

## Customer Focus the Primary Platform for Customer Retention - By Dr. Rick Johnson

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Customer focus must become the platform for success in the hotel-resort industry or for anyone in the service industry for that matter. That starts with establishing guidelines for communication and planning between management, sales, marketing and the customer service team.

A helpful tip provided by a reader suggests establishing a 'Group Folder' for every sizable client that makes a reservation. This folder is basically the 'Customer Profile' which provides insight for everyone on exactly how to service this particular customer. This folder contains detailed information that includes all the basics but also provides insight into the groups preferences or special needs.

### **Pre- arrival Planning**

Face to face on site meetings to discuss each of these group clients go a long way to maximizing service effectiveness. Being able to call guests by their name goes a long way toward customer retention. This information is shared with the entire staff. It is not treated as secret confidential information that requires a top security clearance. The purpose and intent of this folder information and meeting content is to provide world class service.

Another hint toward maximizing customer retention is to have the sales manager/booking agent personally greet the group at check-in. This personal touch provides the opportunity to build relationship equity with the group and to circumvent any issues that may occur during their stay. The old saying 'Prevention is better than a cure' applies here. If you establish that personal relationship up front, any problems that may occur are less dramatic and stressful on everyone's part.

### **The Exit Exercise**

When the group customer checks out --- that is not the end. In fact it should be considered a new beginning. An exit exercise should take place to review what went right, what may have gone wrong and what could be done to improve the group's next stay and enhance your relationship equity. A follow-up with the group representative should become standard procedure even if it only involves saying thank you one more time. However, this simple phone call can often add valuable information to your group folder that can be used not only for service improvements but may be valuable to your marketing program.

### **People Do Business with People**

Let's face it. You are in a people business. It is extremely important that you understand what your customers consider value. You may think that lobby coffee and warm cookies are enough and your customers love them but what you think is not what is really important. What your customers think and value is the deciding factor that will determine your success and retention rate. Take the time to talk to your customers. Find out exactly what they really value during their stay with you. Build your service platform on the basic concept of fulfilling the needs that your customers highly value. That in itself will go a long way toward living up to the slogan of 'World Class Service'.

### **Don't Forget**

Today's customers are savvier than ever. With the advent of the internet and the proliferation of information that is available, your customer not only knows what you know, they may know what you should know.

Your customer has investigated, inspected, explored, scrutinized and examined you and your competition long before they ever pick up the phone to call you. Many have pre-qualified you well in advance of you giving your sales pitch.

Though they are well-informed, they are still novices in the service industry when compared to your wealth of knowledge. Your customer may not have the technical knowledge that you have but they have something far more important..... They have the power to decide.

Your customer has come to expect the unexpected. Many have been conditioned to be cynical about the average experience. The mind of your customer has been trained by the likes of Starbucks, Amazon.com, E-Bay, Body Works, Krispy Kreme, Ritz Carlton, Nordstrom's, Southwest Airlines, Flowers to Go and other companies who have made it their mission to create a uniquely memorable experience for their customers.

They subconsciously reason...'If I get this kind of treatment for a \$4.75 cup of coffee, I should be treated like a king if I am going to invest \$XXX or more for my group meeting.

And you know what? They are absolutely right.

Why would you do anything different than create the optimal experience for your customer? Why would you even consider being average or just getting by with run of the mill service and products?

Here's an interesting point ... **write this down and put it at the front desk .... YOU are still in control!!!!**

You have a lot of control over their experience, the image, their memory and the impression you leave with them whether it's a single customer wanting a one night stay, a wedding party of twenty-five or an annual convention that books out the majority of your rooms.

But, you have to manage the experience well. That's what service excellence is all about. It involves the entire experience including the after stay follow-up, treatment and many other factors. This is especially true if there was any type of problem regardless of how you handled it. You want your customer to be more than satisfied.

### **Create a Culture for Customer Retention**

If everyone understands this, if everyone believes they are part of a customer retention culture ----your business will change. In fact, your whole culture will change. You may already know this at an intellectual level. But, do you know it at a gut level and at an emotional level? Do all of your employees know it? Are you ready to commit. To live it, breathe it? You have to live, breathe, eat, sleep and project your commitment to customer retention everyday.

**This is all about teamwork that old often over used word. But... in fact... that's what it all about.**

The only way to create memorable experiences for your customers is process, structure and the ability to work together toward common goals. Think about that ---- common goals are not automatic.

Structure is about doing things in a formalized way - often times it is sequential.

### **It Takes Commitment**

The key to everything that I have discussed thus far is commitment. Your level of dedication and commitment will determine your level of success and your level of customer retention and repeat business.

Your test will come in the process of developing memorable experiences for your customers. The memorable experiences you create for your customers should not be accidents. They are planned surprises based on your knowledge of your customer and your diligence to find out what impresses them most. It is a process that you must test, test, re-test and test again.

Two quotes come to mind that sum it all up.

*'It not good enough to be good enough'* The Purple Cow, Seth Godin

*'Good is the enemy of Great'* Good to Great --- Jim Collins

Special thanks go out to Honey Thazin Aung Director of Human Resources for his comments and feedback which inspired this article.

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