

Steve Miller's Ramblings

(www.theadventure.com)

IT'S THE EXPERIENCE, STUPID*

*not you

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We walked through the tunnel, unfamiliar with the dark surroundings. It was unnerving to be stared at by the tunnel natives — like we were foreigners, not part of their underground society.

Maybe they knew how it felt to be stared at, I thought. Some had looks of empathy ... or was it sympathy? Others gave quick, defiant glances, as if we had intruded on their kingdom. Was it my imagination? I didn't know. My fellow explorers must have felt the same way. We all stayed close together, drawing strength from the group.

So much seemed unreal, though, like we were in some “fantasy” land. But it all seemed well planned, right down to the finest details. It may have been a small world down there, but nothing was left to chance.

We came to a fork. Do we go right or left? Several nervous glances came my way, as if I was supposed to say something. After all, I had brought them here. But now I was as much a foreigner as them. I looked up, knowing that just a few feet over our heads, thousands of people were oblivious to our presence just below. Would we be able to find our way out? I just hoped the guide I hired knew what he was doing. Joseph, if that was his real name, acted confident, but he talked a lot. Maybe too much.

I looked up and saw something written on the wall. It appeared to be some sort of “Laws” of the land. There were only seven. So simple, I thought, but they seemed to work. There was a sense of order down here, despite the frenetic buzz of activity. Everybody in the tunnel seemed to understand the importance of their role in supporting the Laws.

Suddenly, a fellow traveler, one we called “Patrick,” yelled, “Look over there!” Our heads jerked.

It was like nothing any of us had ever seen before! Was it human? Was it more than one human? Looking closer, it appeared to be just two young adults, holding hands. But ... but ... they were

different. From the waist up, yes, they were normal. But from the waist down ... she was ... she was ... **Minnie Mouse** and he was **Donald Duck!** We recoiled. We realized it was no dream. We had stumbled into the **Magic Kingdom Utilidor!**

Okay, okay. I know what you're thinking. Don't quit your day job, Steve. Hey, you try to write like Mickey Spillane! At least I didn't start the piece with "It was a dark and stormy night!"

But, it's true. We walked underneath the Magic Kingdom in the "Utility Corridor" built at Disney World in Orlando. Our **Assn.Net** group (a private club of associations committed to ongoing enhancements and value-adding to their expositions) held our first meeting of 1998. We wanted to step outside the trade show industry and learn about innovation and customer service from one of the most admired companies in the world. And we learned plenty.

Do you remember the presidential race between Clinton and Bush? When was that, back in 1992? Clinton's top campaign strategist was a crafty, out-of-the-box thinker named James Carville.

The polls had Clinton and Bush running pretty close there at the beginning. One of the turning points came during a press conference Carville was holding. The weight and pressures of the campaign were obviously taking their toll on him, when a reporter asked what Carville thought were the top issues.

Showing his impatience, Carville snapped, "It's the economy, stupid!" And the campaign was never the same.

A 1997 Louis Harris & Associates survey of Americans show a dramatic increase in the amount of time devoted to work activities and equally dramatic decline in leisure time over the last 25 years. In 1973, our parents were working 40.6 hours per week on average and playing for roughly 26.2 hours. In 1997, we worked 50.8 hours and played only 19.5 hours.

Think about those numbers. We're working, on average, one entire workweek PER MONTH more than our parents did. Does that make you want to run home and hug your teddy bear?

So, is it too much for them to ask that we make expositions an enjoyable experience? When we ask people to give us several days of their lives to exhibit at or attend one of our expositions, we are asking them to part with one of their most precious commodities — time. Maybe we need to look beyond just the measurable ROI that trade shows can provide and look at also making the experience FUN!

I mentioned seven "laws" posted in the Utilidor. Actually, they were posted throughout the Utilidor, as a constant reminder to Disney employees, called "cast members." These seven rules for treating guests of Disney World are designed to enhance their experience while in one of the parks.

Here are the rules:

1. Make eye contact and smile.
2. Greet and welcome each and every guest.

3. Seek out guest contact.
4. Provide immediate service.
5. Display appropriate body language at all times.
6. Preserve the “magical” guest experience.
7. Thank each and every guest.

Obviously, each one of these is simple, common sense for treating other people, especially our customers. And you might rightly say that you and your staff do a pretty good job of following this list.

But let’s think about this for a minute. These rules are for **EVERYONE** working at Disney World, not just a select few. And you and your staff are a select few.

Hey, if we’re honest with ourselves, most people don’t exactly leap up and down with excitement and anticipation about attending or exhibiting at a trade show. Last week I facilitated a focus group of attendees and asked their thoughts about attending trade shows, in general.

One veteran of over 20 years said, “Hey, a trade show is a trade show is a trade show. The products might be different, but the experience of attending is the same.”

I didn’t like to hear that and neither should you. But don’t be quick to say your show is different; that the experience is different. There are lots of “amusement” parks in our cities. But it was Walt Disney who created the “theme” parks of today. Theme parks that enliven all the senses, appeal to everybody, and create an “experience” that seems tailored for the individual. They go all out of their way to make each and every guest feel special and welcome. Can you really say that about your show?

If we were to ask each one of our customers, both exhibitors and attendees, about their experience at our show, how would we rate?

Like I said, the rules at Disney apply to everyone, from the street sweepers all the way up to Michael Eisner. No exceptions. The message to customers, “You are important,” is spread by everyone. When was the last time you had a bad experience with a Disney employee? And if, by some chance, you did, weren’t you surprised?

But in our industry we’ve got exceptions all over the place. We don’t actively and passionately work to get each and every “cast member” of our trade shows to buy into the same rules and treat our “guests” with great service.

Can you imagine how the experience of our exhibitors would be if they had service providers who:

1. Make eye contact and smile.
2. Greet and welcome each and every exhibitor.
3. Seek out exhibitor contact.
4. Provide immediate service.
5. Display appropriate body language at all times.
6. Preserve the “magical” exhibitor experience.

7. Thank each and every exhibitor.

I think your exhibitors would go into shock.

And what about attendees? Is it possible to improve their “experience” as well?

To be sure, there are expositions out there who just don’t care. In fact, there are too many. But what about you? Do you care? Do you want to change the experience for your exhibitors and attendees or are you satisfied with, “A trade show is a trade show is a trade show?”

Do NOT Use the Hotel Royal Plaza Orlando for Your Next Meeting

I’ve tried to stop. Believe me, I’ve tried to stop writing about hotels. But they seem to WANT to set me off.

Our meeting in Orlando was held at the Hotel Royal Plaza, a hotel on the Disney property. This is significant, because in order to have the backstage tour of the Magic Kingdom, we HAD to stay at a Disney hotel.

We had several “challenges” with getting any hotel to take us. But the thing that really blew me away was what happened to one of the members of our little group.

Our member (name withheld) was scheduled to attend the meeting, but had a slight emergency come up back at the office a couple of days before. She called the **Royal Plaza** TWO days before she was scheduled to arrive and was informed that they had a FIVE DAY deadline for cancellation. She would have to still pay for one night — \$186.43.

Our office called to help get this straightened out. Nothing doing. No exceptions. They charged her.

Let me get this straight:

- We had 26 decision-makers from 17 major associations in the U.S.
- The Orlando CVB held a reception because of future meeting potential.
- Several Assn.Net members held site visits at the convention center and local hotels.
- She was the only cancellation.

Way to go, **Royal Plaza**. They say that an happy customer tells 4 people and an unhappy customer tells 20. I just told over 1200. AND a lot of them are meeting decision makers.

But you got your \$186.43.

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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