

## Going the Extra Smile

To save more animals, remember the little things

**Kirt Manecke** wants you to sweat the small stuff.

Manecke, a Michigan-based businessman, is the author of *Smile: Sell More with Amazing Customer Service*, which he describes as a 60-minute crash course to help businesses and nonprofits improve their bottom lines by satisfying their customers. Among other tips, it advises staffers to smile, look customers in the eye, say “please” and “thank you,” listen carefully, and be friendly on the phone.

Simple stuff, perhaps, but Manecke says organizations often overlook such social etiquette in the modern world—and wind up losing customers and donors. “This book is based on the simple premise that good service is good business—that if you treat your customers right, you’ll be rewarded in return,” he writes.

That premise applies to animal shelters and rescues just as surely as it applies to retail outlets, Manecke argues. He points to the tale of two well-known hardware megastore chains: One of them neglected to offer the type of personalized service that its competitor emphasized. After falling behind financially, the lagging firm instituted an employee training program that put the focus back on friendly, knowledgeable customer service—which Manecke says has proven to be a successful strategy for businesses as well as nonprofits. Organizations do well when they know how to engage their customers with open-ended questions (“How can I help you?” rather than “Can I help you?”) and discover their customers’ needs. “I think these little things, they are really the big things,” he says.

He saw that approach work when he (along with his father and a business partner) opened a specialty sporting goods store in Michigan, and he thinks the

straightforward advice in *Smile* can help shelters and rescues replicate that success. “You build a business one customer at a time,” he says. “... It’s just unbelievable what happens when you delight people, because nobody else is doing it. And that has to happen in these shelters.”

Manecke has fond childhood memories of visiting the family apple orchard with his mother and Herman, a basset hound who was “my little buddy.” Today he chairs the Animal Asia Michigan Volunteer Group (which works to end bear bile farming), and donates a portion of proceeds from his book sales to animal welfare causes.

In this edited interview, Manecke discusses *Smile* with *Animal Sheltering* associate editor James Hettinger.

### **Animal Sheltering: Tell me a little about your upbringing and professional background.**

**Kirt Manecke:** I went to Eastern Michigan University, and we started a retail store right after I graduated. I volunteered with the humane society in Auburn Hills, Mich., and I loved it. I’d walk the dogs, and I’d make sure that every single dog got walked, because I didn’t think it was fair if one dog didn’t get walked.

That gave me a little insight into shelters. I would be back in the shelter, bringing a dog in or taking another one out. There’d be people back in the shelter, looking for animals. I’d keep my ears open, and it was usually the same scenario: A couple or a family saying, “Hmm, what do you think?” And usually there was nobody back there to help them, and they’d say, “Well, maybe we should just go home and think about it.” They’d take a step away.

I knew that dog already, because I had just walked it. So I’d say, “Oh, excuse me. Did you want to know anything about



Kirt Manecke, shown with his adopted wirehaired fox terrier Ozzie, says volunteering for a Michigan shelter and opening a retail store gave him insight into the importance of attentive customer service.

Martha?” And they would look at me with their eyes like a kid at Christmas, because they just wanted some information. They’d say, “Oh, do you know anything about Martha? Is she friendly?” and I’d say, “She’s very friendly. Would you like to pet her?” To make a long story short, about 70 percent of the time, from that interaction and engagement, the people that were getting ready to leave without a pet would end up adopting the cat or the dog.

### **What prompted you to write the book?**

Our retail store was a startup, and I knew the only way we were going to survive is if we did every single thing right. We could not afford to lose a customer. So I implemented a six-week training program, and we didn’t allow employees to interact with



# Apply for a Spay/Neuter Grant!

Targeted and free-roaming cat grant applications accepted starting March 1

- 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations, government agencies and tribal authorities eligible
- In Canada, registered charities, government agencies and tribal authorities eligible
- Grants available for Trap-Neuter-Return (Free-Roaming Cats) and Owned Pets (Targeted)

## Wondering if your qualified?

Watch our webinar on High Impact Spay/Neuter Grants!  
[petsmartcharities.org/pro](https://petsmartcharities.org/pro)  

**Supporting Community Cats**  
Join us to learn the latest strategies on TNR  
For more information visit [petsmartcharities.org/pro/learn](https://petsmartcharities.org/pro/learn)



customers until they passed that program, and my book is based on that. Most companies train in the processes—how to use the cash register, things like that—but not the people skills that keep people coming back. So I thought, well, if I can provide nonprofits and for-profits with a quick, easy way to train their employees, and something the employees would read, then it would be profitable, and hopefully down the road I can do some good with some of the funds to help animals.

**There's so much that you're expected to do on your own now—like pumping your own gas. It's not like the old days when they'd come out and wipe your windshield and check your oil. I think a lot of people are longing for that.**

When you offer great customer service, you're going to increase your donations; you're going to increase your revenue. We like to shop somewhere where they have good service. There's a quote: Everybody loves good service, but nobody wants to give it. The people running these companies, a lot of them have never worked on the sales floor. They're very disconnected. It's no different in nonprofits. You might have an executive director who's never really worked in sales or customer service, and they may be running an animal shelter, and it just might not be something they even think about, yet it's crucial to saving thousands of lives in that shelter every year. I'm not blaming anybody. That's just not their area of expertise.

**It struck me reading the book that a lot of what you're saying is common sense.**

Exactly!

**Is that something you think people have lost sight of over the years?**

Yes, I think they really have. There's a statistic that while 80 percent of companies think they're providing superior

service, only 8 percent of their customers agree. With technology, we have become a less face-to-face society. A lot of companies, including nonprofits, are not training people in the people skills that bring people back. We've gotten into this mass merchant mentality, but when it comes right down to it, people want good, personalized, friendly service. People will pay more for it, and the companies that offer it are more profitable. And the nonprofits that do it will raise a lot more money.

I walked into a shelter in Michigan, and frankly I was appalled. There were three employees behind the counter. Nobody said anything to me. I looked for where the dogs were kept, and I finally found it. I went back there—spent 15 minutes back in the shelter. Nobody came up to see if they could help guide me, or asked if I needed any help. I walked out of that shelter, called a friend of mine, and said, “We don't have an animal problem. We have a people problem.”

So I think we can really boost the adoption rates with just simply improving the customer service. It's not the staff's fault. If they haven't been trained, how would they know to do this? If you train them, it gives them the confidence. When you learn the type of things in my book, you gain the confidence to go up to somebody, and you know how to interact.

**Generally, is customer service something that can be taught? You don't have to be a natural-born salesperson, do you?**

Not at all—that's a big myth. I'm more of an introvert, and I've been in sales my whole life. The best types of fundraisers and salespeople [have] a helpful nature. In

my book I talk about my Uncle Gene, who was a professional speaker and sales consultant. When I was 18, I was a little afraid of selling. He said, “Kirt, don't think of it as selling. Think of it as helping somebody buy what they need.” That helped me my whole life, and I think that advice would help animal shelter people feel more com-

fortable about approaching somebody. Don't think of it as you're selling them a pet or pushing something on them. Help them adopt the pet that they need.

You learn these things, and then you go try them the same day, and you come back and say, “Wow, I really made that customer happy, with this skill that I [previously] didn't know how to do, or I answered

the phone properly,” which is another critical piece of information for animal shelters, so if somebody calls, that customer will actually come in. Because when I called a few shelters, they're not answering the phone properly, and you're not anxious to go in there, because you think, “OK, they're not that friendly. They're not delighting me when they answer the phone. Do I really want to go in there?” It makes a huge difference—no different than when you call a for-profit business—when that phone is answered properly.

**What would you like to see shelters do with your book?**

What I would like to see is [to] make this the standard handbook for animal shelters, with the goal of eliminating euthanasia in most cases, and dramatically increasing adoption rates by delighting every customer and guiding them to the right animal. Or animals—maybe they need two. ■

