

Bringing Out The Best In Others Brings Out The Best In Ourselves - By Doug Kennedy

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A key principle for finding personal fulfillment in our journey to hospitality service excellence is realizing that when we bring out the best in others, we simultaneously bring out the best in ourselves every day, every shift, and with just about every guest we encounter.

An awful lot has been written in recent years about how today's customers are more demanding, increasingly unreasonable, and generally to harder deal with. One of our the hospitality industry's top research experts, Peter Yesawich, Ph.D. has even been quoted as saying 'This is the decade of the vigilante consumer.'

On one level I'm tempted to agree with them, since it seems obvious that the over-stuff, over-scheduled, multi-tasking lives most of us lead today can cause us to have shorter fuses on our anger time-bombs. But honestly, I don't ever recall a time when customer service was easy. Whether working as a bellhop for Marriott in 1981, or managing the front desk and reservations in the late 1980's, I can't say I ever recall an era when what is now collectively called 'customer service' was an easy profession, especially in the hotel business where nerves can be frayed to their very last strands by the time the guest arrives at the front desk at the end of their long day of travel.

Over the years I've learned that customers don't usually set-out to complain, harass, or upset service providers, although I have to admit the lesson took some time for me to learn. I remember well how I would stand there in the lobby some days, looking around at our beautiful atrium with flowing water and indoor gardens, looking at the stone walls built from sandstone rocks mined right from our own landscaping, wondering to myself, 'How can guests be so darned cranky when they are lucky enough to stay in a place like this tonight?' At that time in my life the chance to check-in at any resort as nice as this would put me in a good mood for weeks both before and after!

Years later, when the tables were turned and I have stood literally thousands of times on the other side of the front desk at check-in, admittedly sometimes being one of those cranky guests myself, I have a whole new level of understanding for the fellow human beings we call customers.

One activity I've done with my hotel hospitality training workshops is to encourage them to think about the types of experiences that guests might have encountered while they were en route to the hotel.

First of all, on the day of travel most people's alarm clocks go off extra early in the morning, especially in these days of heightened security and advance check-in requirements, not to mention over-crowded airport parking. So your alarm clock is going off at like 3am to make that 7am wheels-up flight time.

On a good day you actually do find a parking spot, whisk through security with only a 30 minute wait, and find that your flight is actually on time. But once seated on the plane, you're sure to encounter at least a few challenges. Forget that the airplane seats and the space between (pitch) actually are shrinking, let's think about the passengers. Have you ever been seated next to the excessive talker? 'Hello, my name is Barbara Blabs. What do you do? Oh, how interesting. Now let me tell you about me for the rest of this flight....' Or Randy Overshoulder? He's the guy who can't see wasting 50 cents for his own paper when he can read yours, besides, he's a quick reader and usually finishes before his seatmates change the page so he rarely has to ask them to wait.

Let's say it's still a good day, and when your checked luggage actually arrives on the same flight you are one! All you have to do now is pick-up the rental car. So you saunter on over to Brand Excellence Rental Car counter, your wife en tow on your arm, eager to pick-up the sporty little coupe reserved for the romance getaway weekend. Being a 'platinum' premier level renter club your confidence was high as you said. 'Hello, I'm here to pick-up the sporty little Chrysler Sebring convertible I'd reserved last month.' Upon which you heard the rental agent exclaim: 'Good news! Since the car you'd requested wasn't available, we've upgraded you to the Chrysler Town & Country Minivan, which usually rents for \$20 more a day!'

What about the guests who prefer to drive on their vacations? They have it easier because they don't have to deal with those airports, right? I can only speak from my own experiences. Our parents gave us many gifts growing-up as one of four kids in the Kennedy household, but perhaps one of the greatest gift we all share to this day is a love of travel, which we now call the Kennedy wanderlust. We were always going somewhere, although it was usually to a state park campground or National Park. In those days we were traveling in our 1969 Dodge Monaco wood-paneled station wagon, usually fighting over who got to sit in the third row seat because it faced backwards and we could make faces out the back window.

Granted, the vehicle of choice has changed to a minivan over the years, but what mom and dad hear from the backseat is exactly the same:

'Are we there yet?' Or 'I have to go to the potty.' Or 'Dad, he's looking at me again.' Or 'Mom, he's on my side again.'

To top it off, the night before they went on vacation, mom worked on e-mails until 10pm and then after that finished the laundry and packing, and dad worked even later but still had to bring some documents to read for his job.

What was once at the start of the journey a 'Come on kids, we're off to our vacation today!' attitude has turned into 'If I hear that one more time I'm going to have to stop this car...' along the road.

And so we have two choices in the hospitality industry and elsewhere in the field of customer service. We can continue to react to each customer's individual attitudes and behaviors, to treat them just like they are treating us, to feed their negativity right back to them. We can stand safely on our side of the front desk or reception counter, passing out judgment on everyone we encounter: 'She was rude. He was a jerk.' In other words, we can perpetuate the culture of negativity.

Or, we can make the choice right here and right now to make it our job to turn things around. To bring out the best side of even the most negative person.

The consensus is great among seasoned hospitality professionals, more often than not we do have the ability to turn things around, even for the most negative guests. And we do so, it not only brings out the best in them but also the best in ourselves, as we spend our day interacting with more happy and satisfied guests than ever before.

By Doug Kennedy

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