

'TIS THE SEASON TO FIND FOLLY... RETAIL BUSINESS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME!



My dinner partner this Thanksgiving was my sister-in-law's Mother, a gracious woman of a certain age. She was also one of the first Stewardesses for a major airline, still travels, has a sharp eye for style and substance and is very wise. We naturally talked about Customer Service - then and now. We all can bemoan the current deterioration in service, sadly demonstrated daily by the airline industry, which once stood for attention, care, respect, empathy and the highest level of service delivery. Flying was fun, exciting, an exhilarating experience and memorable, primarily for how we were treated.

Consider the memories we take home now! We are pushed, prodded, corralled, ignored and distained. Those good old days are well gone, and the airline business will never be the same. Ah, she and I laughed and commiserated, sharing a wealth of humbling war stories, most of which could have been turned positively had one (really anyone) paid the slightest attention to our various predicaments and woes. Much of laughter comes from the discomfort of another, the source of the tale, and Retail Businesses (way beyond the airlines) of 2009 looking to 2010 have all the signs of the further demise of service, just when an upturn is upon us (apparently) and service delivery could be the true differentiator, which makes or breaks our various enterprises. From where will our service surge come? We all have been merely holding on, barely.

Our product has been definitively discounted, renovation and innovation placed on hold, investment totally absent, inventory reduced, our staff diminished (numerically and emotionally) - it is tough to get out of bed some mornings. In the back of our minds, many still see halcyon days ahead - foolish, for that dream is shattered. We have new realities, unshakable and unquenched, and we need to pay attention and plan. It will not be business as usual! Joe Sharkey, who writes the "On the Road" column for the New York Times has some acerbic observations, using the Hotel Industry as a beacon of what was once the symbol of Hospitality, and he worries that "...the general quality of the hotel experience could continue to decline." This is a harbinger for other Retail businesses with Customer Contact, as well - restaurants, entertainment, attractions, stores, and, most certainly, our Destination areas. He is concerned, as well as column contributor, Lalia Rach, the Dean of the Hospitality Program at NYU, that Hoteliers simply do not get it, and Customer Service is the key ingredient. As Ms. Rach stated, "Will customers be asking, 'You really want me to pay this kind of money - for that kind of Service?'"

The American Consumer now really understands the quality-value price equation, and I am not sure that has sunk into the hotel industry. That is the new normal". The new normal should surprise no one, as we are all Consumers, and we experience those same lapses in Retail - the botched order for lunch, the clerk who is talking with her best friend, eyes averted, smiles absent, the wayward waiter, the surly ticket taker - it is like we are back at the airport. Oh, Red Cap... For those Doubting Thomases out there, what are your Customers, Guests and Patrons saying? No news is really bad news, providing you are even gathering that information. How do you know how you are doing, what is working (and not), where do you need attention in your operation, unless you ask your Customer? That is the lynchpin to the Customer Experience - their Feedback, responses which are real time, actionable and credible.

Without your own system in place, you have no means to validate your performance. As a further

extension, your Customers will tell you their opinions anyway through other sources, like on-line reviews, Social Media and blogs. Bad news travels just as quickly as good, and the Internet extrapolates the old word of mouth to an open book of commentary. Best to manage and structure that communication. The airline industry once had the strongest and most prevalent Standards of Performance, focused primarily on safety and service.

The industry was ideal for many years. In an emergency, they are still topped, but their Service aspects have been decimated; airline personnel are dispirited and multi-tasked, bombarded by a similarly impatient, caustic traveler. In other retail businesses, circumstances are not quite as dire, but if you have no Standards or have allowed them to be bypassed or reduced the emphasis, you have nothing to differentiate your Brand from others. Standards must be aggressively pursued, constantly enunciated - practiced, punctuated and paramount. They define your business! Lastly, we must look to our Ambassadors, those who deliver our Brand message (the waitress, Front Desk, Sales Associate, etc.), much like those very visible Stewards/esses. With all the staff realignments and transitions, our people are anxious, tired, and unmotivated.

Additionally, the Service sector represents multi-generations and cultures, typically lower-paid, heavily female without the benefit of higher education. They have weathered the storm with you; they are the loyal, hard-working, dedicated talent, who will make your Retail surge successful. Invest in their training, encourage their dreams, engage their knowledge, treat them respectfully. This is the time for Training and Development, to broadcast your goals and their part in the ascendancy, to establish meaningful standards to meet your objectives and the expectations of your Customers.

My dinner partner told me there were associations for retired flight personnel, called "Clipped Wings". Looking at the current Retail service environment, I thought how appropriate. Clipped does not mean broken. We can bring our service delivery back to health. The airlines may never do that, but other Retail operations can, and their Brands will soar!

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