

Guest Service / Customer Experience Mgmt

Managing Guest Expectation Delivers Exceptional Customer Service

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Mr. Isenberg

A hotel can be constructed of the finest materials, decorate its interior with sleek furniture, offer several appetizing F&B options, and pack its rooms with every amenity imaginable, yet still fail to receive excellent customer service scores. Why? It's because at its core, the lodging business is really all about providing guest service.

As every business serving consumers knows, keeping — or losing — loyal clients hinges on providing superior customer service. Fortunately, realizing the downside of a bad encounter with a customer, companies in all industries have apparently upped their customer service game, at least according to American Express's 2017 Customer Service Barometer. The AmEx Barometer found a sharp uptick in customer service satisfaction with more 80% of consumers saying businesses had met or exceeded their customer service expectations, a notable leap from 67% in 2014.

Since we live in the age of Yelp reviews, this newfound focus on providing great customer service isn't surprising. In the past, if a company messed up its customer service delivery, it would simply apologize and the public would (reluctantly) accept it. This is no longer the case.

Today's consumers are much less forgiving. One poor customer service experience and consumers will bolt toward a company's competitor. The AmEx survey, while documenting overall consumer satisfaction, supports this claim: More than half of the consumers who responded indicated that a bad service incident stopped them from a planned purchase or transaction. One third of respondents said it would take only one poor experience to drive them to another company.

This is especially true in the lodging business, where guests can vent immediately on social media. They don't have to wait to fill out the guest survey scorecard left in the hotel room.

There are no second chances when it comes to correcting a disappointing customer service encounter, particularly in today's age of Twitter, Yelp, and Trip Advisor. One bad review means not only losing that customer, but anyone who reads the damning critique.

Competitors Come at You Fast

Even first-to-market companies that once ruled a particular niche soon find themselves fighting off competitors. Like Uber.

I used to be an Uber customer — until the ride-sharing platform suffered its well-publicized data breach. About a month after the breach, I noticed some \$250 charges from Uber Eats on my account — from Brazil. Since I've never been to Brazil, I knew the orders weren't coming from me.

Unfortunately, Uber has built an elaborate scheme to wall itself off from customer service complaints. The only way customers can complain is by texts or messages — never with a live human being. After waiting days to get the matter resolved with no luck, I disputed the charges with my credit card company and had the charges reversed.

On my next business trip, I logged onto the Uber app to summon a ride, but I was unable to do so because my account had been locked. Again, I couldn't speak to anyone, but after some research I learned my privileges had been revoked due to a contract violation. The violation? Disputing the charges resulting from the data breach that

Uber never took the time to work with me to resolve.

Needing a ride, I immediately downloaded the Lyft app and soon a car pulled up. Prior to competitors like Lyft, Uber could ignore customer complaints because, well, where else could their customers go? Now, consumers have other choices for what is essentially a commoditized product — a car ride.

When you think about it, the same is true in the lodging industry. All hotel rooms are basically the same. They all have a bed, TV, and desk. Yet what truly differentiates the experience is how the guest is treated while at the hotel property. Guests have myriad choices of where to stay if they encounter less-than-satisfactory guest service at a hotel. There is always another hotel that will be happy to check in your dissatisfied guest.

If Guests Post It, Somebody Will Read It

If hoteliers think guests don't post or read reviews, they need to think again. J.D. Power's 2017 North America Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index Study found that people who have had a bad guest experience are much more likely to describe it on social media channels. More than half of those polled for the survey said they had read an online hotel review in the past month, and 46% had posted one. The news wasn't all bad from the survey, however. People who had either read or wrote a review tended to have higher guest satisfaction.

Which makes it all the more vital that hotels build a culture of taking care of guests. It's also paramount hotels deliver on their customer service promises. As a frequent traveler, I've (unfortunately) personally encountered less than outstanding guest service at hotels. But I have also been surprised and delighted by services that far exceeded my expectations. Comparing the two scenarios highlights what hoteliers may be doing wrong — and how they can actually execute customer service right.

Promises Not Kept

A good example of a broken promise is the linen laundering opt-out program hotels routinely promote to their guests. Consumers like the idea of "being green" and not wasting precious resources (excessively washing towels that can be reused, for example). Hotels profess to support this perspective by asking guests to hang the towels they will re-use on hooks.

However, as a frequent traveler, I can't count many times I've hung my towels on a hook, signaling I didn't need them washed, only to find the housekeeping staff had taken the towel down for laundering. Was the staff not trained in this procedure? Or did the housekeeper simply not care and respect the request? Did they mechanically and automatically remove any and all towels?

This upsets me for two reasons: One, the hotel didn't make good on its commitment to energy saving practices. Secondly, and more importantly, by not following my request to save water, the hotel gives an impression it really doesn't care about my wishes and therefore, I'm not all that important to the hotel. That's definitely the wrong message a consumer-facing business wants to put out there.

Likewise, many hotel brands give guests redeemable points if they choose not to have their rooms cleaned during multiple night stays. Again, many hotels fail to execute on that promise, leaving guests dissatisfied with the overall customer service experience.

In my experience, however, the solution to providing great customer service is quite simple; It grows from managing the guest's expectations.

Over-Promising and Under-Delivering

Successful companies prioritize good customer service -- knowing repeat business depends upon it. These organizations base their customer service on one foundational principle — managing the customer's expectations. This usually takes the form of under-promising and over-delivering. While it may seem like a bit of a mind game, it really does work.

Recently, I stayed at a resort and intended to check in upon arrival; I was told, however, that my room wasn't ready — a common occurrence at busy hotels. Normally, this type of delay can frustrate a guest after a long day of traveling. That is, unless it's handled correctly and with guest service in mind.

The desk clerk informed me my room would be ready in about two hours. He then took my cellphone number and had my bags checked with the bellman. A hotel van was summoned so I could be driven downtown to do some sightseeing while I waited for my room.

Within an hour, my phone rang to tell me my room was ready. The van picked me up and took me back to the hotel where my bags were waiting in my room. The hotel exceeded my expectations by having my room cleaned sooner than expected. Plus, I didn't have to lug my bags to a nearby coffee shop or sit in the hotel lobby and endure an endless wait.

And, I had the pleasure of strolling through the downtown area. When I was able to check in, I didn't have to find transportation back to the hotel. The hotel staff took care of everything for me and made the delayed check-in experience enjoyable. I nearly forgot that my room wasn't ready when I arrived. That's what great customer service is all about.

The airlines have learned this lesson, too. Remember years ago when you booked a flight and the airline said it would two hours and 30 minutes? Inevitably, the plane ride was delayed for whatever reason and you arrived 15 minutes later than what you were told. Of course, you were upset, but there wasn't much you could do other than grumble to the flight attendant.

Eventually, airlines realized they couldn't keep disappointing their passengers with consistent lateness. So they started to manage customer expectations. That two-and-a-half-hour anticipated flight is now scheduled for three hours, so if the takeoff is delayed for 15 minutes or a gate isn't ready when the plane lands (which often happens), passengers aren't disappointed because, in their mind, they've arrived "on time." A simple tweak of the flight time can ultimately result in happy customers, because the airline delivered on its promise.

Another experience with American Airlines illustrates this point. During a recent flight, I tried repeatedly to log onto the internet, but could not connect. Like many road warriors, I use long cross-country trips to get some work done.

I told the flight attendant about the unconnected internet. She brought it to the attention of the head attendant, who apologized. But more than just offer an apology, he also took action – he offered me frequent traveler miles and indicated that my account would be credited within seven to 10 days. All he asked was that I sign a form saying we had resolved the matter, which I happily did. It was obvious they took my complaint seriously and were making an effort to make it up to me.

Soon after I arrived in Los Angeles, I received a message from American Airlines: My account had been credited 15,000 miles. The airline exceeded my expectations by giving me more bonus miles than I anticipated and crediting those points to my account sooner than seven days. They managed my expectations by "under-promising" the number of miles I would receive but then "over-delivering" on the actual amount. Any traveler who has ever experienced the hassle of trying to collect or use airline points understands how difficult that process can be. In this instance, American Airlines made it seamless and easy. I didn't have to make a call or "fight" for what was promised to me.

J.D. Power's 2018 North America Airline Satisfaction Survey found that overall passenger satisfaction rose to a record high of 762 points, on a scale of 1,000. Such a rise couldn't have happened if airlines hadn't started to manage customer expectations and make good on their commitments.

More importantly, these great customer "recovery" experiences divert the customer's attention away from what otherwise could have been viewed as flaws. Conversely, negative customer service alerts the consumer to multiple problems. When a hotel's staff apparently doesn't pay attention to details – such as not following my clear instructions to not have the towels washed – it makes me wonder what other details they may have overlooked.

Today, there is no excuse for a hotel not to provide excellent customer service. When staff members are trained to resolve guest complaints, they can turn what would have been a negative experience into one that has the guest raving about the great service they received online. And all it takes is a simple yet powerful technique of managing customer expectations by under-promising and over-delivering on your service commitments.

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