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Special Briefing

10 Practices of Exceptional Service

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My research of and work with the very best service providers demonstrates that they all do a lot of things right. However, I've found that there are at least 10 practices that they have in common. They are the following:

1. Eliminate Irritants

Customer service is as much what you don't do to customers as it is what you do for them. For example, in most hotels today, it is not uncommon for a local phone call or an 800-number call to cost from 75 cents to one dollar. As a frequent hotel guest, I find it irritating to pay \$100+ for a room and be charged for local and 800-number calls. When will hotels learn to quit alienating guests with such surcharges?

Obviously, they don't want to lose the revenue these surcharges create. But it costs them in customer goodwill. It would be better if hotels determined the revenue amount generated by access surcharges, divided that amount by the average number of guest stays each year, added that figure to the basic room rate, and then told guests that local phone calls and access to 800 and credit card numbers are free!

The scary thing about customer irritants and aggravations is that they often make perfect sense to the service provider. For example, have you ever tried to get a small cup of coffee served in a large cup? This would seem like a reasonable request from someone who doesn't want to be scalded when opening the spring-loaded lid on a cup filled to the top, yet the average fast-food establishment is dumbfounded by that simple request. Why? Because restaurants often track coffee sales on the basis of cup size. Give a customer a small, \$1.00 cup of coffee in a large, \$1.25 cup and -- heaven forbid -- you throw the system off by a whole quarter!

A solution to this problem is as simple as keeping a roll of quarters on hand. If a customer wants a small cup of coffee in a large cup, provide it. Then just toss a quarter into the cash drawer to make up the difference. The system is intact, but more importantly, the customer leaves happy.

What are you doing to -- or not doing for -- customers that makes perfect sense to you but irritates and alienates them? Conduct a search-and-destroy mission to eliminate customer irritants.

2. Perform As Promised

A vendor tells a client he will send him one of the embroidered polo shirts that the client admired. It never arrives.

An account executive promises a prospective customer that she will call back next Wednesday to discuss a potential order. The call never comes.



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A long distance company begs a business owner to consider using their services. However, he must call and request a quote several times before the long distance company finally gives him one.

Consider your own experience. In the past two weeks, how many organizations or individuals have told you that they were going to do something, and then didn't do it? And what have you told others you would do for them, but haven't done?

Follow-through is abysmal today. Excellent service providers always deliver what they promise. When they commit, it happens.

Don't make promises you can't keep. If you think you can have something for a customer by the end of the day, but you're sure you can have by noon tomorrow, commit to noon tomorrow. Then if you are able to have it by the end of the day, your customer will be ecstatic that you performed even better than promised.

Most service complaints evolve from poorly managed expectations. Don't waste your time trying to exceed customer expectations or provide added value to your product or service if you don't have a foolproof system for the basics: delivering what you promise, when you promise it.

Make it an unforgivable sin in your organization to make promises that aren't kept.

3. Manage the Customer's Experience

The Desert Springs Marriott is a beautiful resort near Palm Springs, California. I recall a visit I made there several years ago. The night before my breakfast presentation, I dined in one of the resort's fine restaurants. While the food and ambiance were very good, the standout of my dining experience was my wait person. She was prompt, attentive, and pleasant. But what I remember most happened at the end of the meal.

"Thank you for dining with us," she said as she shook my hand. Each year, because of my business travel and love of fine food, I eat at least 300 meals outside my home. And yet, this was the first time anyone had thanked me and shaken my hand! While such a move on the part of a restaurant employee might strike most customers as odd, this wait person extended her hand in a manner that I found to be classy and natural.

Then she added, "And don't miss the comet, Halle Bopp, tonight -- the sky is especially clear. Also at 7 p.m., you'll want to watch for the lunar eclipse."

In those two closing gestures, a handshake and a suggestion to view the night sky, my wait person added immensely to my enjoyment of the evening. In fact, the real treat of my dining experience had nothing to do with northern Italian cuisine! It was about courtesy and astronomy. She managed my dining experience so that it was particularly enjoyable, personal, and memorable.

No matter what business you're in, it is critical that you manage your customers' experience. Customer experience



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is a broader canvas for the service artist to paint on. It's those seemingly little touches and comments -- that often have nothing to do with your specific business -- that will make your customers remember doing business with you as personal and enjoyable.

Your competitors are managing product or service delivery. You can leapfrog them all by focusing on managing the customer's total experience.

4. Make Customers Insiders

I love my local Starbucks. They not only greet everyone when they enter the store, but the employees know my name and my order! They recognize my wife Darla as well.

You'd have to be close to my age to remember the television show Cheers. It was about a bar in Boston where "everybody knows your name." The show may not have been timeless, but the sentiment is: we like to feel included. It is no fun being an outsider.

Today's leading-edge companies make their customers insiders. Being an insider is about being know, being informed, being heard and being involved. The FedEx website receives tens of thousands of hits every day. That's because their site allows customers to track their own packages. That ability provides a sense of control reserved for someone who is part of the process rather than outside it.

What are you doing to make your customers feel like insiders?

5. Create Ownership

I have worked with many companies that practice employee ownership. Often the sense of pride, energy and commitment in such organizations are palpable. But employee ownership is not always such a rousing success. I recall one major airline's ill-fated attempt to make, and then advertise, such a move. Their posters and television spots featured the friendly faces of employee owners. Ground crew, gate agents, pilots -- all were identified as the airline's "proud owners." However, my experience, and apparently that of many other customers, was contrary to

the image of the airline's advertisements. While many employees of that airline are terrific -- and they were terrific before they became "proud owners" -- too many others don't act like owners, proud or otherwise.

Naturally, customers expect more of a business's owners than of its employees. After all, it is their business, and an employee can't be expected to show the same commitment as an owner. While making your employees owners can improve performance (and by the way, this occurs only when systems and processes are in place that allow employee owners to effectively impact organizational direction), be aware that it raises customer expectations and



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increases their irritation when employee owners don't act the part.

Be prudent when assigning and then advertising employee ownership. Ownership isn't about what you call employees; it is about how employees act.

Create a sense of ownership for your employees. Give them tangible incentives to perform. Link some part of their compensation with performance. Maybe even make them literal owners -- but think twice before you create an advertising campaign around employee ownership.

6. Have Fun

Passengers on the 6:15 a.m. United flight from Denver to San Francisco are rarely at their perkier. From experience, I know it can be a sleepy, uneventful flight. Of course, it depends on which flight attendant is on the plane's intercom.

On one such flight, as we approached San Francisco, we were treated to some announcements from a rather unorthodox flight attendant: "If you are having a hard time getting your ears to pop, I suggest you yawn widely. And if you are having a hard time yawning, ask me, and I'll tell you about my love life."

He went on, "We are on our final approach into San Francisco airport. If San Francisco is your destination, I hope you'll have a safe drive home." And then, in his best disc-jockey voice, he added, "There is some blockage on the northbound 101, and there is a stalled car at the Market Street exit. But otherwise, traffic appears to be moving smoothly."

After we touched down, the flight attendant was back on the intercom for final instructions. "Unless the person next to you has beaten me," he quipped, "let me be the first to welcome you to San Francisco. You'll notice that the airport buildings are in the distance. We don't land next to the terminal because it scares the heck out of the people inside. That's why we land way out here. That means we'll need to taxi, so please don't stand up until we are parked at the gate and the seat belt sign has been turned off."

"For those of you who are 1Ks, Premiers, and Frequent Fliers -- there are too many of you on board to mention by name, but you know who you are -- we thank you for choosing United for your extensive travels. And if you'll leave me a recent picture as you deplane, I'll be glad to mail it to your loved ones so that they'll remember what you look like."

"My final hope is that when you leave the airplane, you'll do so with a big smile on your face. That way the people inside will wonder just what it is we do up here in the friendly skies."

Take a clue from this delightful flight attendant: Take some risks. Have some fun. And just maybe your customers will have fun too.



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7. Recover Remarkably

I used to buy my homeowner's and auto insurance through an insurance brokerage. I'd been doing business with this brokerage for nearly a decade when I finally got fed up with their increasingly poor service. The service rep assigned to me was immature and incompetent, and when my wife called for a quote on a new vehicle, it took the broker a week to call back. By then we had taken our insurance business elsewhere.

I figured I owed the CEO of the business an explanation of why I had left. So I called, presented a litany of the problems I had experienced, and informed him I had taken my business elsewhere. His response? "Mr. Sanborn, it sounds like there is nothing I can do to bring back your business. I'm sorry you decided to leave."

The fact is, he might have recovered my business if only he had tried. Even the most jaded and upset customers might reconsider going elsewhere if the provider makes a sincere effort to regain their loyalty.

Given the cost of acquiring a new customer, to give up on saving an existing customer's loyalty is a costly proposition. Even the best service providers aren't perfect. But when they do make a mistake, they recover remarkably. Consider the following experience...

Based on previous pleasant stays at Ritz Carlton hotels, I had developed some high service expectations. However, one subsequent stay at the Philadelphia Ritz Carlton fell far short of those expectations. I was disappointed at the surprising lack of customer service. I felt it my duty to share my disappointment with the general manager prior to my check-out. When I finished outlining my dissatisfactions, the general manager apologized -- sincerely and without excuses.

But what he did next was most astounding. "Mr. Sanborn," he said, "I regret that I can't turn back the clock and prevent the problems that occurred from happening. Your room balance, of course, shows zero." I was puzzled -- what did he mean?

He answered, "Sir, I would not expect you to pay for a stay at our property that was short of your expectations." (My bill had been more than \$400!) "And the next time you are in Philadelphia, I would like to invite you to stay with us again -- as our guest with my compliments. You'll be receiving a letter to that effect from me soon." And I did.

Needless to say, my disappointment was more than compensated for by this remarkable recovery. In my opinion, that's what makes Ritz Carlton among the best service providers in the world. Period.

Remember, it's rarely ever too late to save a customer's business if you recover remarkably.

8. Involve Everyone in Improvement

Unique Ideas and the ability to implement them drive your business. And a critical key to success is your ability to



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involve everyone in generating ideas for improvement, or taking advantage of what I call "cumulative expertise." Two of your best resources for such idea generation are employees and customers.

How often do you ask your employees for suggestions about improving service? And how well do they respond? I've seen employee suggestion boxes covered with cobwebs. If you aren't getting lots of employee suggestions, you aren't asking well.

How does Dana do it? For one thing, 70% of all suggestions are used. For most employees, implementation of their suggestions is the best reward. Employees everywhere are tired of making suggestions that are never used.

Second, Dana rewards those who make suggestions with luncheons and other awards. For example, a plant in Chihuahua, Mexico, rewards employees \$1.89 for each idea submitted and another \$1.89 if the idea is used. (Of course the appropriate amount of monetary reward that is depends on location and pay. Remember, you get what you pay for.)

How about customer suggestions? Consider formalizing a process for soliciting, rewarding, and implementing customer suggestions. Most customers would feel gratified if a service provider even simply acknowledged their suggestions. What I'm advocating is more radical. If you pay employees (people you are already paying) extra for their suggestions, why not pay customers (people paying you) for their best ideas? Maybe it's time for you to involve everyone in improvement by offering them much more than the proverbial penny for their thoughts.

9. Make Teamwork Work

Forget the concept of "internal customers." Like so many in business, I used to buy into the quality improvement process definition of a customers as "the next person in the process." It sounded like a good idea at the time. The problem with this philosophy is that the paying customer ends up at the end of the line. I soon realized that focusing on internal customers diverts your attention from the only customer who matters -- the one who buys your product or service.

Don't misunderstand. I still believe that service is created from the inside out. Employees who don't feel well served probably won't serve well. But for the people inside your organization, the most appropriate description is "teammates" not "internal customers," because, frankly, providing "internal service" isn't the point. You don't get extra credit for that. Your real, live customers aren't going to say, "You know, they treated me like dirt, but they took such wonderful care of each other!"

Promote the concept of teamwork in your organization. Teamwork works when there's communication, cooperation, and a desire to work together for a common goal. Rally your teammates around the goal of better serving customers and securing their undying loyalty.



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10. Do Everything Better

When my younger brother graduated from high school, I gave him some of the only advice I would ever offer unsolicited. Inside his graduation card I wrote, "To be a success, do whatever you do better than anybody else who does it." I had no idea what career path my brother would follow, but I knew that being the best at whatever he chose would guarantee his success.

Recently, one of the world's most renowned restaurateurs was asked the secret of his restaurant's success. He said the secret is in doing everything they do as well as they can do it. He added that on his way to the top, he learned that it doesn't matter if you're making french fries, as long as you make them the best french fries anyone has ever eaten.

Take a look at what everyone else is doing -- your direct competitors as well as the best service providers in other industries -- and set a simple goal to do what they do better than they're doing it. Load up a mini-van of employees, and take a field trip to a terrific service provider. Take notes. Capture the best ideas. And then put your own unique spin on them.

Ask everyone in your organization, "How can we do it more, better, faster or different?" Make them sick of hearing this question so that they'll take you seriously. Take your cue from Midwest Express airline where every seat is first-class sized. Or from FedEx who built its business on the concept of faster delivery, guaranteed. Or from Disneyland, who unabashedly calls itself "the happiest place on earth."

Leave no stone unturned nor any idea untried. Do everything better.

The Challenge

Exceptional customer service. It is a simple concept but not often achieved. To be anything more than a fleeting burst of brilliance, your organization must commit to a comprehensive service strategy. But beyond that, you must also commit to the hard work that follows. Your strategy must be implemented in such a way that everyone not only knows what to do to give exceptional service, but they actually do it -- consistently and persistently. That is the practice of exceptional service.

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