

## Memorable Solutions Where Has Service Gone?

I was recently asked to give my thoughts on “what’s wrong with Customer Service (is it diminished or trimmed out of budgets)?”

It’s not so much that service is broken as it is the lack of passion and focus behind it that’s missing. I don’t think budgets are trimmed. I think they are misaligned. Too many resources are placed into programs designed to make-up for poor product design and/or lack of talent to relate to the customer. Money is too often spent on the “icing” without any concern for what’s in the “cake”. No amount of slick advertising, image campaigns or PR will make-up for an average product or for people who don’t care about what they do.

Here are seven more specific insights into the problem...

**Adaptation-** Memorable Experiences are difficult to produce because they can’t be prescribed. It’s an evolutionary process which occurs by building relationships with customers. While the product (thing being sold, or the physical hotel) is relatively static, customer relationships are not. It’s more than smiles and using someone’s name. It’s about being “adaptive”, and continually moving the experience along a path of higher and higher expectations.

**The Wrong Audience-** This one seems to affect all types of companies, large or small. It’s easy to fall victim to thinking that a product or service will be liked by everyone, especially by the producer who is typically tied to it emotionally. But, a very large part of providing memorable experiences is relating to the **correct** customer. It is extremely difficult to “change” customers’ beliefs about anything. So, rather than using push and bully tactics to “force” people to like the experience, find people who are truly interested in feeling what was designed into the product or service in the first place. It’s so true that an experience can’t be “all things to all people”. And, when that’s attempted, it just aggravates those looking for a different experience....to the point they might even think you provide “bad” service.

**Too Big-** Large companies are typically not as good as small ones at consistently providing memorable experiences. Malcolm Gladwell devotes a chapter to this subject in his excellent book, [The Tipping Point](#), in which he refers to the phenomenon as “the rule of 150”. He illustrates that once an organization, club, culture or community hits 150 people, it changes...because the inhabitants, faced with too many choices, can no longer focus on the development of meaningful relationships with each other. Hence, the organization splinters into sub-groups working independently from another.

This is a powerful concept as it relates to providing memorable service and the adaptation principle I wrote about previously.

Assuming that you are not an organization of one (where the problem of “big” certainly doesn’t apply), the critical component to successful adaptation is the transfer of new knowledge to others in the company. Without this transfer, anything learned is dead, and likewise is the process of enhancing the guest experience. In large companies, the transfer of this valuable information is either interrupted or delayed to the point where it just takes too long to work effectively. For instance, if Mr. Johnson is allergic to nuts, it’s likely that the restaurant staff may know, but far less probable that housekeeping ever gets this vital information. So, who removes the nuts from the mini bar? Yes, Mr. Johnson knows not to eat the nuts in the mini bar. But, if they were removed and replaced with his favorite chocolate bar, he’ll likely notice...and remember. Smaller groups and smaller environments usually foster better teamwork and more effective communication. That simply leads to more adaptive and better service.

The other issue typical of bigger companies is the size of management. “Too many chiefs” as they say, who are interested in controlling every touch-point and customer interaction leaving the line staff powerless to adapt and “think on their feet”.

So, if the company is getting bigger, break it down into smaller more manageable pieces, flatten-out the organization, hire great people, and let them be part of the evolutionary “process”.

**The Robin Williams Effect** (see my previous [post](#))- Companies often lose sight of (or never see it to begin with) the “delivery” side of the experience equation. They are so focused on making the best widget that they seem to forget about an equally important aspect of making something really great...the people. **Passionate employees who build relationships** with customers make “memorable experiences”. Fancy lobbies, comfortable beds and great food don’t relate with your guests...people do. Without their enthusiasm, creativity and ability to think, the experience will be stale and most likely very average.

So, make sure you get a fair amount of these folks on board.

**SOP’s**- While not necessarily intended to do so, systems and procedures often limit the passion and creativity of the best people in the organization. Standards and SOP’s **should** allow people to focus on building memorable experiences by serving as reminders or taking the guesswork out of recurring tasks, in essence minimizing left brain processes. Procedures **shouldn’t** stifle

the artfulness of service or take anything away from a person's ability to think on their feet. The right brain should be left free to infuse character and emotion into the guest experience, allowing those wonderful people you hired to really exercise their passion and build customer relationships.

Another problem...systems and technology are too often implemented to serve the Chiefs vs. the Indians. Terms like efficiency, cost savings, productivity, etc., rule when these processes are developed. If you're serious about creating balance between consistency and freedom to think, start with some reflection with questions like this one...Why are people paid to perform functions instead of providing memorable experiences?

**The Purple Cow-** I'm borrowing the term from [Seth Godin](#) because it's quite perfect.

This should really be the first item on your list no matter what you're offering to the market. Forget about being a winner in the minds of the customer if there's no true commitment to being the best, or better yet, the only one doing it. Be Remarkable! And, make it more memorable with a great story...because that's what people remember, and that's what they buy.

Unfortunately, it's too often about making money first, and building something great last.

**Caring for Employees-** There's always a lot of talk in this area, and usually far less action. You hear it from HR managers and read a lot of mission statements referring to "the employer of choice". But, in many cases, it's the same companies who are doing the head scratching when it comes to lost market share and increasing customer complaints. If you have service problems, the underlying issue and root cause usually begins with how you hire and look after your people. Strategically, it's relatively easy to solve.

**Partner with the best talent available** (see my post, [The Robin Williams Effect](#)) and then **bend over backwards to take care of them**. In practice, it's very difficult to pull this off. But, the rewards of hard work are exponential when it comes to selecting and retaining the best people. The intricacies of this subject are well covered by people much smarter than me, like [Dr. Gerald Bell](#) and his [Selecting Achievers Program](#).

It's easy to tell if you have a problem. Look at three things: 1) How hard is it to attract people to work with you?; 2) How quickly do people leave?; and, 3) Are you losing or gaining customers? In essence, if you care about your staff, it will show where the "rubber meets the road".

When there are service issues, start with some serious reflection on how employees are treated, not on what they are doing wrong. My guess is that companies who are recognized for superior service truly put their people first, even ahead of their guests. On the contrary, if sales are suffering, the employees are probably doing so as well. See my earlier [post](#) for an example of a company doing a great job.

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