

Steve Miller's Ramblings

(www.theadventure.com)

Everything Walks the Talk

As I begin writing this *RAMBLING*, I'm on a flight right now winging my way to Pittsburgh.

This is the beginning of a three-week trip. Now, I'm not saying that to solicit any sympathy. I know you better than that. You're probably thinking one of two things:

"Been there, done that, Steve. I know how those long trips are!"

or

"Geez, what an idiot!"

Besides working on the flight preparing for my SAE meeting, I'm also setting up my to-do list for the next three weeks. We've got to be efficient and effective, right? Which, as we all know is hard to do when traveling.

In planning my trip, I remembered that I'm going to be in Anaheim for the annual National Speakers Association convention (part of my own continuing education to continually improve our services for you).

This will be my 11th NSA convention, and I never get tired of attending. The only downside, though, is that everybody attending is a *speaker*. There aren't any *listeners*, so it can get to be a little chaotic. (Gee, I wonder why more spouses don't like to attend?)

I digress. As I said, the meeting is in Anaheim this year, which, of course, makes us all think about Disneyland ... which is the inspiration for this *RAMBLING*.

When you think of visiting Disneyland, what first thought about the park comes to mind? It's an interesting question, because I often do ask that at consulting meetings and to audiences.

What did you first think about? Was it Mickey Mouse? Was it the incredibly creative rides - Space Mountain, Pirates of the Caribbean, or maybe the Haunted Mansion? Was it the unbelievably cheerful and helpful Disneyland "cast members" (that's what they call their employees)? Was it the constant entertainment - the parades, the bands, the fireworks?

I'd be willing to bet it wasn't any of those ... even though each one is certainly a strength in anybody's book.

I'm betting you probably thought about how CLEAN Disneyland was. Every single time I've asked that question, this is the first answer I get.

Clean? Clean is a top of mind thought for all of us when we think about Disneyland?

The fact is that Disneyland is obsessed with clean. Actually, the fact is that Disneyland is obsessed with DETAILS, because they know that a customer's overall experience can be enhanced or even ruined by a small, insignificant detail. They know that it's not enough to provide an unforgettable experience with state-of-the-art rides, top-drawer entertainment, or happy employees. They look for ways to go above and beyond making the total experience the most memorable you've ever had. And they assume that *everything and everyone* in the park can have an impact.

The next time you're in Disneyland, check out what I mean about their fanatical attention to detail. Those metal hitching posts lining Main Street? Did you know those are stripped and repainted EVERY night? Did you know that every employee, including Michael Eisner is considered part of the custodial staff when in the park? That's why it's so clean. Did you know the bricks in Sleeping Beauty's Castle are larger at the bottom than at the top to give the illusion of height? Have you ever had a Disney cast member NOT want to help you?

You may be asking why all this fanatical attention to detail is important and what difference it makes. Disney's philosophy is simple. Over 70% of Disneyland's visitors have been there before. They know that every time you come back, you *need* to experience something new. Otherwise, you'll eventually get bored. Disney wants EVERY experience to be a WOW. They know that everything walks the talk.

Now compare this with other companies and services you've experienced. Let's take HOTELS for example. It seems the hotel industry has been struck with a serious case of insensitivity to customer needs. In a recent independent Zagat survey of frequent travelers, hotels were really given a black eye. Customer satisfaction nose-dived in less than a year, yet the average hotel room cost went up 23% in the same time.

Chicago hotels, in particular, seem to be doing everything they can to take advantage of their current high-demand situation.

At the last three Chicago trade shows I've personally been involved in there has been a distinct difference in attitude and behavior. When booking a room in a Chicago hotel, you must **pay** the first night's charge in advance (or at a deposit), no matter how far ahead you book the room. Of course, all you who use Chicago know this. But did you also know that Chicago hotels are now running your credit card charges EVERY DAY? So, if you stay for five days, your card is being charged five times. Pretty slick, huh? Complain and they just shrug and say, well, that's the way it is.

I've started to run into similar bad customer-relationship situations in other cities, too. At the Atlanta Hilton, I got a message that a fax came in. I asked if they could deliver it, but nobody was available. I went down 25 floors to the Mail Desk, as instructed, but nobody was there. I asked a bellman if he could help and he pointed at the front desk. I stood in line at the front desk for several minutes only to have the desk clerk call over that same bellman to help me. He couldn't find the fax in the file and told me to go back to the front desk. Back at the front desk the attitude was indifference. The exact words were, "We received only one fax last night and it was delivered."

I won't bore you with all the rest of the stupid little details. But, in summary it went like this:

... we never found the first fax

... I received another message. Same exact thing happened.

... I complained to TWO assistants managers. Both said they'd handle the problem and get back to me.

... I never hear from them again.

I shared my frustration with Judy Kohles, of the Christian Booksellers Association. She reminded me of problems they had with the same hotel. It seems a new front desk clerk decided to flex his new found “power,” and proceeded to walk several CBA Convention attendees. When asked by CBA and their travel company for some flexibility, the new clerk flat refused.

What is our attitude about the Atlanta Hilton right now? One little fax problem for me, an uncooperative front desk clerk for Judy, and we’ve got a very negative perception about the entire Atlanta Hilton (and maybe Hilton Hotels, in general).

There’s an old saying, “One bad stewardess can bring down an entire airline.” Of course, nowadays, we’d say “flight attendant.” (I said it was an OLD saying.)

As the title says, “*Everything* walks the talk.” And everything at your trade show either enhances or detracts from the perception that your exhibitors and attendees have about you and your organization.

What type of experience do people have with your show? What areas are causing problems and aggravation for participants? From the moment people arrive in the city until they leave, **EVERYTHING WALKS THE TALK.**

- What happens to people when they land? What type of message is being carried by the airport personnel? Is it easy to find your way around the airport?
- What about ground transportation? Are the taxi lines long and uncomfortable? I stood line for 45 minutes in 90+ degrees waiting for a taxi recently in Las Vegas. Guess what type of comments were being said by the crowd.
- How about the taxis? Is there some rule somewhere that Atlanta cabbies are supposed to loudly proclaim their unhappiness when you aren’t going to the airport? I’ve kept track. In the last seven cab rides from my hotel to work with Coca-Cola, six of mine did this. Even though I’ve chewed each one of them out, it still doesn’t make me eager to get a cab in Atlanta.
- And what about the unions? What exactly is the reason that the trade show industry, the very industry that gives these people jobs, continues to put up with terrible service and surly attitudes? Year after year, show after show, the top exhibitor complaints are **STILL** union related problems. What is stopping us from fixing this?
- How long are your registration lines? I know you continually looking for ways to alleviate this, but maybe we’re looking in the wrong direction for solutions. I stood in line to ride the Haunted Mansion at DisneyWorld for almost an hour. I was entertained by passing musicians. There were funny grave markers in the yard to read. Inside, there were more distractions with pictures that appeared to follow us as we walked. A room with no escape that became an elevator. Eerie music, sounds and a periodic scream kept us on our toes. There were also signs along the way telling us how many more minutes until we were on the ride. The Indiana Jones line was even funnier.
- What types of communications are typically being sent out from your office? Do most of your letters, emails, and direct mail pieces **ASK** for something from your customers and prospects? One of the things that drives me crazy about being an associate member of IAEM is the fact that I am bombarded almost weekly with solicitations for giving them money. Buy space in our show. Sponsor a meeting. Buy ad space in our magazine. Give money to the foundation. Give,

give, give. I finally realized that IAEM almost never sent me anything that would help me be successful. The benefit of my membership was minimal.

- How would you like to be in competition with Disney ... or Nordstrom ... or Southwest airlines? The fact is you already are, even if you don't know it. Your competition is anybody that your customers (exhibitors and attendees) compare you to. How do you handle problems when they arise? If your customers shop at Nordstrom, that's who they compare you to. Are you as innovative and detailed oriented as Disney? That's who they compare you with. Are your shows fun? If they flew in on Southwest, that's who your competition is.

Take a close look at the most successful people and companies in the world today (not just trade shows). You'll find that, even though they might be well known for one particular trait, they also pay very close attention to the little things. And when it comes to customer perception, it's never the lions and tigers who get to you in the jungle - it's the mosquitoes.

Does *everything* walk it talk in your organization and trade show?

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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