

Customer Disservice... With a Smile!

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There's a lot of talk about the importance of providing quality customer service and superior customer experiences to improve customer loyalty and sales and, as you know if you've visited this blog before, these topics are a primary elements of my Pinnacle Performance training seminars and consulting practices. But, on the flip side, there's relatively little dialogue about the aspects that turn customers off, harm customer relationships, and can ultimately have customers not only leave your business for a competitor but do so while complaining about your business to everyone they come into contact with.

Please allow me to provide you a very personal experience of my recent family vacation in sunny San Diego. I didn't know it (or expect it) going in but left with plenty of examples of what not to do when providing proper customer service. First, please know I am removing the destination name we stayed at because this is not intended to slam them directly but rather to learn from their mistakes and ensure you're not doing the same with your customers.

The first thing you should know is that this was not a bargain basement motor lodge. It is a high-end, "luxury resort" that advertises "first class" vacation experiences. Sounds wonderful... let's go!

Traveling with another family, we required two separate suites. Using a special American Express promotion I was able to secure a desirable "free room upgrade", a significant savings of \$50 dollars per night over paying for the rooms without the AMEX card. On the online reservation return receipt I noticed that room upgrades (like the ones I just reserved) are "based on availability" so I promptly called the hotel for clarification and was told to call back a week before traveling out and they would reserve the room upgrades at that time.

Enter Patsy. Patsy and I had a wonderful conversation and she was most helpful saying that my room upgrades were "all set" and would be waiting for us when we got there. So we got there and, lo and behold, found that was only half true. Seems only 1 room upgrade is available, the other is not. Not particularly good news and certainly not what we were expecting. I explained my previous "all set" call with Patsy. The reply from the front desk employee? "Patsy is in reservations, she doesn't upgrade rooms". Let me see if I have this straight... Patsy is in reservations and she doesn't manage reservations? You would think the person most empowered to manage reservations would be the person whose job is to interact with customers on their reservations line, right? Evidently, wrong. So much for being "all set".

Lesson #1: Be Accountable.

A big part of delivering great customer service is assuming responsibility and standing behind your commitments. Saying it is not the important part. Doing it is. Sales and service professionals already have their work cut out for them to gain customers trust. Broken commitments are a warning sign of mistrust that can seriously jeopardize the health of the relationship. You will never see this type "it's not her job" finger pointing at elite customer service establishments. They focus on making it right for the external customer not on who made it wrong internally.

Once settled in our suite we realized there was no silverware, glasses, plates or any other kitchen utensil in our kitchen. So we called the front desk. Remarkably, their first response was "many guests bring these household items with them". We traveled across the country from Boston to San Diego with two kids and four suitcases. Did they actually expect us to pack and lug our kitchen items as well?

Lesson # 2: Never make your customer feel like they did something wrong.

When a customer feels like their being accused of wrong doing they typically get defensive, annoyed and uncomfortable. Obviously, these are not the best emotions for positive customer relations. Never make the issue *the issue*, focus instead on what you can do to help the customer. Managed properly, the front desk employee should have replied with something like, “I’m sorry to hear that, we should have asked you upon reservation if you would like us to supply the kitchen with these items, I’ll see to it that this gets taken care of right away.”

In any event, after the initial inquiry nothing happened so a few hours later we called again. Each time the staff member on the other end of the line was polite, helpful *sounding* and ensured us it would be taken care of in short order. But, for the entire day, exactly nothing materialized and we were still completely utensil-less. So the next morning while staring at our dry cereal we decided to physically go to the front desk and seek redemption. Once again, the smiling staff member entered the information into “the system” and ensured us that the utensils would be sent over right away. A few hours later when (unbelievably) no one showed up I made *the last call*, the call that makes it clear that we are beyond displeased, have no faith in anything that is spoken to us, and asked what manager I should speak with when nothing happens after this call-in-progress too. That’s all it took to get some basic kitchen utensils at this “luxury resort”.

Lesson # 3: It’s not what you say, it’s what you do.

The old adage is true; actions do speak louder than words. Many people think providing great customer service is about being friendly, polite and smiling a lot. While that’s essential it is only part of the total equation. You can smile *all day* but if you don’t fulfill your commitments and meet your customers’ expectations then the net effect is greatly diminished. Customers ultimately view the gestures as insincere, and you’ll end up with an unhappy customer.

Unfortunately, we experienced at least a couple more incidents of customer disservice that week. Clearly, there is a detrimental disconnect between what staff members are demonstrating/saying (behaviors) and what they’re doing (actions/execution) at this vacation resort. True world-class customer service can only be achieved with a proper unity between the two.

In closing, always remember this fitting Ben Franklin quote, “*Well done is better than well said.*”

Steve

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