

Redefining "Service"

How to identify and deliver desired service outcomes

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Service has long been the sacred cow of the hospitality industry. Everybody talks about it, but few managers dare to question or challenge what 'service' really means. Over the last few decades, service has attained almost a ritualistic significance.

We have stopped asking why we're doing certain things or what we really need to do. Instead, we focus our energies on how things are supposed to be done. There is a lot of emphasis on following exact steps and procedures. As the best hotels are rapidly discovering, this approach has many limitations. In their best-selling book "First, Break All The Rules" Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman made a startling observation:

"There are no steps leading to customer satisfaction"

Companies don't grow by doing what's required of them. "Required steps only prevent dissatisfaction", note the authors, "They cannot drive customer satisfaction."

So, what is the missing ingredient that catapults an ordinary company into greatness?

It's the way these companies define 'service'. America's most admired companies define service in terms of measurable "outcomes" or end results. However, most companies tend to play it safe by defining service as a series of step-by-step "procedures". This approach discourages people from taking initiative, while encouraging mute compliance. It turns off customers by equating service with a mechanical act, devoid of genuine warmth or caring.

What your customers want: how customers perceive "service"

Managers forget that customers often take a very different view of service than the company might. Most companies are too busy keeping up with the competition or vying to be the industry leader, to find out what really matters to their guests.

Testing customer response is an effective way to find out how customers perceive service. "Holiday Inn is said to have 200 test hotel sites in operation where they are continually experimenting with rooms, pricing and restaurant menus," observe Peters and Waterman in their best-selling book, "In Search of Excellence-Lessons from America's best-run companies".

Every point of contact with the customer is an opportunity to reinforce 'service'. Consider the check-in process at any given hotel. Here's a procedure

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that most certainly does not serve the needs of the customer, but is mandatory for the hotel.

Imagine a guest that comes in tired and jetlagged after standing in long security lines at the airport. Would they appreciate a faster check-in? Indeed they would. But what if the customer never had to check in on arrival at their hotel? What if they could check in online at the airport, or on their way to the hotel?

"Wouldn't it be great if travelers could check into their hotel rooms at the same time they print their boarding passes and receive their airplane seat assignments?" thought Matt Adams (VP, Operations) at The Hyatt. The web check-in process at The Hyatt shows how you can 'think like a customer' while complying with standard procedures of running a hotel.

How customers "do their math"

While customers appreciate 'extras' such as speed and convenience, they don't want them at the expense of 'givens' such as reliability or quality. If a hotel offers web check-in, customers expect the process to be quick and reliable.

The key to succeeding in the hospitality industry is to effectively nail down what matters most to your customer and make it your main focus. Fast food chains such as McDonald's found their winning combination in fast service, good value and a child-friendly atmosphere. You can't be tops in everything. But you can find the combination that makes your company a winner.

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The most successful companies have a culture of supporting people that work closely with the customer. They are the first to know when there's a problem, and they are best equipped to ensure that customer expectations are fulfilled.

At Hotel Le Meridien (part of the Starwood Group), feedback is meticulously gathered from a variety of sources and made available to everyone within the organization. Various systems are in place to ensure that the lessons are well learned and painstakingly implemented.

The best hospitality companies have various systems in place to collect and measure feedback. Results are carefully analyzed and new rewards and incentive programs are put in place.

The best companies structure their rewards and incentives in a way that recognizes employees that deliver the most desirable service outcomes. Employees try harder when they have clearly defined goals and measurable outcomes to work with.

Behind every successful company are people that never tire of asking, "What do our customers really want?" rather than "What am I supposed to do?" Knowing how customers define and perceive 'service' is the key to building profitable companies and turning average employees into stars.

