

THE ONLY DIFFERENTIATOR LEFT IN THE GUEST EXPERIENCE IS SERVICE



Nothing like a world-wide recession to expose our Brand vulnerabilities. Our advantages have been shed, slashed and even trashed. Everything has been discounted to leverage some type of parity and attractiveness. Now, value is seen as two-for-ones, 50% off, good through October, meals for two under \$10, children and pets fly for free, upgrades in suites, cars and Loyalty points. What an uphill battle we face, when the economy does turn, as we try to reclaim our market posture. Some will never succeed; others will simply fall by the wayside.

We look to the tripod of the Guest Experience - product, facility and service. Our Brand deliverables have been under intense scrutiny by all our stakeholders. Our investors insist that we reduce costs significantly. Vendor bills are pushed out. We have asked our stretched employees to do more with less. And, of course, our Consumer wants a deal. We just want to survive! That memorable Guest Experience has been reduced to our service promise and how we deliver on that (most would say not particularly well). Sensationalism sells papers, news content and air waves, but will it fill our rooms, restaurants, attractions and stores? No. What a marketing coup to refocus Hospitality/Retail success on Service.

Service! That's what our audience wants to hear about, and a simple test for you (providers) is to review your Guest Comments and Feedback. Your bath water may be tepid, the entrée cold, your merchandising dull, but most feedback is wrapped around Service lapse. "I had to wait forever", "Sally was rude", "I could not get a waiter", "The sales associate ignored me", "Why don't they smile", "She was too busy on the phone", etc. You've read it, you've seen it, and experienced it yourself. So, what's new? The marketplace has been focused on the negative, yet the heart of Hospitality (applied across all of Retail) is the service aspect: attention, care, comfort, security. This is ultimately what the Consumer seeks. Accentuate the positive through an emphasis on Service. We have all those marketing dollars to promote our business(es). So, we try to parlay our advantages: sun, snow, natural beauties, history, celebrity chefs, culture, spas, designer jeans and the like. Just like everyone else. We may tout our community, such as accommodations, dining, recreation and shopping. Just like everyone else. We make promises with no guarantees. We say we shall deliver, but with no credibility. The Guest Experience may be memorable but for all the wrong reasons, for a big step in the process was neglected - you forgot to elevate the behaviors, attitudes, competencies and perceptions of those who dramatically and directly impact that experience - your employees, really, your Ambassadors.

Ultimately, if you cannot establish, raise and inspire service standards of excellence, your Brand will be devalued. Some Brands have this built in, such as Ritz Carlton, the Four Seasons and Nordstroms. Starbucks, in its' rebranding effort, has recognized the value of the service aspect. Destination areas, such as the State of Oregon and the Pocono Mountain Vacation Bureau, emphasize service delivery. The experience they all market is laced with service requisites. Hmm! Marketing dollars, the Guest Experience, Service delivered, expectations met, let me tell others, book me next year. So, what have we learned here:O Service Standards of Excellence raise the service bar as a vehicle to achieve greater Guest satisfaction and potential for a return visit.

They become the very foundation of your performance, removing that vacuum of best intentions.

Standards provide consistency and reliability. There are fewer surprises.

They are measurable, providing a quantitative Performance Management tool.

Successful implementation provides for marketable Brand positioning. You are welcome to test this out. What are your Customers saying about their experience? Is your marketing Plan the usual - throw ideas against the wall and see what sticks? Evaluate what is the Value Proposition in the marketplace and plan a strategy which accentuates your positives, embracing service, in a landscape of Hospitality/Retail negativity and angst. Commit to Service Excellence, market the heck out of it, and your differentiation will be measured by prosperity. You can take this to the Bank (Oops, another Brand segment in trouble). By Ragsdale Hendrie The author believes that Remarkable Hospitality is the portal to the Guest Experience.

Date: 2009-08-03

Article link:

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