

Going 'Off Book' - The Movement towards Empathetic Hospitality - By Shannon Pruce - Account Director, LRA Worldwide, Inc
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In acting circles, they are the two words that can strike fear in the hearts of the most seasoned performer - 'off book.' The script has ceased to be a security blanket, the actor must rely on his ability to take words from the page and create something personal and memorable.

It's the essence of creating a character- feeling your character's life experiences and delivering those lines in a fashion true to that backstory. When Crash Davis tells you he believes in 'long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days' you can be pretty sure that Kevin Costner does as well. It's not the line, it's the feeling behind it that makes it memorable.

No, this is not a call to rush out to the Actors Studio for Method classes, however, taking a cue (pun intended) from the world of stage and screen has increasing validity in the hospitality industry today. As hotels face competitive markets and looming economic woes, how do you make your guests' experiences memorable enough to keep them coming back? It's no longer enough to provide the expected service, you now must go 'off book' and perform beyond expectations.

Two years ago I came down with a horrible cold during a trip to Chicago. In a barely audible voice, I sniffled my way through a room service breakfast order. Detecting my obvious discomfort, the associate, Lila, warmly noted that I had one heck of a cold and asked if I would be interested in some tea. Not ordinarily a tea drinker, I accepted the offer, eager to try anything to make me feel better. Rather than just adding the tea to my order, Lila went a bit further. She told me she would send up chamomile, as it always helped her when she was feeling ill. Not only did Lila close our call with a 'get well soon' sentiment, so did the associate who delivered my order.

Lila's approach to service exemplifies the 'off book' principle. Lila took her script - the order process, the suggestive sell, the recap - and deviated by listening to me and anticipating my needs. The result - an experience that I still talk about two years later and share with clients as an example of exceeding expectations. And it wasn't only what she asked, it was how she asked it. Her soothing, warm tone comforted an otherwise distressed guest. Lila took the words from her script and brought to life the 'character' of a caregiver concerned with the needs of her charge.

Creating memorable service interactions doesn't necessarily require access to all the tea in China - it simply requires empathy. Empathy for your guests and their individual situations, combined with the ability to go 'off book' and connect their needs with your offerings is the recipe for taking your service to the next level. A check-in experience could be technically flawless, but if there is no capacity (or leeway) to connect with the guest on a more personal level, you're missing the opportunity to build a lifelong relationship. Conducting the required tasks while extending a trained antennae to sense your guest's state of mind may provide the opportunity to connect with the simplest of gestures. Offering late-night food to a harried business traveler or highlighting kid-friendly movie options to a family on vacation may be just the right touch. It doesn't have to be extraordinary - it just needs to be thoughtful.

You're probably never going to win an Oscar working the front-desk of a hotel, but the same skills that earn Tony Soprano an Emmy nomination every year may very well be the key to offering a spontaneous, meaningful guest interaction. By going 'off book' and turning the dry language of an SOP into a cherished memory, you're not going to win a Tony ...but you will win the hearts and minds of your guests.

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