

AN ULTIMATE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CHALLENGE - CRUISE LINES



The rest of us in Retail and the service industry have it easy. We say visit our shops, dine with us, spend a night, give us a call, enjoy a round of golf, try this on, watch your favorite team and so on.

We have that moment to WOW, a specific short window to make the Experience memorable. We are oriented to the moment - orchestrate the one meal, present the goods, address a particular problem, conduct the tour, etc. We also have the chance to recover from a lapse - a lapse of attention, service, and credibility.

There is one industry which does not have the benefit of hit or miss - the Cruise Lines.

Understand that their "Customers" are with them for anywhere from three to forty full days and nights, serving meals, entertaining them, providing rest, relaxation, fun and nourishment around the clock. The big difference is you just cannot get up and leave, for this is a "captured" audience, and you need to make it right, consistently, all the time. Their guest simply cannot depart at a whim or in a huff!

Consider who provides that level of service, usually an international staff, representing all types of languages, cultures, religions and backgrounds. There is the challenge - how do you create a level of performance excellence and Customer Experience culture.

Of course, they have hired foremost for attitude, as everything else can be taught. But what are they provided? A Job Description, a Handbook, any type of formal orientation, other than "walk around with Mary" or "here is how the register works, go get 'em!" How do you communicate with them? Only when there is a problem, at your leisure, or when there is a complaint. How do you recognize performance, especially superb performance? The litany of "good job", the pats on the back, or no response at all: they, just like you, have the opportunity to transform behavior, so it reflects a high level of performance expectation and your statement to passengers (or your Guests and Customers) of a guest-centric commitment.

This all starts with the "knowns", your Hospitality Performance Standards. These are written, shared, discussed, reinforced, reviewed again and again all the time. This is attention to detail for service-centered Standards at its finest, ultimately creating one Experience across the board and for every aspect of the cruise operation from casino to spa to boutiques and shops, entertainment, dining and accommodations.

The cruise lines do have an advantage. As ship safety is the most important concern, the management organization is structured with a no-nonsense chain of command and strict compliance. In our other retail operations the structure is much looser. But, Cruise lines have an esprit de corps which no one else has. It is wrapped around the environment (sea and circumstance), protocols to maintain safety, and a commitment to service excellence around the clock, reinforced at every level all the time.

A colleague, Peter Starks, Director of the Cruise Institute of the Red Global Group, who provides Training, Development and Guest Experience expertise to the Cruise Line industry, captures the essence quite well, regarding staff, who:

- Know that service, especially Person to Person, is the differentiator;
- Are committed to the Service paradigm;

- Are fully in the conversation; and
- Are delivering at a level that keep Lines at incredibly high occupancy with a significant return guest ratio.

As he states, "The company, the guest, and the staff are all the better for it. I wish you could experience the refreshing atmosphere of 250 crew, with a United Nations of backgrounds, all pulling on the same guest-centric rope. It lifts everyone."

We may read about that unusual rogue wave, or a bout with food poisoning, or a person overboard. This makes the eager news cycle. But, what is not covered is the great success of these voyages, the surging popularity of that Experience and the people who make the difference. We all can learn and adapt.

By Ragsdale Hendrie

The author believes that Remarkable Service is the portal to the Memorable Customer Experience. Seek solutions at: www.hospitalityperformance.com For full disclosure, the closest the author was to an "at sea experience" was aboard aircraft carriers for two years as lowly ship's company.

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