wall Street and at Conde Nast headquarters and rave book reviews across the country would make the 64-year-old chief executive officer of Mitchells in Westport and Richards in Greenwich an untouchable business icon.

Not so. In fact, you're more than likely to bump into him doing what he's always done with a smile: running around one of his stores with a tape measure hanging around his neck, giving "hugs" to both new and longtime customers.

It all started a few years ago when Mr. Mitchell was invited to attend a Fairchild Publications conference in Carefree, Ariz., as a panelist. He discovered his positive approach to selling and customer service practices were vastly different than those of his peers in the retail apparel industry. "And that's when it became crystal clear in my mind. Everyone didn't do what we did, and what we did was hug our customers," he wrote.

A year later, he was asked to be the keynote speaker of the conference and decided to call his speech "Hug Your Customers." That speech See Mitchell on page 5C



Mitchell: Embracing family, business, customers with great passion

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led to a conversation with the CEO of Simon and Schuster, Jack Romanos, also of Wilton. He was told by Mr. Romanos: "Come in when you're ready" to write a book. He later signed on with Sonny Kleinfeld to work as his collaborator and proceeded to spend roughly a year working on the book.

"I enjoyed the entire process a lot," he said. When asked why the book took a year to complete, he said, "I wanted to show everyone that I was still serious about everything — the business, my family and the customers." He said it could have been done more quickly, but not without making sacrifices he wasn't willing to make.

Hug Your Customers is as much a family history as it is critical reading for business owners, executives or employees (or "associates" as Mr. Mitchell prefers to call them instead). While he said no single event triggered his desire to write the book, he does voice some frustration at the absence of plain common sense in the business world, whether it be at a car dealership, a dry cleaner or a bookstore. "My dream is that I can actually make a difference. But this is a difficult mindset to change," he said.

"Let me give you an example of what I mean," he said. "Do you know that not one bookstore has ever asked me what I like to read? I know what I like and what my family likes. I have several grandchildren who enjoy reading books. My point is, none of the bookstores I go into ever takes the time to get to know me. How nice would it be if a store called me up and said 'Hey, Jack, we just got this book in that we feel you might be interested in, or your wife may enjoy.' Just think how many books I would buy for my family every month if just one of them made that effort!"

All about hugging

Mr. Mitchell's customer service philosophy, and driving force behind his family's businesses, is all about "hugging" — "getting everyone on your team to sell with passion so you develop long-term loyal relationships with your customers." As he says in his book. "...we mainly metaphorically hug them by showering them with attention in a way that every business ought to but doesn't." And every member of the Mitchells and Richards teams treats each customer as a guest in their own home. "The stores are like our homes, and the customers are our friends," he said.

One of the themes Mr. Mitchell consistently drives home in his book is "knowing the customer." Everyone at Mitchells and Richards does this by paying attention to customers' needs, tastes, likes and dislikes, as well as going so far as to understand each customer's lifestyle, personality, purchasing history, family background, and work environment. This helps customize each customer's buying experience with the goal of delivering to them exactly what they need or want when they walk into one of the stores.

When asked how difficult it was to extract information from the customer, given the impression that many people in this area may not be very approachable, he said, "We simply break down people's barriers by being ourselves. Believe it or not, it's very easy with the mindset we have in serving our customers."

That mindset began with his parents when they opened the original Ed Mitchell's back in 1958. He writes at length about the lessons they taught him and his siblings growing up tending to the store that still drive the business to this day.

He said everyone at Mitchells and Richards wants to make each and every customer feel special.

To illustrate exactly what he

meant by this, he told a story about his recent interaction with a well-known national news anchor who lives in the area. He approached her as she entered the store a few weeks ago, and told her he would like her to read *Hug Your Customers*, and give him some feedback.

"She told me she didn't do endorsements, but all I wanted to know was what she thought of my book," Mr. Mitchell recalled. "As we talked some more, she noticed a quote from a book display in the store talking about how it's important to know even a customer's dog's name. She said, 'We don't have a dog, Jack.' I asked her, 'Well, what do your kids have as a pet?' She told me they had fish. 'What is the oldest fish's name?' She told me what it was. I promised her if she ever had me on her program, she could test me to see if I could actually remember the funny name."

He got his chance earlier than he thought when her husband and kids showed up at the store a couple of weeks later. "I approached the kids, got down on one knee, looked them in the eyes and asked them how their fish was doing. When I mentioned the fish's name, the kids were stunned."

That's just one way he "hugs" his customers and develops lasting relationships. "Those little things are major!" he said.

The Mitchells' businesses go one step further, however, when it comes to knowing their customers better than anyone could imagine. They employ the use of a customer tracking and sales system that has been continuously developed in-house. With the help of an IBM AS/400 system, sales associates are able to immediately call up data about any given customer. Those little tidbits of information they get from listening to their customers are all recorded in each customer's profile.

Mr. Mitchell demonstrated the system to give an example of just

how much common sense their technology approach is built on, its ease of use, and its value to the business. He called up a retired executive's profile to illustrate the type of information the businesses kept. (He emphasized that every bit of information they have in their database is confidential and that their customers trust them enough to know they will never sell or disclose anyone's information.) Within seconds, the customer's profile appeared on the screen. He had access to the person's address, work history, wife's name and what she preferred to be called, their birth dates, what their children's names are, every item of clothing they've ever purchased, as well as this person's sales rank.

"In just a few seconds, I can find out when was the last time he was in here, what he bought and how much he spent," Mr. Mitchell said. "I also know when it's time to send him a birthday card. And if he doesn't buy his shoes from us, I'll know it and I'll be determined to find out what he likes so that he buys his shoes from us, too."

Sales data for both stores and all associates are available within seconds as well. He refers to this as "knowng the score" in his book. "This helps me gauge how we're doing on a particular day, and also compare it to the same day last year. It also helps me to know who had a big sale in the last hour so I can pat them on the back when I go upstairs to let them know what a great job they did."

Strong area roots

Mr. Mitchell grew up in Westport, while his wife, Linda, and her family grew up in Wilton. The couple first met at Staples High School when it was still a regional high school and were married right after college. They have formed strong bonds together with the town of Wilton ever since.

"I'm so delighted we raised our family in Wilton. It reminds me of

the old Westport," he said. They raised their four sons, Russell, Rob, and fraternal twins Todd and Andrew in Wilton.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell have been involved with a variety of organizations in town. Mr. Mitchell served on the Republican Town Committee for 20 years, serving as its finance chairman for many years, and helped create both the Wilton hockey and soccer associations. Mrs. Mitchell served as chairman of the Board of Education, and was on the school board that selected the current longtime superintendent of schools, Dr. David Clune. Their son Todd was president of the Wilton Volunteer Ambulance Corps.

The family's ties go back even further. Linda Mitchell's family, the Tallmades, owned Tallmadge's Wilton Department Store in the Center. The Mitchells bought the store in 1965 and had to close it in 2001.

"We just love the Wilton community," said Mr. Mitchell. He said the family hasn't been able to be as active in town over the past couple of years due to the demands of their businesses, which included a successful merger with Richards in Greenwich. Mr. Mitchell has been spending more of his time at Richards as the owners are still integrating the two businesses.

For the time being, Mr. Mitchell

will continue to focus on the family business and other duties that have filled his life. He said the idea of the book is to help the business and the brand. "But, I'm still focused on keeping family harmony," he said.

His oldest son, Russell, and nephew, Scott Mitchell, are poised to take over the reins of the family business in the coming years. Both Jack and his brother, Bill Mitchell, are dedicated to leaving the family business in good hands for a third generation and beyond. As he points out in the book, "Having the next generation follow successfully and synergistically is, to my mind, the greatest hug of all and will be the greatest legacy of my business life."

Mr. Mitchell revealed that he would like to teach courses or seminars at any of the area universities or colleges. He currently holds an advisory position at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. He also disclosed that Harvard Business School is doing a case study on the family business, which, he said, was an honor. Another book or two is also a possibility for him.

"But, the goal right now is to be one of the family leaders and have this book be successful. I have a new boss (publisher Hyperion), and I really want to please them."

Family, customers, friends or bosses, Jack Mitchell knows how to hug them all.



Zion's Hill United Methodist Church

Sunday Morning Schedule

9:30 Worship Service

10:30 Fellowship & Coffee Time

Nursery Care Provided 9:30-11:00

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