

THE MOST FAN-CENTRIC ORGANIZATION IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS



BY NIVI NAGIEL, NCSA

When you step into Chesapeake Energy Arena to watch the Oklahoma City Thunder host an NBA game, you are not a customer, you are a guest. In the short time since the franchise played its first game in Oklahoma City in 2008, the Thunder focused on distinguishing itself among professional sports organizations in terms of the guest experience by consistently striving to treat every fan like an All-Star.

In a business that has little control over the product (what happens on the basketball court) and a front-line customer service team which includes more than 700 staff members employed by 15–20 different organizations, for the Thunder to provide a first-class guest experience and create repeat customers is no small feat. For the team's Guest Relations department, it all begins



with a mission to “Create Repeat Guests Profitably,” a vision to be “the most FAN-centric organization in professional sports,” and applying these two statements every day as a gauge in asking “How are we doing?” according to Pete Winemiller, senior vice president of Guest Relations.

In its efforts to constantly strive to meet these objectives, Winemiller's department can be observed to engage in three “continuous improvement processes”: Educate, Evaluate, and Congratulate (E.E.C.).

The Oklahoma City Thunder faces a unique customer service challenge, in that its front line, which consists of more than 700 guest-facing team members who work every home game caring for guests in various capacities, are actually employed by 15–20 different partner organiza-

Continued on following page

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tions, from food and beverage to security to merchandise companies. The vast majority of its service providers, therefore, are neither hired nor supervised by the Thunder. But as far as guests are concerned, these staff members represent the Thunder brand and are largely responsible for the quality of the guest experience: they are the face of the organization. Despite the challenge inherent to this model, the E.E.C. program has consistently proven successful in ensuring customer service excellence.

The first part of the Thunder’s core customer experience initiative is Education. “We have an intense focus on training . . . making sure we’re setting our front-line staff up for success, through education,” Winemiller says. Because the front line is diversely hired by the Thunder’s various partner companies—last season alone, it trained over 1,700 front-line team members—the first job of the Guest Relations team is to bring all staff members onto the same page. The Thunder training program, called “CLICK! With Your Guests,” provides front-line staff with the tools to create memorable guest experiences and revolves around the organization’s key service values: Communicate Courteously, Listen to Learn, Initiate Immediately, Create Connections, and Know Your Stuff. The acronym provides a clever reminder that practicing these five elements is the roadmap to truly “clicking” with your guests.

The next component of the Thunder’s winning customer service program is Evaluate. “I can have rich, A+ training, but the question really has to be asked, ‘Is it impacting the guest experience?’ which is obviously what we’re all focused on,” says Winemiller. To this end, Guest Relations uses metrically based research and overall fan feedback to determine what it is doing well and what it can do better. Research methods include secret shoppers; intercept surveys—in which guests are stopped during the course of the game and asked specific questions about their experience; and post-game guest surveys. By providing fans multiple feedback channels, the Thunder has received more than 35,000 messages since November 2009 and has provided responses to these messages usually within one business day.

Of course, no less important than the information gathered through evaluation programs is how that infor-

mation is received and put to use. “We’re big believers in begging for complaints,” Winemiller emphasizes. “When we have guests giving us insights into what we’re doing well, or what we can do better, it’s really free consulting. It allows us to improve in a way that affects not just that particular guest, but most likely, others who may see the experience through the same or similar lenses.” He highlights the value of guest criticism as a welcomed and critical ingredient in the process of continually looking to improve the guest experience, which the Thunder organization takes pride in.

Continued on following page



Front-line staff are reminded of service expectations and thanked throughout the arena for *clicking* with their guests.



Taking a photo of some happy fans is its own reward for this front-line team member.

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In a business model where your customer service teams are not in your employ, how can leadership consistently and effectively reinforce service expectations? The final piece of the Thunder's E.E.C. initiative is the answer: Congratulate. To Winemiller, a well-thought-out recognition program is paramount to any successful customer service model. "We want to recognize our front-line team members for doing the fantastic work that they're being asked to accomplish . . . because I don't know how you could expect your employees to treat your customers any better than they're being treated themselves," Winemiller says. And as with their training and research programs, the Guest Relations department is constantly looking for ways to improve: "We spend a lot of time—a lot of time—asking, 'How are we doing in terms of recognizing individuals?'"

Knowing their group of more than 700 game-night staff has the single greatest positive impact on guests, and based on the unique philosophy that "our front-line employees know more about our business than we do," the Thunder constructed the "Pyramid of Recognition." The recognition platform includes a number of programs,

which might be generally categorized as employees of the year, employees of the month, and employees of the moment. The "employees of the year" are actually recognized twice a year, in an on-court presentation at half-time, in front of 18,203 fans, as members of the Thunder's "100% Guest Care Team"—an esteemed group comprised of front-line individuals who have been observed to demonstrate all five of the CLICK! service values. The "employees of the month" program is called "Fan Favorite," where guests are given the opportunity at every game to nominate front-line team members for going above and beyond. The Fan Favorite Awards are presented in-season during a break in the game; recipients are announced in-game via the arena vision and on the PA, awarded a pin, and given a framed photograph of the presentation. "Employees of the moment" are recognized via the "CLICK! Chip" program, where full-time employees are equipped with CLICK! Chips to hand out whenever they see a staff member "clicking" with a guest—doing those "small things that make a big difference," per Winemiller. These chips are then redeemable for appreciation gifts, but as Winemiller often hears from

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staff, receiving the chips—the honor of being recognized, in the moment—is just as important, if not more important, than the gifts.

The Pyramid of Recognition ensures that staff are treated and acknowledged by the organization as the integral members of the Thunder—the “points of influence”—that they are. But how do you unify an operation where many hundreds of employees are working for more than 15 different companies—how do you create a culture among the staff members themselves? For the Thunder, this is achieved through the concept of RAVE: Respect and Value Everyone. The culture of RAVE is expected and delivered by all team members in a 360-degree manner: it is provided to guests and coworkers alike, and received in return. According to Winemiller, RAVE is truly the backbone of the organization, holding together and making possible

Culture of RAVE ***Respect and Value Everyone***

all of the other programs, and is indeed the essence of any organization’s success.

Walking through the arena, guests and employees will have more than one opportunity to see the organization’s values and service expectations featured publicly, from displays of the CLICK! logo recognizing and thanking individuals for “clicking with their guests,” to a sign above the doorway announcing that “Through this doorway pass the most FAN-centric arena staff in America!”

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Scoring points on and off the court with guests is what the Thunder is all about.

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The upshot of the dynamic and evolving E.E.C. program is that all the individuals working in the arena on game night, no matter whose logo is on their paycheck, are welcomed as part of the business, as members of the Thunder organization. As Winemiller likes to say, “the front line is the bottom line, all the time.” A genuine understanding of this critical fact, that “we wouldn’t be successful unless they’re successful,” is precisely what sets the Thunder apart. Measured against their mission to “Create Repeat Guests Profitably,” the Thunder is certainly on the right track, as evidenced by a 98 percent season ticket member renewal rate that places it among the top in the NBA, an NPS (Net Promoter Score) of 88.6 percent, a CES (Customer Effort Score) of 1.51, and all metrics continuing to receive “Top 2 Box” scores.

“We are blessed to have phenomenal front-line team members—very talented individuals—that represent the Thunder on a game day to the eyes of our guests, caring for the 18,203 people who come night after night to watch basketball in this venue,” Winemiller affirms. But clearly it’s more than a blessing. It’s the result of a rich, comprehensive, constantly progressing program of empowering employees by giving them the tools, training, and confidence to truly be problem-solvers in the moment, creating a culture where front-line team members are shown how their contributions are appreciated, and believing and living the philosophy that you have to create something bigger than yourself for your team. This is what keeps fans coming back, and employees providing that All-Star service. ■

Nivi Nagiel is the NCSA Senior Editor.

About page 1 photo: Chesapeake Energy Arena, home of the OKC Thunder, where the most FAN-centric arena staff in America hosts 18,203 fans.

Photographs provided by Oklahoma City Thunder.

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