

Steve Miller's Ramblings

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THE RAISED BAR OF EXPECTATIONS

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Two well-to-do women are having lunch at a rather expensive and tony restaurant in New York City. After being served their entrees, the maitre d' walks up and asks: "Is anything all right?"

Is this the state of affairs regarding customer service in the US these days? Why does it seem that customer service has gone DOWNHILL over the last few years?

As I mentioned in previous *Ramblings*, I think hotels have actually gotten worse in recent time. I stood in line at the downtown Dallas Hyatt Regency recently ... in the Gold Passport line ... you know, the frequent guest line. Call me unreasonable, but I thought the Gold Passport line was a loud signal to Hyatt staffers that I was one of those people who actually spends a lot of time and money in their hotels.

While checking in, I asked the young woman helping(?) me if my room had a connecting door with the next room. (I don't know about you, but when I've got a connecting door, I can clearly hear every telephone conversation my neighbors have and every TV show they watch. Especially at 3:00 a.m., when I'm supposed to be giving a speech at 7:00 the next morning.)

So, after asking for a room without a connecting door, why was it necessary for her to let out a big sigh, roll her eyes, and then loudly state, "I MIGHT be able to find one for you, but of course, it will take a few minutes, and I don't think those people in line behind you will appreciate that."

???

Are the hotels hiring rude people on purpose these days?

And what about that same afternoon at the Dallas Convention Center during setup for the Society of Exploration Geophysicists exposition? I'm standing in an aisle, looking at the Schlumberger booth when I hear loud, persistent honking from behind. I turn around to see one of those 3-wheel motorized carts (clearly stamped "GES" on the side), no more than 12 inches behind me, with a couple of Dallas finest customer service representatives - union workers. They are looking at me

and, get this, HONKING THE HORN FOR ME TO GET OUT OF THE WAY. No verbal “Excuse me” ... just honking. And no “thank you” after I moved.

Now, tell me again why exhibitors hate unions?

At the new Washington National airport, I’m checking in at American Airlines for a flight back home to Seattle. I’m checking my LCD projector, a suitcase, and one bag with my wireless mike and other items. The woman behind the counter notices that I also have two small carryon briefcases - one with my computer. (I use two to balance myself when running through airport terminals.)

She says, “You can’t take two bags on the plane if you’re checking three.” This new rule, of course, has nothing to do with the fact that my two briefcases take up LESS room than one garment bag.

Understand, mind you, that I am one of the top 1% of the flyers on American. Not the top 1% of all flyers. The top 1% of all of American’s *most elite* flyers. My frequent flyer card has imprinted “Three Million Miles” and I’m approaching four. And she’s saying I can’t carry two bags if I’m checking three.

Why does all this terrible customer service upset me? The answer is simple:

Because they all trained me to expect more!

I expect to be treated *special* by people who are taking my money.

I expect to be treated *special* by people whose livelihood depends on whether I spend money with them or not.

I expect to be treated *special* if I have shown the willingness to spend my money over and over again with the same supplier/vendor.

Why do I expect all this *special* service? Because, over the last few years, I’ve been conditioned; conditioned by “frequent guest” programs, by a proliferation of books, articles, and speeches, by massive advertising campaigns expounding the results of Customer Satisfaction Surveys and Indexes, and by corporations’ “the customer comes first” babble.

Gimme a break. It’s all rhetoric. Over the last few years, customer service hasn’t gotten better, it’s actually gotten worse!

But then again, maybe not. Maybe all that’s happened is that Corporate America made a mistake by selling all this bull.

Oh sure, there are those corporations who exemplify the attitude of great customer service - the Nordstroms, the Ritz Carltons, the Southwest Airlines’s, the Disneys. But aren’t those companies *always* the examples? I mean, weren’t these companies the examples ten years ago? Why are they still the only consistent examples today?

Is it because they’re the only ones who have really done it? Are they the only ones who have actually made the hard decision to actually implement outstanding customer service?

Good customer service is hard. We've all come to expect a certain level of service just to meet our expectations. We expect people to treat us with respect. We expect to get fair value for our money. We expect flights to leave on time. We expect deliveries to arrive on time. We don't like to stand in line at fast food restaurants and banks (and trade shows?). We expect to be upgraded to first class or a better room.

The problem, though, is that none of us are happy with just "being satisfied." We are now in a world where we expect more. We have grown to expect the WOW.

I also recently stayed in the Loew's Hotel in Denver. This is a beautiful hotel, like all the Loew's. The room was very nice. It was well designed with a great desk for working on my computer. It had three telephones, robes, a coffee-maker, a mini-bar and an iron and full ironing board.

But there was no WOW at the Loew's. In fact, they did something that really irritated me. As I mentioned, my room had a coffee-maker. But guess what? They didn't provide complimentary coffee! You had to BUY the coffee from the mini-bar. Is that cheap, or what? Simply by making me buy the coffee, they actually became BELOW AVERAGE to me.

Think about it. Ten years ago, this would have been a GREAT room, but today it was below average, because most nice hotels have all those things for us. They've raised the bar.

The problem for the Loew's, though, is the bar is now higher than what they've chosen to deliver. I would not recommend that hotel to you. Just for a bag of coffee.

Now flip it around and look at Amazon.com. In case you haven't heard about these guys, Amazon.com is an online bookstore. They sell *a lot* of books online.

You may think that it would be difficult to give me a WOW by selling me a book online, but Amazon.com has more than met the challenge.

When you place an order with Amazon.com, several things happen for you:

- First, you get a fairly decent discount on the price of the book. I ordered *Marketing Aesthetics* this week. It retails for \$29.95, but I bought it through Amazon.com for \$21. Pretty good discount, huh?
- That same day, I received an email from them acknowledging my order, thanking me for it, and providing an estimated delivery date.
- One day later, I received another email informing me that my book had been shipped and that it went out by Priority Mail.

This is what I call great service. Beyond expected.

I've been buying from Amazon.com for over a year. Instead of driving to some bookstore, searching the aisles, hoping to find the book I want I simply go online, type in the book title, or author name, or category, and place my order with one click of my mouse. No hassle.

But that's not all. This past holiday season, I received a small package in the mail. Inside is a very nice travel coffee cup with a note from Amazon.com wishing me a happy holiday and thanking me for buying from them. Just for buying a few books!

I call that a WOW. Yes, I'd highly recommend Amazon.com to you.

But can we all be Amazon.coms? Well, of course we can, but we choose not to. Loew's chose to charge me for their coffee, even though that little bag probably cost them 25¢, or less.

But even worse are the Hyatts and American Airlines of the world. You see, they tell me I'm special through all their TV commercials, magazine ads, frequent guest newsletters, and gold cards. But then they turn around and treat me like I'm a hassle. I hate being treated like a hassle.

What about you? Do you tell your customers (exhibitors and attendees) that they're special and then create rules and situations that treat them just the opposite?

Or do you treat them like Amazon.com does me. Do you provide outstanding, BEYOND EXPECTED customer service and value and then go even farther with a totally unexpected WOW?

Before you answer, think about it long and hard. I, frankly, don't hear a lot of wow's in descriptions about trade shows from attendees and exhibitors especially exhibitors. Have you raised the bar of expectations too high or do your customers have expectations you can't possibly meet? Do you think that after fighting for a hotel room begging for delivery of your freight standing in a registration line setting up and tearing down an exhibit arguing with floor managers and so on and so on

..... well, you get the message.

Steve Miller, Kelly's Dad and a strategic director, works with both show management and corporations worldwide, advising them on competitive advantage and innovation. He also speaks to business groups around the world on corporate strategy. His website is www.theadventure.com.

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