



DoubleTree by Hilton – From Engagement to the Bottom Line

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When I was asked to share our views and direction in customer service, I found it challenging to put into words what we at The DoubleTree by Hilton in Bloomington, IL, communicate to our tens of thousands of guests each year. Then it hit me! We do not teach our staff how to give our guests great customer service; we educate them on our culture. Customer service is our culture, and it all starts with engaging our customers.

The Engagement

I view customer service as very simple. Customer service is nothing more than engagement and communication. Engagement means that when you honestly take the time to engage with a customer, guest or client, he will connect with you, and that conversation will translate to a higher level of confidence. You are not just “telling” your guests the answer to their questions; instead, you upgrade what would otherwise be a simple response to a conversation, which in turn becomes a warm, friendly exchange. As an example, at our hotel, we have 25 to 30 Diamond Hilton Honor members who stay with us on a weekly basis, so engagement becomes very important. They have

become not only our valued customers—they are now part of our family. We find that our staff members communicate with each other regarding our guests, sharing a little about them, where they may be from, their likes, what floor they prefer, what time they may come back to our hotel after work, who they travel with, how many nights a week they are here, etc. Now, that person has engaged another staff member, who will now be able to better engage with those guests. So as this exchange of information progresses (and it will in a very short period of time), I find that those guests, who may have met only one employee, are now being addressed and engaged by other employees as if they have known them for a very long time. Take away the formal, stuffy, uptown approach and engage your guests and customers with a caring, interested, professional manner. This approach will increase their comfort in you and build their trust, because they will always know that you want to take care of their needs. This sense of confidence becomes what we call the Travelers Reward.

The Travelers Reward

When I was starting my career, I wanted to travel. Travel made me feel important. It was sought after, it was sexy,

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and when I told someone I traveled for a living, I could sense their envy. Visiting new cities, attractions and unbelievable hotels, and dining at restaurants all over the globe—wow, that is the life! Or is it? Well, it may have been at one time. Now with our ever increasing needs for safety and security, it no longer has the same appeal, especially for the “road warriors” who travel daily to make a living.

I am sure that many of you who have traveled in the last year have found that it is now more of a hassle than a pleasure. Imagine that you are leaving for a business trip. Your journey begins after you book all your travel, and the departure is great as you have a loved one or a friend take you to the airport. Then the frustration sets in. You stand in lines, get your identification out, put it away, get it back out, and wait while they rub down your luggage with bomb detection devices. Then you go to the security checkpoint, take your laptop out and set it in a tray, remove your jewelry, pen, billfold, belt, shoes, and glasses if they are metal and anything that might attract further attention from the friendly TSA agents, and place all this in a tray. As you go through the X-Ray, it becomes a little nerve-racking as you watch them cut their eyes from their screen to you and back again. If you are really lucky, you are chosen to join them in a random search. You may be poked, prodded, and groped and leave feeling rather violated. Once you are through with this, then you are on your way to your gate, thinking “All right, I made it!” only to be disappointed yet again when you find that the plane is delayed. Yes it can get better, but now you experience the stress of potentially missing your connecting flight. Once you get to your destination, you can only hope that your room is ready and your needs are met according to your request.

For our guests, this is when our staff jumps into gear. We know that many have gone through a long, stressful day that would most certainly place our guests in a defensive mood as they approach our hotel. Now for the reward! You are met with a smile, a warm DoubleTree by Hilton cookie, a sincere welcome back, a genuine concern for how your day has been, and a promise that your day of travel to get to our destina-

tion is far behind. Our staff works very hard to ensure that the chain of hospitality/service is not broken.

The Travelers Reward is very simple—To Make Our Guest Feel Human Again! Our employees put themselves in our guests’ shoes in order to be aware of all they go through to get to their destination, and to fully appreciate that, among the many choices available to each guest, they chose ours.

“Where the little things mean everything”

The Little Things

Whenever you travel or go to an event, dinner or wherever service is delivered, it should not be only the end result of your event that you grade; it should be all of the little details. Part of our approach to hospitality is to ensure that DoubleTree by Hilton is “where the little things mean everything.” Simply put, it is very easy to enjoy something, but when you drill down, was everything—and I mean everything—that you expected and requested met or exceeded? Or did the overall event go well when you block out any “missed opportunities?” To be honest, everyone will make mistakes, but it is when the mistakes become the rule or consistency of your service that it is time to rebuild. Taking the time to review your customers’ needs, wants, likes, dislikes, etc., gives you a very big advantage in being able to build your relationship. A simple gesture, such as placing their favorite wine in their room for no reason other than just to say, “We missed you and welcome back,” or sending a card to their room on their birthday, anniversary or any other occasion goes a long way with your customer. It is not only the little things that count, but of course, the little things build your credibility and their trust in you to deliver. When the DoubleTree Brands repositioned to DoubleTree by Hilton, it was the ideal time to identify with our customers, create the reward and instill in our communities that the key benefit in staying with us really is because DoubleTree by Hilton is “where the little things mean everything.”

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The Customer Speaks

Let's face it; there are plenty of customer service surveys out there. But there is really only one way to make those needed changes, and that is to listen. At DoubleTree by Hilton, we measure customer relationship success with SALT, which stands for Service And Loyalty Tracking. Listen to the collective voice of your guests, and for the most part, if you review, study, and respond to it and make the changes your guests suggest, your results will improve. I review our SALT scoring on a daily basis, and often I will pull it up in the evenings and on weekends. If your guests/customers take the time to complete your survey, you had better make sure you are making the time to respond, react and—if necessary—repair. When you review some of those harsher comments, you may be tempted to not respond at all. Swallow your pride, because even if your customers did not tell you the problems or challenges they faced with their service while they were still at your establishment, they are telling you now. It would be best to make contact in a very appreciative manner. This approach will assure them that they were heard and you want to respond by making appropriate changes. Remember, those silent customers can be the most challenging to serve. If you choose to respond abruptly or not at all, you may “win the battle,” but you will lose their patronage and that of others, as they will most likely tell everyone they can about their negative experience. That will destroy many efforts that you and your team have put forth.

The Bottom Line

When I think of one individual dissatisfied guest, I consider the potential for them not to return and to give others the same advice; the direct result is that we may lose another would-be room reservation or two. However, the ultimate reality is that, if the concerns of that one dissatisfied guest are not handled honestly and quickly, you could stand to lose more than you know due to the far-reaching impact of social media sites, chat rooms, blogs, etc. My job is to



Guest comments in this box fuel DoubleTree by Hilton's SALT process

try to ensure that these communication media reflect a net positive image of our services. There may be no way to prevent someone from sharing a negative experience, but if you make contact with the guests/customers in a timely manner, listen to their challenges and ensure that they know you appreciate them, they will most likely be able to make some positive comments about your customer service.

Our hotel is fortunate to have some really great communicators and engagers. These people are not engaging with our guests because they have to; they are genuinely

interested and want to take care of them. When we are recruiting new employees, it may be hard to find the perfect match for everything we really are seeking, so we focus on what type of personality a candidate will bring to the team. I believe it is easy to teach someone the task and responsibilities of his position, while demeanor is much more innate and is the best basis for making your choice. Caring, compassion, courtesy and the genuine love to be around people and assist them are the key qualities we are seeking. These traits will make the greatest improvement in your customer service. This is what travelers trust and what will inspire them to open up and engage. I believe that every one of your customers impacts your bottom line! No matter what your job title is, ensuring that your guests/customers are completely satisfied and enjoy your services will inspire them to choose your business over your competitors. Remember, if you do not have these customers, you will have no bottom line at all!

Ultimately, a strong business is supported by both customer service and customer loyalty. Consistently offering unsurpassed service through the Travelers Reward is our key to developing customer loyalty at DoubleTree by Hilton. Without such service, your company's future is at best uncertain. As you improve your service, you take control of your success and build the foundation of a better business. ■