

“Ron Kaufman has included many Singapore case studies in his new book.”

# Uplift the world with better service

Ron Kaufman, guru of good service, pens his 15th book and it's an instant bestseller



John Lui

Ron Kaufman was in the United States recently when he saw a kid in a T-shirt. Nothing special about that, except for the words on it. The phrase was a fairly typical middle-finger motto, one of the hundreds beloved by young people with an attitude and on sale in any number of shops targeted at teens looking to buy edginess.

For Ronald Andrew Kaufman, the T-shirt's words sum up much of what is wrong with our coarsening world.

"It said, 'A hater is a motivator,'" he recalls. Decoded: I am fuelled by our mutual hatred.

"It disturbed me deeply. That way of being in the world has led to generations of centuries of conflict," explains the 56-year-old known to thousands in Singapore who have attended his courses and seminars in service improvement.

He goes on to explain what can only be described as the General Theory of Great Service.

He says: "Singapore acts as a successful amalgamation of talent, and of people serving one another. Now, how we get each person doing that in the world is that you wake up each morning and you walk out in the world and you say, 'How can I contribute? How can I

make this world better?'"

Making the world better? This, and other such feel-good, all-or-nothing, think-positive mantras ("enlightened planet", "when everyone improves, the whole world grows stronger and closer") pop up in messages from and about Kaufman. It is not stuff you would find in a book from, say, Tom Peters.

Kaufman seems to be aware of the charges, and his response to those who say there is fluff beneath his philosophy is both quick and combative.

"There is intellectual laziness in people who make that accusation," he snaps. "If you ask people in business today, 'What is service?', you will get a fluffy answer. If you ask them, 'What is culture?', they get even more airy-fairy. That is absolutely unacceptable.

"Service and service culture can be created, it can be engineered. There is a proven architecture for building a successful service culture in a country, in a department, in a company, in a government agency."

Whatever one may think of his ideas, there is no denying his success. The American who settled in Singapore 22 years ago built up a worldwide reputation as the guru of service on the back of countless speaking tours, and 14 business self-help books. There is also the occasional letter or article contribution to The Straits Times on the topic.

Now, as his fellow Americans would say, he has just hit one out of the park.

His 15th book, *Uplifting Service*, launched in the United States and in Singapore last month, peaked at the top of the sales chart for business books on Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com and the USA Today lists. Early this month, it entered The New York Times' best-seller list, in the paperback advice category, at No. 5, before dropping out altogether the following week.

A spokesman for his Singapore distributor Pansing says that in the United States, the book was propelled up the charts because of strong pre-sales, thanks to

Kaufman's reputation, built on previous books and his live appearances, as well as a strong promotional campaign.

In Singapore, it is not yet on the best-seller lists because the marketing push has yet to gather steam.

Despite *Uplifting Service*'s quick exit from the NYT rankings, this is his most successful book yet and as he says in his YouTube video, one of several for his legion of true believers, he is excited.

There is another element to the thrill, he says over the telephone from New York earlier this month, one stop on the current book promotional blitz across the United States.

He is pleased that the book contains case studies from iconic Singapore organisations such as NTUC Income, Changi Airport, Marina Bay Sands and Singapore Airlines.

"It goes out to the whole world, featuring Singapore," says the Singapore permanent resident.

This pro-Singapore boosterism is a frequently occurring theme in his answers during the interview. It does not appear to be a blind faith, because he can be critical of institutions here that have catching up to do, as the SMRT proved last year during its massive breakdowns.

He is also appalled that in this era, when buzzwords like "social networks" and "community engagement" are on the lips of even the most out-of-touch business chiefs, there are Singapore heads of companies whose ideas of customer service would not be out of place in a government campaign from the 1970s.

He quotes from an annual report that both alarmed and amused him.

"It was decided that a service mindset would be inculcated into the staff. This is a perfect example of the blindness of leadership who think that you can install a service mindset like changing oil in a car. You don't give staff an injection and then it happens," he says.

He gathered his case studies from working with the Singapore firms, and adds half-seriously that given his years in business here, one would be hard-pressed to find

any sizeable company in Singapore that has not hired him as a consultant or trainer at least once.

One such organisation is Singapore Airlines which, of late, has suffered a double blow of red ink on its May quarterly results, its first in two years, caused partly by high fuel prices. Readers have chimed in on The Straits Times Forum Page that the woman in the sarong kebaya is no longer the attentive helper she used to be.

Kaufman disagrees with the notion that SIA's service levels have declined. It just seems that way, he says, because other airlines, especially the Middle Eastern ones, have raised their game.

"Singapore Airlines set the benchmark for inflight service for so long that others have copied it. They've caught up," he says. The airline is aware that it is in an inflight service arms race

and is always working to improve, he adds.

Nor is the success of budget airlines proof that service is dispensable, a frill that can be cut away because people will not mind being treated poorly if the price is low enough.

"The budget airlines provide a different level of service. The planes still have to be clean, be on time, the check-in procedures have to be fast. The staff should not be rude," he says.

In fact it was Singapore Airlines, and the Singapore Government's National Productivity Board, that in 1990, invited Kaufman here to run a service quality improvement programme.

"One week stretched into a month, then into a year, and now more than two incredible decades" is how he describes it in the preface to *Uplifting Service*.

Kaufman is married to an Australian, Jenny, 44, and they have a teenage daughter, Jen, as she likes to be called, runs the administrative side of the Ron Kaufman speaking and consulting business.

In a world where competitive advantage is determined ever more by quality of service, companies are scrambling to find the magic formula that will turn workers into individuals driven to serve colleagues and customers.

If building a service culture is a science, as Kaufman insists it is, it is an incredibly soft and squishy one. So perhaps it is understandable that his prose in *Uplifting Service* can sound a little earnest.

The first line in the preface of *Uplifting Service* best captures the tone of optimism and epic sense of self-belief needed for the job.

"For the past 40 years I have been on a mission to improve the world."



PHOTOS: RON KAUFMAN, UPLIFTING SERVICE  
Ron Kaufman believes building a service culture is a science. He has included case studies drawn from Singapore firms in his new book *Uplifting Service*.



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## EXCERPTS FROM RON KAUFMAN'S NEW BOOK

### CHANGI AIRPORT

#### Clean toilets

A computerised touch screen in every washroom shows a photograph and the name of the washroom attendant. It also offers a timely greeting – good morning, good evening or good afternoon – and then asks the traveller one simple question: "Please rate our toilet." Under the question are five large on-screen buttons with words and yellow faces, from a toothy grin for "Excellent" to a disappointed frown for "Very Poor".

The attendant and maintenance office receive this feedback instantly when a passenger rates the washroom as "Poor" or "Very Poor". Immediately, the attendant discovers and corrects whatever is not pleasant, not working or not well-stocked. That's 42 million opportunities for actionable input from its customers every year. And that's talking only about the toilets.

#### Friendly Immigration

One of the airport's ambitions is



ST PHOTO: JEVYI FANG

Changi Airport takes note of passenger feedback, ranging from the service at its Immigration counter to the condition of its toilets.

to be rated the friendliest in the world. But one Perception Point persistently scored low in the "friendly" category on passenger surveys: the Immigration counter. Of course, it's not Immigration's

primary function to be friendly as much as it is to monitor and manage who enters and leaves the country.

But because Changi Airport wants to step up their passengers'

experience at every Perception Point, they studied this point carefully and found a new solution. Instead of asking Immigration officers to make friendly small talk with arriving and departing passengers which could distract them from their essential responsibility, slow down the process and lead to longer waiting times, Changi Airport placed an attractive box of breath mints on each and every counter.

Every day, as thousands of passengers hand across their passports for review, Singapore's immigration officers smile, gesture toward the box and kindly say one word, "Sweet?". And what was the result of this inexpensive innovation? Immigration's "friendly" scores went up.

### NTUC INCOME

#### Leading by example

Service Role Modelling is not only what you do with customers – it's also what you do and say with the members of your team. When NTUC Income embarked on a cultural revolution, the new

CEO Tan See Chieh knew he was asking people to change their traditional way of thinking and their comfortable way of being. The best thing he could do was model new behaviours for all to see and follow.

He wanted his people to be more flexible, so Mr Tan took up intensive yoga classes to demonstrate his commitment to be flexible and balanced. He wanted the team to think and act outside their comfort zones, so he shaved his head for a charity function and proudly displayed the results. He wanted the team to use new media, go online and not be afraid of the digital future. So he created a Twitter account, Facebook pages and a LinkedIn profile to connect himself and his company to the world.

Now he wants the company to be fit for the competitive future and is training to run a full marathon. Some in the company will join him on the run. And, through his behaviour, everyone will be uplifted by his commitment.

Your team members notice every consistency and every contradiction. You can't ask your



NTUC Income CEO Tan See Chieh believes in leading by example to show his commitment.

team members to respond quickly to customers if your own meetings do not start on time. You can't ask for great organisation and housekeeping if your own office is a mess. You can't ask your people to be polite and gracious if you swear with impunity behind closed doors. You can't ask your team members to provide uplifting service if you don't serve them with passion as an uplifting service leader.