

Guest Experience

Excellent Customer Service? It Starts at the Top!



By Brenda Fields

Founder at fields & company

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Excellent Customer Service? It Starts at the Top! — Photo by midjourney.com

Are companies like Amazon and Apple setting better examples of great customer service than the hospitality industry? There has been a sharp decline in the hospitality industry in basic customer service with more reliance on technology, resulting in impersonal or rote customer interactions. Many times, calling a hotel requires extreme patience because of all the sales and reservation messages and the numerous prompts before getting to the right area, if lucky. Many general managers are not accessible; do not respond to guests; and set the lack of importance of the guest to his/her staff.

There are many tag lines of “*exceeding customer expectations*” and to “*creating experiences*”. But how effective is that promise if basic services fall short of minimum expectations? This article will address what great customer service is from the guest perspective and the value of general managers setting the standards.

Why Excellent Customer Service Matters

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 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 finding new ones? Loyalty and referrals are THE most cost-effective ways to impact business.

A recent *RightNow Technologies Customer Experience Report* found that 86% of adults in the United States are willing to pay more for a better customer experience and 73% of US adults said friendly employees and customer service representatives made them “fall in love” with the brand. And a study by *Harvard Business Review* of restaurant reviews reported that a one-star increase in Yelp ratings, leads to a 5% to 9% increase in revenue.

As most hoteliers are acutely aware, there are often-times, guests who are difficult, rude, and looking for ways to beat the system! Therefore, it is tempting to set the bar for customer service against the difficult guest. But dedication to excellent customer service across the board, will offset any loss of income by placating a difficult guest.

What Does Excellent Customer Service Look Like?

- It’s Easy to Do Business.

Put yourself in your guest's place. How easy is it to do business with your hotel, restaurant, bar, or sales department? How many touchpoints are there for the guest to have an experience and to form an impression? Consistency is key and the hotelier who is passionate about the importance of each touchpoint, will excel. Test your own property. Take an honest assessment and set a plan in motion.

Review all areas of contact:

- Information on the website is up-to-date and easy to navigate. Rates are transparent. Extra fees and any specifications are listed prominently. Room types are clear. Directions and addresses are easily found.
- Menus are updated 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 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?
- 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 all relevant needs of a guest or client.
- Contact information is available on the website as well as when phoning the hotel directly i.e. email addresses of key staff, including the general manager.
- 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.

Staff learns by his/her example that the guest/client is paramount to the property's success, in both the short and long terms.

- **Staff is Proactive.**

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

- Obtain guest arrival times, 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 supplies is less than needed.

It's all in the details! These tactics should not add additional costs to implement. It just takes the intention of delivering and a plan to incorporate with existing staff and resources.

- **Staff is Responsive and Clear in Communications.**

Have you ever sat in a hotel room waiting for a hairdryer to be delivered or waiting for someone to repair the air conditioner and wondering if you are going to be late for that business appointment or concert? The hotel that delivers EXCELLENT customer service will not necessarily correct all of those issues at lightning speed (although that would be better!), but 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 room service will take 45 minutes to be delivered instead of the hotel's standard of 20 minutes, then staff should 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 guest to have realistic expectations and to make their plans accordingly.

- **Staff is Well Trained and Well Informed.**

Empowering associates to make decisions contributes to delivering excellent customer service. But to deliver well and consistently, take the time to hire the person with the soft skills and train the technical skills. And in training, provide the knowledge of how operations work in hotels and restaurants 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*” (as opposed to “*takers*”).

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.

A smile and eye contact are free. They do not require extra expenses in delivering a guest experience that inspires confidence and builds loyalty.

– **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. Being informed of these issues will allow staff to handle a guest’s complaints or questions.

Take the time to map out all channels of communication. Sometimes, by relying on reports to be passed along, critical information is not relayed quickly enough to avoid or deal with guest issues. By prioritizing and training, key information will be timely passed on to staff and passed on to each shift.

Take every opportunity to teach and train. Well-informed and well-trained staff is confident and feels in control. That positive spirit translates into excellent customer service.

Excellent customer service starts at the top. Actions matter. Excellent customer service is the culmination of making it a priority; a dedication to consistency; training; and a continuous cycle of communication. Lead by example. Staff will respond positively when they see the general manager stopping to greet a guest; picking up litter off the floor; and expressing genuine compassion to a guest when something occurred during the stay. There will always be issues that occur. But how those issues are dealt with is the key to having the guest/customer feel that they are valued and that someone cared. And that translates into good business.

Brenda Fields has a strong background in helping owners and operators achieve success, regardless of market condition or product deficiencies. Her keen problem-solving skills and deep knowledge were honed from a diversity of experience, working with all types of properties in all markets.

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Brenda Fields

+917 825 2100

Fields and Company

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Brenda Fields

Founder at fields & company

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