

Micah Solomon: The Art of Exceptional Customer Experience

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Roger Dooley [00:00:05]:

Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest is a kindred spirit when it comes to customer experience. Micah Solomon is a leading expert in customer service, company culture, hospitality, and, of course, customer experience. He's been named the world's number one customer service turnaround expert by Inc. Magazine. Micah's work has also been by CEOs and founders, ranging from restaurateur Danny Meyer to Steve Wozniak to Herve Humler of the Ritz Carlton company. Humler says, Micah Solomon is my go to expert on exceptional customer service and building a customer focused culture. We've talked about Ritz Carlton's obsession with customer experience here before, so this is high praise indeed.

Roger Dooley [00:00:45]:

Micah is a fellow McGraw Hill author, and his new book is, "Can Your Customer Service Do This? Create an Anticipatory Customer Experience That Builds Loyalty Forever." Welcome to the show, Micah!

Micah Solomon [00:00:56]:

Thank you so much for that introduction. I really appreciate it, Roger, and it's an honor to work with you.

Roger Dooley [00:01:01]:

Well, glad you're here. And likewise. You know, when I got your publicity photo, it had you wearing basically a cheesy Groucho Marx disguise. Now, I've gotten a million publicity photos from authors, but this is the first one that looked anything like that. And at first, I thought, okay, what's going on here? Is this guy a joke or what? But then, in the context of the book itself, it made a little bit more sense. Explain the disguise photo.

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Micah Solomon [00:01:30]:

Well, I'm glad that caught your eye. So, yeah, it's a little bit of a joke. But as I have gotten better known, when I do the current state analysis, part of a customer experience initiative. Boy, that was a lot of words, a lot of syllables. Anyway, my team and I need to check out my clients customer service, and it needs to be in an honest, candid way. So as they start to know me and they start to put photos of me by the valet stand or wherever it is, the bank manager's desk, I need to not look like I actually look here. So an extreme version of that would be Groucho glasses and mustache, which is what I picture in the photo you saw, right.

Roger Dooley [00:02:16]:

That wouldn't be at all suspicious. It reminds me a little bit of reading the book by the New York Times restaurant reviewer who had to do something very similar, especially in such a closed world as New York City restaurants. She had a whole range of disguises, wigs, and everything else that she used. I guess you don't have to be quite that extreme. But still, it's interesting. Michael, why don't more companies do this sort of mystery shopper test, whether it's their call center or their in person experience or something else. At least I assume they don't because I encounter such obvious stuff all the time in dealing with a company, whether it's using their website or interacting with their call center, and say, well, this is horrible. Surely they've known that their executives have ever done this or they've never actually had somebody check it out for them.

Roger Dooley [00:03:00]:

Why do you think that is?

Micah Solomon [00:03:01]:

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Well, I think the second part of what you said is what's true. The executives have a special line so they don't have to go through the queue, and they have special parking, so they don't need to know what a hassle it is for their customers to park. So all of that keeps them from getting an actual external view of what it is like dealing with their customers. As far as the mystery shopping, a lot of companies do some sort of mystery shopping, but it's very checklisted and they ask questions that are very rote, which is good if you want to compare, say, one month to the next. But what we try to do is more find those places that you're talking about where it just really falls through the cracks and then we can get going with it. Because sometimes what we'll find is the language used is very abrupt and not nice with customers. Sometimes, as you said, we'll find the wait times are a challenge. And sometimes it just seems like one hand doesn't know what the other one's doing.

Roger Dooley [00:04:04]:

Yeah, it's unfortunate. And I think sometimes it's that they have an idea that this is a problem. It's just either that they don't know how to fix it or they don't want to spend the money to fix it. Yes, we could reduce wait times in our call center if we had 30% more call center representatives, but, wow, that'd be really expensive. So instead we'll put an annoying voice menu front end on there to slow people down a little. Know, Micah, I think we come from sort of opposite ends of the customer experience spectrum. My focus tends to be on making things as easy and effortless as possible. That's kind of been my mantra.

Roger Dooley [00:04:44]:

So from my point of view, Amazon's customer experience is near perfect. They never delight me. They never surprise me. They never make me feel

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like I'm getting a highly personalized experience other than the ads that they show me from time to time. But at the same time, I am a very loyal customer of theirs. You're looking at kind of the other end of the spectrum, which is going beyond what is say, a satisfactory customer experience and creating what you call an iconic customer experience that is not Amazon, I don't think. Unless maybe they fall into there somehow. But explain what you mean by an iconic customer experience.

Micah Solomon [00:05:25]:

So, yeah, comparing yourself to Amazon, which in one sense we all should do, is a little bit like comparing ourselves to the moon launch. It's a level of experience that we're not going to reach but we should always aspire to. So, I mean, where does Amazon surprise and delight? Well, in the astonishing, incredible shrinking delivery times, right? I mean, my goodness, they actually have a patent. This is true. I don't know if they got it, but they applied for a patent to ship things you want before you even knew you wanted them. So that's what's called anticipatory customer service. Now, what does it mean in real life for Amazon? It means that they pretty much know that Micah needs razor blades. I did shave this way.

Micah Solomon [00:06:11]:

Micah needs razor blades every x number of weeks or months. And so they won't ship them to me, which would be annoying if I hadn't asked for them. They will ship them to the nearest warehouse. So then when I think with my own free will that I'm ordering razor blades on the schedule that I need, they're like, we'll get them to you in an hour because they have them right here. So that's what's called anticipatory customer service. In more of our mere mortal type businesses, anticipatory customer service means delivering on desires that the customer may not have even expressed and

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may not even know that they want or answering questions that they didn't even think to ask. And that's how you get to a level of iconic customer service by and large. Now, I do think that if you're Amazon and you're same price or lower than everyone else, and you're dramatically faster than everyone else, and you have fewer errors than anyone else, then that's a type of iconic service.

Roger Dooley [00:07:19]:

No, I'm glad they meet your criteria for that because I think you're right. They do offer something that's unique because they are so effortless, so easy that they're really a pretty hard act for other companies to follow. Although I think companies could do a better job of at least trying to emulate. Know most of the ideas in your book, Micah. Revolve around your people, particularly your frontline people. Obviously the leadership and managers count. Know you're in Seattle, I'm in Austin. I don't know how it is there today, but finding people in Austin to work those frontline jobs is very difficult.

Roger Dooley [00:07:59]:

We have retail stores, restaurants that can barely operate simply because it's so hard to find people. I don't know if the situation is similar in Seattle, but I've read that around the nation, certainly in many spots, this is the know. How do you cope with this when you're trying know train people and build this really fantastic customer experience, but you're operating at three quarter staff.

Micah Solomon [00:08:29]:

Well, if you actually offered benefits from day one, if they knew you were loyal and you were going to lay them off the next time, the economy goes a

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different way. If you paid them well, I think you'd have people lined up out the door. So it's a challenge with our current structure, which is that frontline people are treated the worst of anyone. When that changes, I think things will improve, but it is a real challenge. So what you want to do is make sure that the people that you have are well suited to the job. And that means they have the potential to provide empathetic customer service. Once you've done that, and there are ways to ensure that. Personality assessments and so forth.

Micah Solomon [00:09:14]:

Once you've done that, then training is extremely important. I do offer very extensive customer service training, both traditional training live in person and also some very customized elearning programs which are, we aspire, even have the production values of masterclass. So they're not like a drop ceiling and someone who's not really comfortable on camera. They are tip top quality. Because the reason is that we want people to know we take this seriously and it's not just an add on. It's not like safety third, customer service fifth, or whatever. The reality is at a lot of companies, but if you just don't have enough people, you can get to chapter, maybe it's eight in my book, the chapter order got moved around a few times. Let me see.

Micah Solomon [00:10:07]:

Hold on, hold on. In the latest version of can your customer service do this? It is chapter seven technology. So you can use technology to build an anticipatory customer experience, also to help with a frictionless customer experience. And that's very valuable. When you introduce technology into a customer focused business, ideally you want it to be well, with the exception of self service like Amazon, which is a different beast, you want the technology to be what I call below eye level. So it's like you walk into a

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great hotel or even pretty okay hotel, and they can make eye contact with you, they can smile at you, and yet they are very informed because there's a whole terminal, literally below eye level, where they have the information on what rooms have already been cleaned and everything else that is necessary to serve you as an arriving guest. So that's a great metaphor to keep in mind that the technology should be below eye level so it doesn't get in the way of your customer.

Roger Dooley [00:11:13]:

Yeah, and I think budget brands can create some of those experiences. In fact, the last hotel I stayed in was Ritz Carlton, and it was indeed a wonderful experience. I didn't have any problems. I was almost tempted to create a problem to see if they could solve it for me, but it was actually all just fine. But a couple of years before, I stayed in a Holiday Inn express, where it's definitely a budget chain. Not fancy, but when I got in, they recognized me. My name was on like a little handwritten board recognizing me as a loyalty member know. Welcome, Roger.

Roger Dooley [00:11:47]:

And it was not highly personalized, but there was just enough there. I think there was a little note from the manager, again, sort of a form note welcoming me and giving me some snacks or water or something. But all in all, it was fairly personalized for that level of stay. So I think it can be done. People shouldn't just say, well, I'm not a Ritz Carlton. I can't do know. I don't have this infinite budget where I can empower people to spend thousands of dollars to solve problems. I'd go bankrupt.

Roger Dooley [00:12:18]:

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I think even if your budget doesn't match theirs, there's things you can actually do. If you have some other examples of how budget type operations can still do a great job.

Micah Solomon [00:12:31]:

Well, sure. I don't use Ritz Carlton examples exclusively or even all that extensively in this book, though they have collaborated with me on two of my books, which I've super appreciative of. Here's a great example from a budget hotel, as you were calling it, which is the Hyatt house, I think it was, in Springfield, Virginia, though I'm not 100% sure on that. I can look it up. So it is what's called an extended stay property. And you usually end up at an extended stay hotel. Not for a good reason. It's because you're getting divorced or heaven forbid, like we've been seeing lately.

Micah Solomon [00:13:13]:

There's a fire that climate change has been involved in, and your house is getting repaired. Let's hope not all the way rebuilt, but it's getting repaired and you need to stay somewhere else. So it's usually not for a happy reason. So the Hyatt house. If you were there any particular morning, you would see a dog padding down the corridor toward the front desk, and when the dog gets there, looks very expectantly up at the desk. And this gentleman who works there, his name's Alec, I believe. He tosses a pre rolled newspaper to the dog, who catches it in his mouth. Now, I gotta tell you, if dogs are a certain breed and they are trained properly, they have what's called a soft mouth, which means they don't get slobber all over it.

Micah Solomon [00:14:04]:

This isn't maybe as gross as you think it is. Then the dog very proudly pads back up the corridor to where he's staying. So what's going on? Are they

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treating the dog like a guest? Well, sort of, but sort of not. What they are aiming at is to make the experience as much like home as they could for the human guest who's staying in room 223, or whatever it is. So she had to move out of her large home with a long driveway, like you see in the Sopranos, where her dog would pad down the driveway and get the newspaper and bring it back to her. So they thought, well, if we can get the dog in his routine, then maybe we can help the guests be in her routine as well. So I think that's incredible. It's not a very expensive very, it's not heavily staffed.

Micah Solomon [00:14:57]:

And I promise you, Mark Hoplamazi and the CEO of Hyatt did not personally instruct Alex to do this, but he did instruct all his employees to look for these moments where they can improve the stay for their guests. And that's exactly what he did.

Roger Dooley [00:15:16]:

Michael, not too long ago, I had Tom Peters on the show, and he reiterated, probably for the millionth time for him that frontline managers are the most important people in the organization. The frontline management position, he says, is not a training ground, a place to test people out, and if they don't work out well, find somebody different. He thinks these are the people that make or break an organization. How do frontline managers fit into delivering this iconic customer experience?

Micah Solomon [00:15:44]:

He's not known for mincing words, but he left out another part of this problem. Frontline people are called a manager just because you don't want to have to pay overtime anymore. So there's a lot of that going on. I think

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that if you say that you're putting the customer in the center of everything you do, then these are extremely valuable positions, and it should be someone who's highly attuned to the customer and highly attuned to their staff. As well. And someone who's willing to make what I call instant corrections, which means they get off the phone call. You say, Julie, do you have a moment? You and Julie talk, and then you help Julie figure out what she could have done better on that call. Giving feedback every quarter or every year is pretty useless because Julie's not going to remember that phone call.

Micah Solomon [00:16:37]:

If she remembers it at all. She's not going to remember it the same way you remember it. So it's going to be a bit of a he said, she said situation. So these are very valuable. I would say also the people answering your phone, that's often used as an entry level position, but the person you want answering your phone is someone with some experience with people. I find often a grandparent or a parent is great at this because they've seen everything, right? So using this as a position that you're trying to graduate from right away is kind of a letdown for the customers as well.

Roger Dooley [00:17:12]:

You mentioned using technology and giving the frontline people information about the customer that can help deliver a personalized service. Where do you draw the line between sort of being too personal, almost creepy, or delivering, wow, that's really wonderful personalization. I was thinking, like, say I'm a Buffalo Bills fan. If I called into United's one k line and they said, hey, Roger, how are the bills doing? Is the second thing. I'd find that kind of weird and creepy, even though, wow, okay, I'm somewhere in their file is liking the bills, but this seems kind of strange. On the other hand, if I

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checked into a hotel and there was a note from the manager saying, hey, the bills are playing on Thursday Night Football tonight, and here's the channel you tune to on our tv system to get that, I would think, wow, that's really pretty phenomenal. Where or how do you draw the line between too much personalization and just right?

Micah Solomon [00:18:15]:

The United example is interesting because when you're calling the United Contact center, that's not really the kind of relationship that you have. So that is a little bit odd, though. I admire them for their intention. For the rest of us, though, we want to use what's called the gold, or what I call the gold touch method. And that is always, or always is wrong. Sometimes people are just in a hurry and don't want to do this, but oftentimes add a little of what I call a do extra or a little of a tell extra. So a do extra is when you do a little more for them, a tell extra is what the GM at that hotel was doing which is giving you a little extra information, and that can be really valuable. Like, think about, we don't think them as customers, but they surely are people who are applying for a job in our business.

Micah Solomon [00:19:02]:

Absolutely. They're similar customers because even if they don't take the job or we don't hire them, we want them saying good things about our business. So they could email us and say, when should I get there for my appointment? You said, well, you could just write back by 830, or you could write back your appointments at 830. I would suggest getting here a few minutes early because the security procedures downstairs are actually rather serious and could eat up a couple of minutes. Also, be sure that you bring your id with you. The first time I came here, I didn't have it handy. And

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our security guards, unlike many that you see, actually are diligent about checking those.

Roger Dooley [00:19:44]:

Yeah, those were hypothetical examples, Micah, by the way. But yeah, I appreciate the commentary. And you're right, most companies do not do that. Even the companies that are trying, the princess cruise lines, has installed some really nifty technology that theoretically gives their people the chance to do just those sorts of things, knowing exactly what people have ordered in the past and other things about them. But it seems like when the rubber hits the road, I guess. Don't know if there's roads where the cruise ships are, but not ideal when it comes to delivering that service. Most of them are really focused just on the basics of getting your meal order, your drink order, whatever, without doing those extras. Of course, even there, I think there are some staffing issues where it's difficult to maintain a full, highly trained staff in the current environment.

Roger Dooley [00:20:37]:

But Michael, one area that I think was pretty interesting is the language that people use. You've got some great advice about what to say and what not to say. What are a few examples of things that you generally don't want to say in a customer service interaction?

Micah Solomon [00:20:53]:

The first thing is to start thinking about it, to think about language as part of your brand and a very important part of your brand. So a simple ish part of this is how formal you're going to be. If you work at Cartier, you don't want to say something like no worries, because it just sounds a little off brand. But if you were working in the Bose electronics shop, that would probably

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be fine. In some contexts, though, that's actually one of the key things to try to stop saying is if someone thanks you, that's exactly the wrong time to say no problem or no worries. Because when a customer thanks you, they've gone out of their way to do something nice that they had no obligation to do. And if you just say no problem or sure, then you're discounting that. It's a little awkward.

Micah Solomon [00:21:44]:

If you could say, you're welcome. Thank you. The famous, "My pleasure," which you used to only get at Ritz Carlton. And now for two dollars and ninety-nine cents plus tax, you can get with your sandwich at Chickfila because they went through the Ritz Carlton training. All of those are good ones, just things that we say that don't even mean anything bad. Like, well, let's see. The president has, I don't know if you've heard this, but he has a few prosecutions that are coming up in his near future. And I don't think any of his lawyers would advise him to say to the judge, well, to be perfectly honest, because what does that mean? If we say that? What does that mean? Were we lying up through our teeth up to that point? So to be honest, to be frank, this one you hear all the time nowadays to be fully transparent or full disclosure, all of those are ways of actually bringing in the question of your honesty, where you probably don't want to.

Micah Solomon [00:22:43]:

I have an employee. I had an employee, let's call her Lisa because that's her name. Well, it's very close to her name. And she was great. But she had this one tick, that nervous tick or angry tick that I had to point out to her and get her to stop having, which was a customer would be getting hot and heavy in the start of what could be an argument with her. And she'd say, well, Jody,

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I'm not going to argue with you. And I think she thought she was being polite, but she was bringing up the concept of arguing. Right.

Micah Solomon [00:23:22]:

So things like that, that we don't think of. The one I used before is this question of, how are you doing? So in the United States, this is a little ping pong or badminton game we play. Someone says, how are you? And then what happens? Well, if you're not accustomed to this type of interaction, you might say, I'm fine, right. Or you might go in the other direction. You might be like, well, I had some indigestion this morning. Should I tell him about that? No, because we don't actually care how you're doing. Right. But we have this social ping pong game that you can't let the ball drop.

Micah Solomon [00:24:03]:

So that's an important one as well. If someone asks how you are, you have to, number one, tell them, fudge it a bit. If you're feeling bad, actually. Don't tell them. By and large, tell them you're doing great, and then ask how they are. Very important.

Roger Dooley [00:24:17]:

Great advice. You mention artificial intelligence AI briefly in the book, not extensively. And it's got to be a very difficult time to be in the midst of publishing a book when the world of AI is changing every week. How do you see this developing going forward in terms of providing higher levels of customer service, more informed customer service reps and so on.

Micah Solomon [00:24:44]:

The way to think about AI in customer service is my triangular model. So a triangle has in here I'm about to use up my high school geometry. A triangle

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has three vertices, right? So one vertex will be the customer, the next one will be the AI, and the third one is the customer facing agent. So thing is that all of these three vertices work interactionally. So a customer can start by working directly with your AI, and the cliched version of that would be a chat bot. But probably a less obvious example is if they come to the search bar on your website, which is probably powered to some extent by AI. I know mine is, even though I'm just me, I'm just a small business that helps out large businesses, but I'm a small business. I still have one.

Micah Solomon [00:25:38]:

My search bar is powered by Google, which is, we don't think about it, but Google, or as my mom insists on calling it, the Google, is the biggest AI purveyor out there. So you have this very intelligent search bar, and the customer or prospect can come to that and start using AI directly, even if they don't realize they're doing it. And that may be it. That might be all they need is to work with your AI, either that way or through a chat bot. But if they need something more complicated or they're ready to buy and so forth, then they will want to connect, not necessarily talk, but chat message, email, or talk with your agent. The thing is, at that point, it's a mistake to think that AI is no longer involved. AI can be absolutely wonderful on the agent side, not by being an agent, but by informing the agent. You can have your agent, who is a generalist, fill in in those places, whereas you said in Austin, it's very hard to find a specialist because it can have great prompts for you on screen or via another method that can make you really know what you're talking about.

Micah Solomon [00:26:48]:

And then it's a mistake to think the customer stopped using AI, because even when we're talking with a customer rep, of course we keep googling

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things, and we also use, hopefully, the website and other electronic tools of your business while this is all going on together.

Roger Dooley [00:27:02]:

One last topic, Michael. We could make an entire podcast about this, but I'm just curious. You briefly mentioned healthcare and patient experience, which is an interest of mine. What do you see today, in particular, US healthcare, as the biggest failure points in customer service, customer experience in healthcare. And do you have any solutions for these or suggestions to correct these?

Micah Solomon [00:27:33]:

Well, I'm going to differ from some of my customer experience colleagues with the following. Clinical results are the most important thing, right? They are the most important thing. But there's a lot on the patient experience side that we can do wrong that gets in the way of that. If a person at the front desk is surly, if they don't understand that you're in pain when you're calling, if a nurse doesn't understand that four minutes is really a long time, if you have a full bladder, then all of this really gets in the way of healing. And all of that is fixable, assuming you want to fix it, assuming you know where to go for proper training. Thank you very much. And assuming that you continue to reinforce the right behaviors. Positive peer pressure is very powerful.

Micah Solomon [00:18:14]:

So once you reach a critical mass of people doing things the right way, then things can really blossom. So when you walk in, let's not pay well, Mayo Clinic, right? If you walk into a Mayo Clinic, I would say 80% to 90% of the people you run into are there to help you, maybe even more. Why? Because

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they have been hired for their interpersonal skills as well as their clinical skills. If you are the kind of surgeon who only wants the results, what's the great joke? I went to med school and then specialized in surgery because I like surgery, but I don't like people. Right? So if that's the kind of physician you are, they don't want you at the Mayo clinic. And if that's the kind of frontline employee that you are, then even if you're highly skilled in all other ways, then they don't want you. So number one is hiring, right? But number two, their motto is, the needs of the patient come first. The needs of the patient come first.

Micah Solomon [00:29:23]:

So if everybody knows that, then even, and I've had this happen, even the cashier in the cafeteria runs into a family member, and the cashier says, how's your day going? And you say, well, I'm really worried about the trajectory that my son is on. We thought this was going to be quick. Every day it seems to be something new. She is empowered not to give clinical opinions, right? That's important. But she is empowered to walk you over to someone who can help. So at that point, positive peer pressure from all these people who feel the needs of the patient come first, work together, a less life and death situation. Think of the Apple store. You walk into the Apple store and you get the feeling that these people are eager to find a solution to my issue.

Micah Solomon [00:30:14]:

My issue, my problem, my hope. Because Apple doesn't hire people who are just good at tech, you got to be good at tech. But you also have to be interested in people and working with your team as well. And once they get enough of those, then you start to learn on your first day that the way things are done around here is to be helpful rather than at some businesses where

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the way we do things around here is to try to get away with doing as little work as possible.

Roger Dooley [00:30:41]:

Micah, I think that positive peer pressure could apply to any kind of organization, not just healthcare or even a company like Apple. And if you can get to that critical mass, that's a fantastic goal. We could go on forever. Micah, but why don't you tell our audience how they can find you and your ideas?

Micah Solomon [00:30:59]:

So I'm a customer service and customer experience trainer, consultant. And according to Inc. Magazine, as Roger was nice enough to say, the world's number one customer service turnaround expert. However, they quickly caveated that I might also be the only one they know. So if you want the world's number one, and I guess number two, number ten customer service turnaround expert, that's me. Find me at my website. If you can type really carefully, it's micahsoloman.com. So that's M-I-C-A-H.

Micah Solomon [00:29:23]:

Like Henry dot Solomon. No a in Solomon. There's no a in Solomon. Solomon.com. You can also on my website, my mobile number is right there. You can text me, you could email me. And I expect Roger will give a link to my upcoming or right now being coming book, Can your customer service do this?

Roger Dooley [00:31:55]:

We will link to all of those places on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](https://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast). Micah, it's been a blast talking with you.

Brainfluence with Roger Dooley

[rogerdooley.com](https://www.rogerdooley.com)

Micah Solomon: The Art of Exceptional Customer Experience

Resources: <https://www.rogerdooley.com/micah-solomon-customer-experience/>

Micah Solomon [00:32:04]:

What a treat talking in with you. Roger, you are the best in the business.

Brainfluence with Roger Dooley

[rogerdooley.com](https://www.rogerdooley.com)