

Simple Ways To Elevate Service

American Express recently conducted a survey exploring attitudes and preferences toward customer service. The survey revealed seven in ten Americans (70%) are willing to spend an average of 13% more with companies they believe provide excellent customer service.

Even so, the same survey indicated that six in ten Americans (60%) believe businesses haven't increased their focus on providing good customer service. Among this group, 26% think companies are actually paying less attention to service.

So the question continues: "Why is it that businesses consistently claim to value customers, yet inconsistently deliver exceptional customer service?"

What are the truths about exceptional customer service?

1. It involves job essence. Every employee's job is made up of both job function (the duties and tasks associated with a job role) and job essence (an employee's purpose or highest priority which, for employees at most companies is to create a delighted customer).
2. It's voluntary. While obtaining a valid method of payment (a job function) is required, smiling or making eye contact (job essence) is voluntary.
3. It's free. While employees are paid to perform job functions, there's no extra charge to smile, make eye contact, or add enthusiasm to their voices.

Most employees in most service organizations are unaware of the above truths simply because no one's mentioned them. Instead, most managers spend time talking about job function, procedures, and operational efficiency while scrutinizing hours to schedule, forecasts, and profit and loss statements.

The result: Employees are unaware of the subtle opportunities they lose daily to show job essence, elevate the quality of their personal customer service, and make lasting positive impressions on the customers they serve.

There are seven simple ways employees can incorporate job essence into their daily job functions:

1. Express genuine interest in serving customers

This exceeds the basic customer service expectations of the job role. For instance, in a hotel setting, after checking-in a guest, most front desk agents will say, "Enjoy your stay with us. If there's anything else we can do for you, don't hesitate to call."

While there's nothing wrong with this response, if the guest's welcome ends there, it's routine and unlikely to leave a positive lasting impression.

A simple example: Upon guest check-in, placing a call to the room to verify that the guest is pleased with her accommodations and later following up with a hand-written note, welcoming the guest and providing your name and contact information for future assistance.

Cossetting (means pampering) a guest will not only elevate customer service it will also elevate the guest experience!

When guest luggage is thoughtfully handled with extra care the guest will genuinely appreciate the consideration. Guests who utilize valet parking will value employees who drive their cars responsibly and pay attention to detail by (if adjusted) returning seats and rear-view mirrors to their original positions. And fine dining restaurant guests will appreciate having their chairs pulled out and the waiter's efficient use of a crumber to tidy the dining table between courses.

Sure, employees must read their audience. The expectations of a twenty-something student will differ from a forty-something professional. Although, when the opportunity does present itself, cossetting guests will make a positive lasting impression. Customers simply are not accustomed to receiving this level of attention and care.

2. Offer sincere and specific compliments to customers when the opportunity genuinely presents itself

Front desk agents routinely obtain a valid method of payment prior to issuing a room key. In so doing, they are performing a required job function.

If the desk clerk was intentional about demonstrating job essence then, while obtaining a method of payment, he/she might notice and compliment the guest on his necktie saying, "That's a lovely tie. It matches your suit nicely. Who is the designer?"

The guest will be flattered that he/she noticed and a positive lasting impression will have been made.

3. Share unique knowledge

Unique knowledge differs from job knowledge. Job knowledge is expected of the employee and, generally speaking, is transactional. Unique knowledge is unexpected and has the potential to enliven an otherwise predictable customer service encounter.

For instance, a typical restaurant waiter might say, "Our signature appetizer is Pâté de Foie Gras. May I interest you in an order?"

As a result, he/she has shared job knowledge with his/her guests and may or may not make an impression—or a sale. Consider how the same information might be conveyed together with some unexpected and interesting unique knowledge:

"Our executive chef trained at the prestigious Restaurant School in Philadelphia and traveled to France to refine her knowledge of French delicacies such as truffles, escargot, and foie gras. In fact, our Pâté de Foie Gras is our signature appetizer. May I tempt you with an order?"

Which approach might move you to order the Pâté de Foie Gras?

4. Convey authentic enthusiasm, whether animated or reserved, for serving customers

When a guest is checking into the hotel, the Front Desk Agent can convey enthusiasm into the process. A great smile, direct eye contact and correlating body language go a long way. Is there something unique that an agent has that will spark a conversation with the guest?

5. Use appropriate humor

It is said that laughter is the shortest distance between two people. Look for opportunities to enliven routine and mundane interactions with humor.

Consider a typical hotel automated wake-up call script: *“Good morning. Today’s weather forecast calls for partly sunny skies, breezy, with a high temperature of 82 degrees. Thank you for choosing the XYZ hotel.”*

Now consider interjecting a little humor into an otherwise staid and predictable practice: (Imagine the voice of an English butler.) *“Good morning. I’m so sorry to disturb you, but it appears to be morning. Very inconvenient, I agree. I believe it is the rotation of the earth that is to blame.”*

The first example evokes a yawn while the second inspires a chuckle. Clientele differs from business to business so use good judgment. But do look for opportunities to use appropriate humor to make lasting positive impressions on your customers.

6. Provide pleasant surprises

The unexpected nature of surprises tends to leave a lasting impression - so make sure they’re pleasant.

I recently sent amenities with a hand written note to a small corporate group at a hotel I am currently consulting with – there were eight rooms for 4 nights. The next day, I received four separate notes from the receiving guests thanking me for the unexpected surprise...it made them feel special.

The concept of providing pleasant surprises: lagniappes. These are the unexpected “little extras” that may delight customers. Lagniappes are the 13th bagel in a baker’s dozen, the mint on the pillow or the single, bite-sized hors d’oeuvres that arrive unexpectedly at your table—a memorable “little extra” from the chef.

In the hospitality industry, we do not have the luxury to control unpleasant surprises. However, we can influence pleasant surprises—but only if we are intentional about providing them.

7. Deliver service heroics when necessary

Service heroics require employees to go beyond the typical job duties that are expected of their job role. Hotel personnel typically respond to a guest’s request for an alternative room due to smell, location, or view by identifying an alternate room and sending a staff member to the original room with a set of keys to the new room.

Delivering service heroics requires going a step further. It may mean sending a desk manager to the original room with multiple keys to a set of optional rooms from which the guest could choose based on his or her unique preferences. Although circumstances will influence the response, when possible, delight the guest with an unexpected option such as an upgrade to a suite or a room on the concierge level.

Although situations like these are exceptions, exceptions require exceptional customer service.

At the beginning of this article, the question posed was, “Why is it that businesses consistently claim to value customers, yet inconsistently deliver exceptional customer service?”

The answer: The reason that we inconsistently receive exceptional customer service is because... it’s voluntary.

An employee chooses to express genuine interest, share unique knowledge, or provide a pleasant surprise. This explains why we as customers, rarely receive exceptional customer service.

So how can we resolve this?

Educate the employee about the difference between job function and job essence. Include the seven simple ways they can elevate their personal customer service; managers should look for ways to incorporate job essence into job function.

It can be as simple as the waiter’s description of the appetizer or the refreshing hotel wake-up call verbiage proposed above. Or it may be a bit more spontaneous, such as the front desk agent’s compliment of the gentleman’s necktie or the unexpected amenities sent to a corporate group.

It only when employees recognize and understand that their jobs are a combination of both job function and job essence; that they are intentional about displaying job essence while serving customers, will they have the awareness to consistently elevate the quality of their personal customer service—and make lasting positive impressions on the customers they serve.