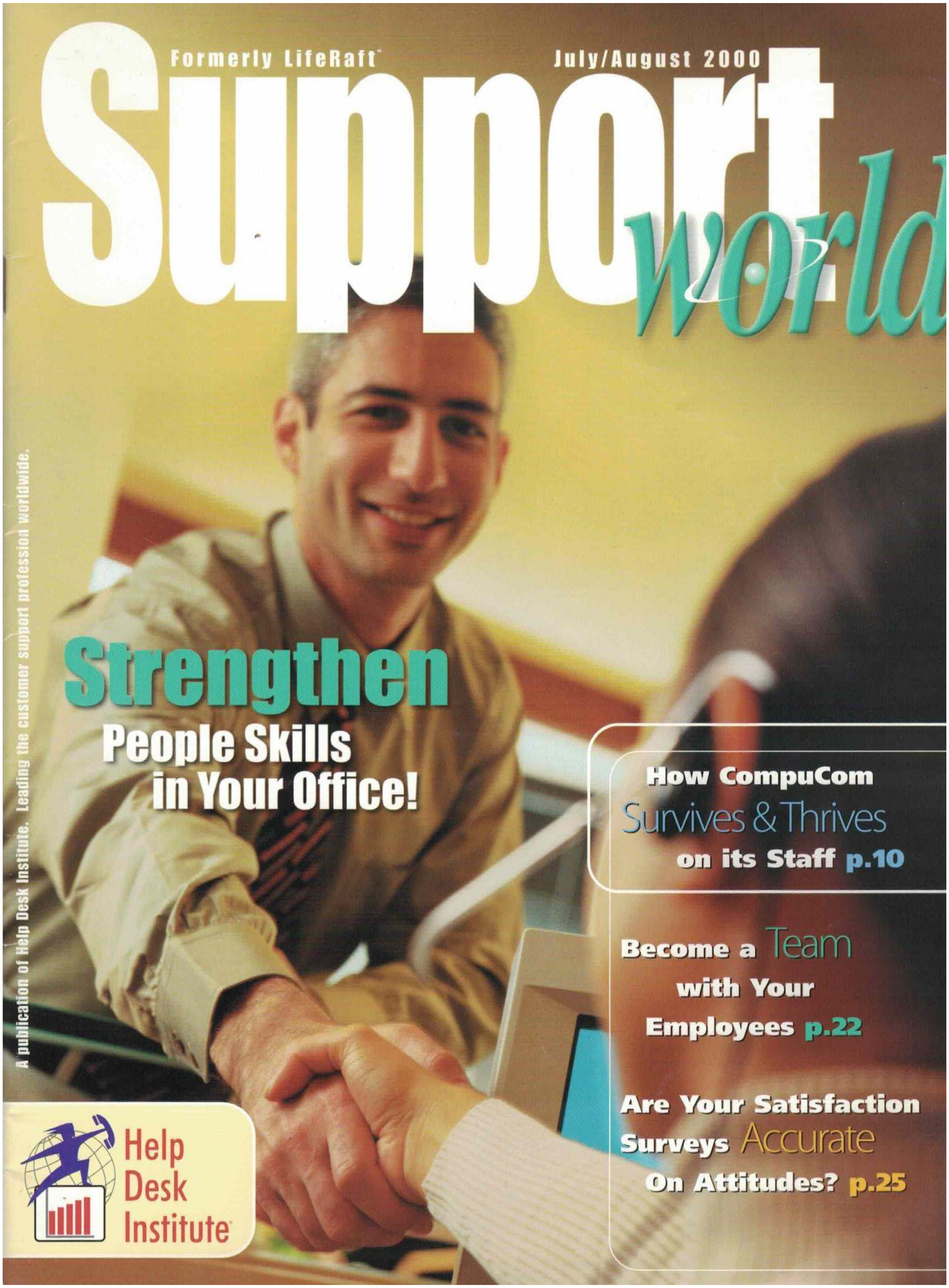

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Support world

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Strengthen People Skills in Your Office!

How CompuCom Survives & Thrives on its Staff p.10

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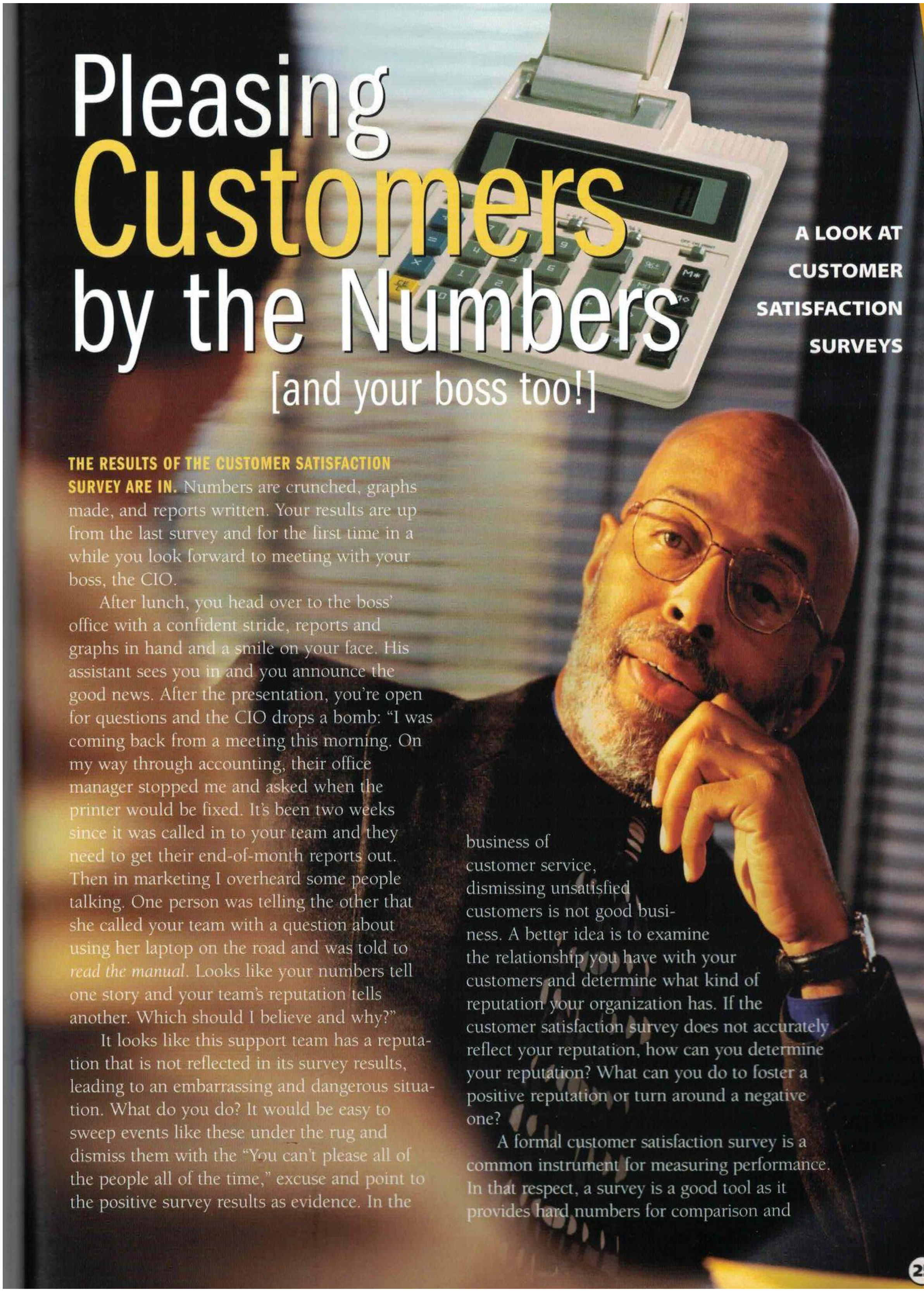

Pleasing Customers by the Numbers

[and your boss too!]

A LOOK AT CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEYS

THE RESULTS OF THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY ARE IN. Numbers are crunched, graphs made, and reports written. Your results are up from the last survey and for the first time in a while you look forward to meeting with your boss, the CIO.

After lunch, you head over to the boss' office with a confident stride, reports and graphs in hand and a smile on your face. His assistant sees you in and you announce the good news. After the presentation, you're open for questions and the CIO drops a bomb: "I was coming back from a meeting this morning. On my way through accounting, their office manager stopped me and asked when the printer would be fixed. It's been two weeks since it was called in to your team and they need to get their end-of-month reports out. Then in marketing I overheard some people talking. One person was telling the other that she called your team with a question about using her laptop on the road and was told to *read the manual*. Looks like your numbers tell one story and your team's reputation tells another. Which should I believe and why?"

It looks like this support team has a reputation that is not reflected in its survey results, leading to an embarrassing and dangerous situation. What do you do? It would be easy to sweep events like these under the rug and dismiss them with the "You can't please all of the people all of the time," excuse and point to the positive survey results as evidence. In the business of customer service, dismissing unsatisfied customers is not good business. A better idea is to examine the relationship you have with your customers and determine what kind of reputation your organization has. If the customer satisfaction survey does not accurately reflect your reputation, how can you determine your reputation? What can you do to foster a positive reputation or turn around a negative one?

A formal customer satisfaction survey is a common instrument for measuring performance. In that respect, a survey is a good tool as it provides hard numbers for comparison and

A formal customer satisfaction survey is a common instrument for measuring performance... it provides hard numbers for comparison and analysis.

analysis. Keith Henline, Assistant Vice President and Director of Customer Service for Lincoln National Reinsurance, and Juan Giron, Problem Manager for the Lincoln Reinsurance Help Desk, offered their insight on surveys and reputations. Lincoln Reinsurance's 14-member help desk and security teams serve approximately 900 customers with about 90% of the customers working in the same building as the teams, the other 10% being located around the world. Each team conducts its own formal customer satisfaction survey biannually. The survey questions are tailored to the work of each team and anyone in the company can complete one, submitting their feelings on paper or electronically through the company's intranet. "It's one of our metrics, in order to measure how good we are doing since our focus is on quality rather than quantity," says Giron of the help desk's survey. When survey results are taken over a period of time, trends become evident and the results can be used to illustrate the effects of strategic decisions on customer satisfaction. In these ways, the metrics produced by a survey are useful. However, they do not always paint an accurate picture of the support staff from the customers' point of view. Most support centers have a reputation, good or bad, with their customers and chances are that reputation is not accurately reflected by the survey result[s] Taken individually, survey results are a snapsh[ot] of the customers' feelings at the time that the survey was completed. In the time it takes for the results to be compiled and examined, it is likely that each customer has had additional contact with the team and their satisfaction le[vel] has been reset based on the latest experience. Henline is aware that a survey received yester[day] may or may not accurately reflect a customer's thoughts today. "You've got to recognize that somebody may have sent in a survey that just had a help desk call and we were wonderful a[nd] that's all they remember. So, hey, we're nines. The next person we've serviced great forever a[nd] we just had a terrible experience with them, t[he] only time in one year. And they give us a four

There are two main tools at your disposal [for] detecting and managing your organization's re[pu]tation. One is ongoing personal interaction wi[th] the customers and the other is the service leve[l] agreement, or SLA.

Personal interaction with customers is an important part of overall customer service and the primary tool for detecting and managing y[our] team's reputation. "Look at it [a survey] as just another tool to try to ascertain customers' perc[ep]tions," Henline advises, adding, "I get a lot of hallway conversations. That's probably of more value." Personal interaction does not always m[ean] face-to-face, one-on-one meetings. This is the preferred method, but is not always feasible. Telephone conversations work well as do e-ma[il] messages. Keep in mind, though, that the inte[rac]tion is *personal*, so tailor the contact to the person. Avoid a generic approach and carbon-copied e-mail messages. Remember that interaction means full-duplex communication: [be] open to comments from customers and make [an] effort to respond to each one. Henline takes comments from his customers seriously: "If so[me]body is willing to sit down and write me a no[te] then I think that's probably a pretty sincere ev[alu]ation." No one on your team has more person[al] interaction with your customers than the supp[ort] staff. Share with them the importance of perso[nal] interaction and stress that good customer serv[ice] does not end when the problem is fixed. Encourage them to be receptive to customers' comments and make clear to them how they should respond. An overzealous staff member who promises more than the team can deliver can damage the team's reputation with their enthusiasm for improving it.

Just as common as the formal customer satisfaction survey in the operation of a technical support organization is the service level agreement, or SLA. The SLA is the flipside of the survey in that the SLA describes your commitment to the customers while the survey is one way of revealing how well you meet the objectives of the SLA. The customers need a clear understanding of what they can expect from your organization. Dust off the SLA and discuss it with them. An unclear understanding can lead to a bad experience when the customer's expectations do not line up with what your team has agreed to deliver. A good example of this is the rollout of new technologies, such as laptops or personal digital assistants. Since the help desk is the contact point when something goes wrong, it is easy for the customers to assume that the help desk is also at fault when it does not work right. Henline illustrates: "About the time we get all the bugs out of it and everything works good, it's obsolete and they want something else. To them, a computer is a computer. It used to work, it doesn't work anymore, service is falling off. It is a revelation to them that every time the help desk gets a new computer in, they have to go back and figure out how to make it work. This is all news to the customer."

The customer satisfaction survey and personal interaction are both valuable tools to the technology support manager when used to complement each other. By no means can one be used as a replacement for the other. Survey results supply hard numbers to reinforce strategic decisions. Personal interaction provides constant feedback for continuous improvement of your services. Giron sums it up simply: "Perception to the customer is reality. So if they think we're doing a good job, we are."

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