

## Excellent Customer Service: The Secret Sauce

By [Brenda Fields](#), Founder, Fields & Company | April 09, 2023



Those hotels that have survived the devastating financial impact of COVID-19, have no doubt, found themselves continuing to deal with a new business environment.

With limited resources, the challenge for hoteliers is to do more with less. Labor shortages and increased expenses, combined with an upside-down marketplace, have contributed to financial uncertainty.

While restructuring and re-strategizing, perhaps now is the time to rethink the value of excellent customer service and how it can impact the bottom line.

What is excellent customer service? With many moving parts, it is the dedication to authenticity. Words and actions line up. What does it actually mean to "exceed expectations" and to "create

memorable experiences"? How effective is that promise if basic services fall short of minimum expectations? That expectation of reliable and trustworthy service starts with every interaction whether in a no-frills, budget property or a five Five-Star resort. It is every touchpoint that will result in a positive or negative impression either online or in person.

Hopefully, a heightened appreciation of good customer service has arisen from our own experiences during COVID. When the world was closed down, we were dependent on impersonal interactions to make purchases, question an invoice, or change an appointment. Chatbots were everywhere. Speaking to a human being was like hitting the lottery! And even with that good fortune, you were, no doubt, placed in a queue to learn from a recorded message that "Because of an unprecedented volume of calls due to COVID-19, your wait time will be 40 minutes....". OR you were left on hold, only to be cut off and having to start all over, with 20% left on your mobile phone battery.

### Does Excellent Customer Service Matter?

The overarching reason for excellent customer service is that "It is good for business". What easier and more cost-effective way to build business than by keeping existing customers and attracting new customers through great word of mouth and stellar reviews? How much time and money have hoteliers spent in a continuous cycle of losing guests or clients and then finding new ones? Loyalty from repeat guests and referrals are THE most cost-effective ways to impact business.

According to the recent blog, Rebel, "Brands that put the customer first drive revenue 4-8% higher than their competitors". And in a 2023 article in Forbes, Blake Morgan stated that ".....research shows that 89% of companies that lead with customer experience outperform their competition on key performance indicators".

Customer reviews lead to good rankings if handled well. Would you book a hotel that is ranked #325 out of 500 hotels? Or would you book a high-ranking property? Rankings matter. Timely and personalized responses reflect a property's dedication to its guests.

As most hoteliers are acutely aware, there are guests who are difficult, rude, or looking for ways to beat the system! In those cases, it is tempting to lower the bar for customer service against the difficult guest. But dedication to excellent customer service across the board, will garner enough good will and guest loyalty to offset any loss of revenues by placating a difficult guest.

### What Does Excellent Customer Service Look Like?

#### 1. It is Easy to Do Business

Put yourself in your guest's place. How easy is it to do business with your hotel?

Consistency is key and the hotelier who is passionate about the importance of every detail, will excel. Test your own property. Take an honest assessment and set a plan in motion.

Review all areas of contact:

- The website is easy to navigate and information is clear and easily found. Rates are transparent. Extra fees and any specifications are listed prominently. Room types and services and amenities are well defined and understandable. Addresses, phone numbers and email addresses are easily found.
- Information is up-to-date on the website. How many times have you seen a New Year's Eve menu still up in March or a Mother's Day special that has not been removed in July?
- Can a busy meeting planner get information for a potential meeting without having to list his/her contact information on the website and then patiently wait to be contacted? When calling the sales office, is it the exception, rather than the rule, to speak to a knowledgeable sales person without going into voice mail?
- Are meeting room capacities clearly stated? Professional photographs are important, and equally important is a clear breakdown of capacities and setups. Otherwise, a person will move on to where it is easier to do business.
- Social media content is written in the voice of the brand positioning and its content speaks to the target markets. Content about a "boozy brunch" to promote the restaurant will miss the mark if the property's target audience is young families, as an example.
- Customer reviews are responded to in a timely and well-researched manner. That is an important component to ensuring good rankings. Buzzwords and phrases tend to be meaningless i.e. "We strive to exceed our guest's expectations". That well-intention credo obviously failed. It will be more effective in turning around a negative impression or legitimate complaint by addressing it head on and with compassion.
- Phone calls are answered promptly; transferred to the correct person/department; and IF a voice message is left, the call is returned promptly.
- If the hotel has an automated phone system, ensure that the prompts address the anticipated needs of a guest or client.
- Contact information is available on the website as well as when phoning the hotel directly.
- Inquiries and reviews are responded to promptly and customized to the question or issue at hand.
- The general manager is available. Contact information is easily obtained.
- Any billing inquiries are handled with promptness and efficiency.
- The culture is that EVERY staff member is responsible for customer service.

## **2. Staff is Proactive**

What does this look like in the context of EXCELLENT service? Here are some examples:

- Obtaining arrival times in advance can avoid headaches for both the guest and the hotel, especially from those who have indicated they are celebrating a special occasion and for international arrivals. It may be a little off-putting that a guest is arriving at 8:00am without booking the room from the night before, but if available, why not give the room to that guest who has been flying for 10 hours? It has been established that the goodwill generated will go a long way.
- If an item is accidentally left behind, why wait for the guest to contact the hotel after checkout? It may take a guest several days and some time-consuming backtracking to realize that he/she left the item in your hotel. Create a system so that the guest is contacted immediately.
- Upon reviewing the arrivals list, review the number of people occupying the room. As an example, if there is a family of four in the room, ensure that there is an ample supply of linens and toiletries in case the standard inventory for that room is less than needed.

It's all in the details! These tactics should not add additional costs to implement. It is a matter of teaching and training to set the goal and expectations with existing staff and resources.

## **3. Staff is Responsive and Clear in Communications**

Have you ever sat in a hotel room waiting for a working hairdryer or waiting for your dry cleaning to be delivered and wondering if you are going to be late for that business appointment or concert? The hotel that delivers EXCELLENT customer service will provide clear and precise timelines to set a realistic expectation. That allows the guest to feel more in control and make decisions accordingly.

Keep your promises. If a room service order will take 45 minutes instead of the hotel's standard time of 20 minutes, then communicate that. Sometimes, it's like pulling off a band aid. But a temporary disappointment will be offset by clear expectations, again, by allowing the guests to make their plans accordingly.

## **4. Staff is Well Trained and Well Informed**

Empowering staff to make decisions contributes to delivering excellent customer service. But those decisions are best delivered by well-trained staff. Train and inform so that personnel can exercise good judgement when dealing with guest issues.

- Hire Well

Danny Meyer, CEO and Founder of Union Square Hospitality is a world-renown leader and trailblazer in creating a culture of hospitality. His restaurants consistently rank in the top listings and win prestigious awards, as much for the guest experience as for the food. He states that the cycle of hospitality starts with hiring naturally empathetic people, whom workplace psychologist Adam Grant calls "givers".

And Isadore Sharp, Founder and Chairman of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, a brand synonymous with quality and exceptional customer service, recapped his company's philosophy at the Stanford Graduate School of Business by stating, "We want people who like other people, and are therefore more motivated to serve them. Competence we can teach; attitude is ingrained".

What better way to deliver great customer service than with people who are warm, pleasant, and eager to make guests happy. Turning an introvert into an extrovert is impossible despite great training. Technical skills can be taught. But what cannot be taught are compassion and joy in dealing with guests.

- Keep Your Staff Informed

The better informed your staff is, the better equipped they are to deal with guest issues. The concierge or front desk staff should not learn from an irate guest that the Wi-Fi is out; that the dry cleaning was not delivered; or that there are street closings and no immediate access to transportation.

Take the time to map out all channels of communication. Sometimes, when relying on reports to be passed along during shift changes, critical information is not relayed quickly enough to deal with guest issues. Key information should be passed on to staff as it surfaces.

Well-informed staff is confident and feels in control. That positive spirit translates into excellent customer service.

A proactive and well-trained staff, along with meticulous attention to detail, is the secret sauce to customer service and great financial results. It is easy to do business with you; you inspire trust; and your guests feel that their business is appreciated. Who would not want a 4-8% increase in revenues to land squarely on the bottom line? Not a bad return on investment!

In summary, the secret sauce in providing excellent customer service is to hire well, make it easy to do business, and view all things from the guest/account perspective!



Ms. Fields

*Brenda Fields is an industry leader, named by HSMAI (Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International) as a "Top 25 Extraordinary Mind in Sales & Marketing" and is a member of the exclusive International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC), a by-invitation only, 200-member professional society. Ms. Fields served in senior marketing positions before establishing her successful consulting practice. Her clients comprise a wide range of hotels, resorts, and hotel companies around the world, including five-star, luxury boutique properties, 2,000 room hotels and conference centers, as well as some of the largest real estate development companies in the U.S. At the onset of her career, Ms. Fields joined the then, hospitality industry visionary, Dunfey Hotels at the renowned Ambassador East in Chicago, IL and moved up the ladder quickly. The systems Dunfey Hotels had pioneered provided a basis on which any problem can be resolved regardless of market conditions or product type. Ms. Fields can be contacted at +1 518-789-0117 or [brenda@fieldsandcompany.net](mailto:brenda@fieldsandcompany.net)*

**[Extended Biography](#)**

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