

BY ANDY KANEFIELD AND MARK POWERS

“**T**he core of business is customer service,” according to Jerry Kent, CEO of Cequel III.

Of course, delivering great customer service is easier said than done. Especially when you’re in an industry with a poor reputation for customer service and part of your growth strategy is to acquire other cable and telecommunication providers.

“In the early 1990s at Cencom Cable, we lost customers in one of our California properties after a new competitor entered the market. I promised myself that I would never get caught off guard like that again,” says Kent. “Customers have long memories. It’s a long-term process to reestablish a good reputation.”

While acknowledging the bad customer service reputation of cable companies, Kent notes that Charter in the mid 1990s and present day Cox Communications and Insight Communications are “exceptions to the rule.”

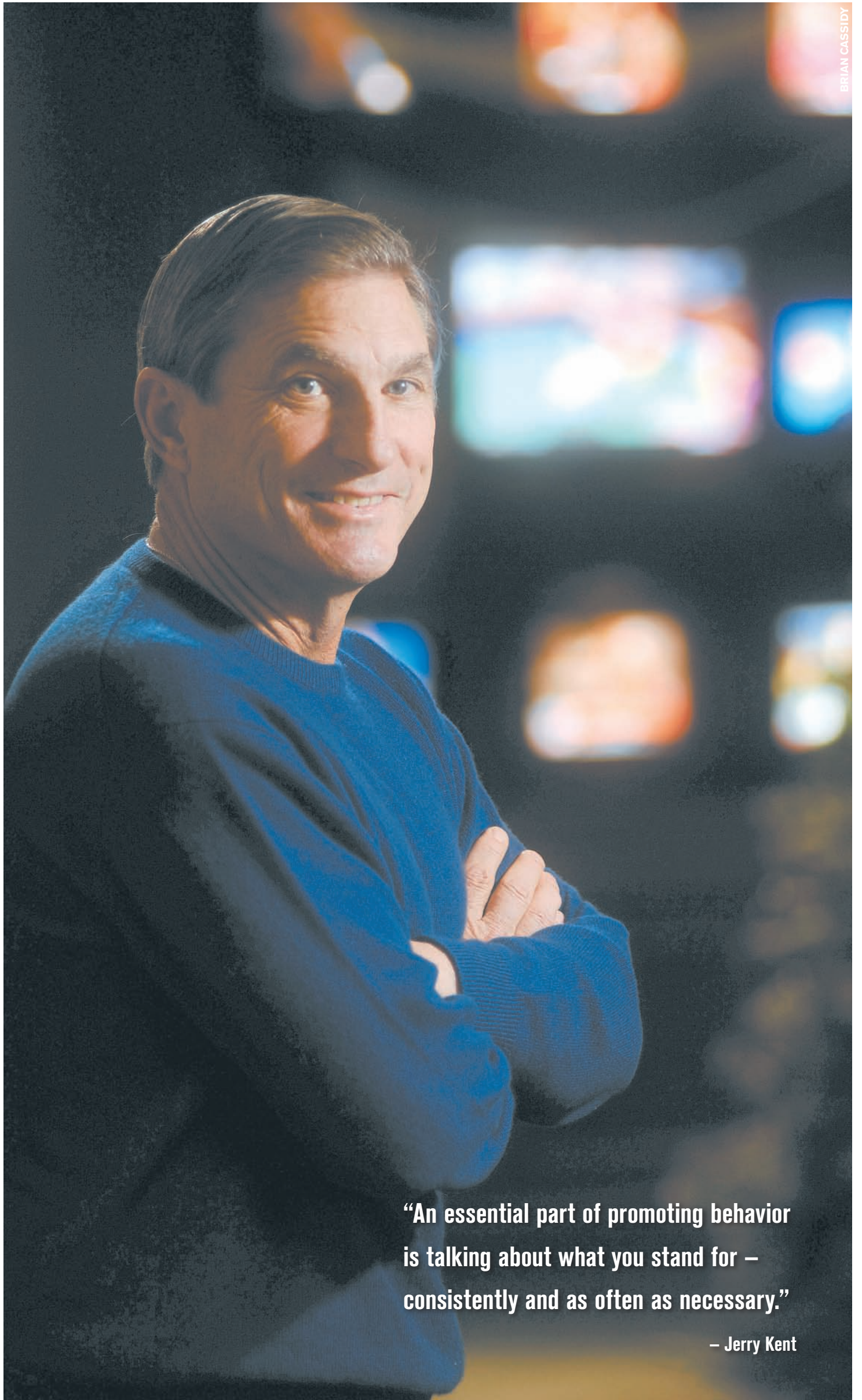
So how does Kent promote a customer service-oriented culture while acquiring other companies at the same time? “When I was at Charter Communications we did a large number of acquisitions — something like 18 major acquisitions and at least 50 total acquisitions,” Kent says. “I’ve been assimilating companies for 25 years. I’ve learned that it’s a challenge to get everyone marching together, especially in this industry since our lowest-paid employees are the face and voice of the company. Our mantra now is that we guard our customers as well as we guard our children.

“Of course, an essential part of promoting behavior is talking about what you stand for — consistently and as often as necessary. It’s not something where you can wave a magic wand and get buy-in overnight.”

One of the ways Kent reinforces what is important is through stories. With over 25 years of entrepreneurial experience, he has accumulated quite a few success stories.

“We tell stories in structured ways in

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three primary venues. First, we include them in our Annual Management Conference for top managers and their spouses." Stories are told not only from Kent's past, but outside speakers such as James Surowiecki, author of *The Wisdom of Crowds*, have shared examples of the successes and failures of other companies. "We don't want to be myopic," says Kent.

"We also incorporate them into our annual visits to call centers and our top 10 cable systems. We talk about our history, lessons learned, knowing that real life stories help front line employees connect to what we're trying to achieve and makes management principles come alive. We also use stories to illustrate what makes for good partnerships and lessons learned about when partnerships didn't work.

"Thirdly, we use our online and print employee newsletters to reinforce our culture through stories. And I'm not the only one who tells stories. My longtime business partner, Howard Wood, often tells the story of the moment he knew Charter was going to be successful. He noticed that region vice presidents were swapping their own stories and ideas and best practices, peer-to-peer. In a decentralized organization, that type of grassroots, peer-to-peer communication is incredibly important. To emphasize how important it is, Howard shares that story with managers throughout our company.

"And the head of our Atlantic Region, Dave Bach, is fond of telling a fictional story about a group of monkeys and the bad habits they learned. The core lesson? If you want to be successful, you can't just do things because "they're always done that way."

Story is not only how Kent reinforces positive examples. He also extracts management principles and lessons from stories. "I'm a big believer in studying American history — in particular conflict during the Civil War and World War II.

"Take General Robert E. Lee — always outnumbered, always fewer resources but until the end continued to outfox and outmaneuver the competition. He trusted his generals, he delegated, and he wasn't afraid to go to the front lines when the battle was going

Leadership

Jerry Kent recommends the following books for those who want to explore leadership and management principles from U.S. history:

- "The Founding Fathers on Leadership: Classic Teamwork in Changing Times" by Donald T. Phillips
- "George Washington's Leadership Lessons" by James Rees and Stephen Spignesi

against him. He was much more nimble than his opponents. He didn't have a bureaucracy — he let his generals do what they thought was best.

"And Grant (General Ulysses S. Grant) was just a tenacious bulldog. He refused to give up. And he was willing to try new things.

"Eisenhower was a great diplomat. Being in charge of Allied Forces for D-Day he had to manage all the egos and different viewpoints. Somehow he kept Montgomery and Patton in check. He was able to manage diversity of thought and still be successful."

Kent sees this as directly applying to business management. "You don't want to look around the table and have everyone alike. We have a lot of different personalities. It's harder to manage, but when you consider different viewpoints and then make a decision, it's probably the best decision."

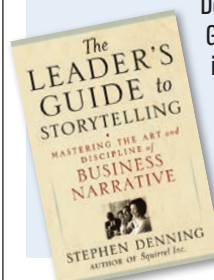
Kent also sees a connection between General George Washington and his business experience. "He had no resources. It reminds me of my early days at Cencom. No money, no resources. He was taking on the best army and navy in the world at the time. He picked good people and put them in the right place.

"We're a small company compared to AT&T, Verizon, and DirectTV. We don't have the resources, and we can't outspend them. But we can out-think them, motivate our front-line personnel, and most importantly we can take better care of the customer."

Andy Kanefield is president of Dialect, which helps leaders promote sync — that elusive state when departments and people are working in concert toward big picture goals. He can be reached at (314) 863-4400 or andy@dialect.com.

Storytelling

If you would like to hone your business storytelling skills you might want to check out Stephen Denning's book, "The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative."



Denning held several director-level positions with the World Bank before becoming a

consultant. He identifies the following 7 types of objectives for which you can develop a narrative:

- Sparking action
- Communicating who you are
- Transmitting values
- Fostering collaboration
- Taming the grapevine
- Sharing knowledge
- Leading people into the future