

True Professionalism The Core of Service Excellence - By Dennis Snow

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I don't like to shop. Clothes shopping, grocery shopping, car shopping; it doesn't matter I don't like it. I want to get in, get what I want (fast), and get out. That's my strategy when I have to shop. Two recent shopping experiences, however, were pleasant surprises.

Both of these experiences showcased customer service at its best, and its most simple. Once again I was reminded that great service isn't about grand acts, it's about common courtesy, artfully delivered.

The first story took place while on vacation in Chicago. I needed to buy a pair of casual shoes (I had forgotten mine at home). I found myself in a store called the Walking Company in a Chicago mall. A friend once told me that it was a good store. It was crowded, so I almost left. But one of the salespeople made eye contact with me. It wasn't the kind of eye contact that said, "Oh no, another customer." Instead, it was eye contact that said, "I know you're there, and I'll be right with you." It was good eye contact.

So I browsed around for a couple of minutes and found a pair of shoes I liked. Sure enough, the salesperson was right next to me and she said, "Sorry about the wait, let's get you some shoes." I showed her the pair I was interested in and asked to try a size ten. She said, "Let's measure your foot just to make sure." I know that I wear a size ten, but her whole demeanor showed that she wanted to make sure I got the right shoes. She was a professional.

She measured my foot and said, "Size ten is right, but you have a very Reubenesque' foot." I didn't know what that meant but she sure seemed to know what she was talking about. "I've got to tell you, the type of shoe you've selected won't be the most comfortable for you. I think this other style would feel much better." Being the skeptic that I am I looked at the price of her suggested shoes to see how much she was upselling me. Same price. Hmm. With nothing to lose I tried on the style she suggested and they were extremely comfortable. Enough time has passed since buying the shoes that any psychological effect has passed they are truly the most comfortable pair of casual shoes I've ever owned (I wear them all the time).

As I paid for the shoes, the salesperson continued to wow me. She said, "If you ever buy a pair of shoes somewhere else, and I don't know why you would, be sure to tell the salesperson that the arches in your foot have fallen just a little, and you need shoes with some arch support just like these."

When I get good service like this, I want to keep a good thing going. I asked her if there is a Walking Company in Orlando, where I live. "Absolutely, it's at the Millennium Mall." I thanked her (sincerely) and left. Since then I've bought two pair of dress shoes at the Orlando Walking Company, both times with great service and incredibly comfortable shoes. I can't imagine buying shoes anywhere else. And I've sent plenty of friends there.

Now, let's look at what this Walking Company salesperson did that caused this to be a great shopping experience. I'll analyze the details in a moment, but one word sums up her style professional. This lady was a professional in every sense of the word. Her skills would apply anywhere. The skills that she demonstrated are as applicable to a bank, hospital, theme park, or law office as they are to a shoe store. Here are four universal traits of a professional in any job position:

1. Professionals are responsive

When I entered the store, the salesperson made immediate eye contact with me. It was sincere eye contact the kind of eye contact that would've made me feel guilty had I just turned around and left. It was eye contact that said she knew I was there and cared that I was there. And as soon as she was finished with her customer she came right over to help me and apologized for the wait.

The store was busy. But I noticed that everyone was being helped. The salespeople had mastered the art of handling more than one customer at a time while making each customer feel like he/she was the only one. None of the salespeople looked frantic, they just looked responsive.

2. Professionals are knowledgeable

This salesperson knew about shoes. On the other hand, I know nothing about shoes other than they're brown or black. Seeing that this was the case, she took charge of the situation and made sure that I was getting a pair of shoes that were right for me. I benefited from the knowledge that she had.

There is an art to sharing knowledge, I admit. Some customers may say, 'I wear a size ten, I know what I want. Just get it for me.' By spending a moment talking to me, however, it was obvious that I was flexible. She was able to be at her professional best and recommend a pair of shoes that were better for me than the ones I had chosen. Professionals read the situation and adapt to the knowledge of the customer. With a couple of well-asked questions there's no reason that an employee can't determine the level of knowledge a customer has. The employee can then best determine how to add value.

Of course, all of this means knowing your product. Professionals are in constant learning mode about their products and their customers. The only way that the Walking Company salesperson could steer me to the right pair of shoes was by knowing shoes and feet. Professionals know their stuff.

3. Professionals care about what they do

My Walking Company salesperson could have easily brought me the pair of shoes I originally asked for. But she wasn't selling shoes she was selling shoes that were right for me. That's a big difference. Professionals aren't happy just selling a product or service. They want it to be the right product or service for the customer.

Right now I'm sure that some are saying, 'That level of care takes too long, especially when we're busy.' But let's think about it. She took a few moments to measure my foot and to check my type of foot (Reubenesque!). When she got me that pair of shoes she knew they would be comfortable for me. Rather than bringing out two or three pair until I found a pair I liked, she brought me one pair the right pair. Truly caring is smart, and in this case saved the salesperson time. Professionals care.

4. Professionals teach you something

I left the Walking Company with more knowledge than I walked in with. I now know to ask for extra arch support in my shoes. Not a big deal, but I will always remember that salesperson's advice.

Think of some of your best service experiences; the waiter who made the perfect recommendation, the computer helpdesk that gave you a tip on how to make an application more effective, or the clothing store employee who helped you coordinate colors. In most cases of outstanding service, the employee left you better than when he/she found you. You know more than you did before. The new information may not change your life (though it might), but it made your life a tad better.

So, four seemingly small behaviors turned me into a loyal Walking Company customer. The behaviors apply to any service job and can make the difference between a mediocre service experience and an outstanding one. Once again, the behaviors of a service professional are:

1. Professionals are responsive
2. Professionals are knowledgeable
3. Professionals care about what they do
4. Professionals teach you something

Conclusion

At the beginning of the article I mentioned that there were two recent shopping experiences that stood out for me. The second experience was while buying a fountain pen. I went to a store called Write On (cute, huh?). The salesperson was a professional who loved fountain pens. He had me write something on a pad so that he could see how much pressure I use while writing in order to recommend the correct pen. He even gave me an instruction sheet that he had personally done for the care of a fountain pen. It was an amazing experience that will definitely bring me back to that store. I sure enjoyed buying that pen.

The behaviors are simple. What's not simple is the consistent application of the behaviors. Being a true professional takes thought and effort. But, once you are a true professional you can go just about anywhere. The skills are universal and they are very rare. True professionals stand out from the crowd and grow rewarding and satisfying careers. And the customers of the world know when a true professional is at work.

About the Author:

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