



Customer Service is Not a Department

Lee Cockerell

When I give talks to business audiences, I am often introduced as the man who ran Disney World operations for ten years. I was responsible for twenty resort hotels, four world famous theme parks, two water parks, five golf courses, an entertainment and shopping village, the ESPN Sports Complex, and much more, all staffed by 65,000 Cast Members (Disney's word for employees), including 7,000 managers, who served fifty million visitors a year.

It always sounds incredibly impressive. Then I get up to the microphone and tell the audience the naked truth: I did not know what was going on half the time.

After the shock wears off the audience always laughs, especially those managers who often don't know what's going on themselves because they're juggling a hundred balls at the same time. But that's not what I mean. I then explain. The boss never knows what's going on in every corner of a business. They can't. And they shouldn't. Because smart bosses know something even more important than all the operational details in the world: they know that their top priorities are to hire the right people, train them for excellence, and serve as great role models for them.

One more thing, the most important: they also know that the customer rules. Everything good leaders do, and everything they inspire their employees to do, is aimed at giving customers what they need and want—not only a great product, but service that is so sensational and beyond expectations that they can't help but rave about it to others.

Let's home in on those points.

Great leaders hire expert talent. They look for people that not only have the skills needed to do an excellent job, but also a “can do” attitude, and a visible passion for the work. When I learned how to separate the wheat from the chaff in the hiring process, it was a landmark day in my management career. Once I had the best people in place, I was free to focus on what I'm really good at. I had the best engineer, the best retail executive, the best food and beverage executive, and the best direct reports, and they ran the day-to-day operations. I also had excellent finance support and fantastic IT support. In fact, I had experts running everything from transportation to security to purchasing. That's why I can say that I did not know what was going on half the time—because I didn't have to. Those highly competent, dedicated, passionate employees knew exactly what was going on and were capable of handling anything that came up.

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In addition to hiring and promoting the best people in every position, I focused on making sure everyone from the top executives to the frontline Cast Members were well-trained, and tested, before they were allowed to serve guests. No business should practice on those it serves, whether they're customers, patients, passengers, students, or guests. That's why smart leaders make absolutely sure that every employee knows exactly how to perform his or her job and is given all the information and resources they need to provide excellent service.

They should also make sure that every employee, from the bottom of the ladder to the top, knows that they have the power to impact the customer's experience in a positive way. They should be oriented and inspired to make every customer feel special. That means treating them as individuals who are worthy of respect and careful attention. Inculcating that service attitude should be an integral part of training and ongoing education efforts. If you expect the most from your employees and treat them with dignity, the great majority will meet your expectations—if not exceed them. That will translate to repeat business, enthusiastic recommendations, and a healthy bottom line.

By hiring and training at a high level, I was free to spend time on a third task, which I consider crucial to managerial success: being a great role model for leadership. If you go around saying that employees at any level can exercise leadership, and that everyone in the organization is responsible for providing excellent service, you'd better demonstrate those qualities yourself.

I worked hard at creating an environment in which every employee mattered—and knew they mattered. You should, too. Your employees will not be committed to you unless they're sure that you are committed to them. When they know they matter and are cared about, respected, trained and developed, people give their best. That's a win-win-win for employees, customers, and the company. Your people are your brand. If you think about people first, the profits will surely follow.

The principles I've discussed so far are central to the Disney Great Leader Strategies, which I had the privilege of helping to create when I was an executive at Disney World. Those strategies became the bible for training and developing the 7000 leaders at that world-famous resort, and they are used in the training programs conducted by the Disney Institute. They work, and for that reason, I adapted them for my first book, *Creating Magic*. But all those leadership strategies had one goal and one goal only: to provide every guest with excellent service. I may have been the boss of a few thousand people at Disney, but there was only one true ruler: those guests. So I embarked on my second book, *The Customer Rules*, because every person in every company needs to know the Rules if they want to win.

“*If you think about people first, the profits will surely follow.*”

As simple as they are profound, the Rules work on every level of organizational life, from the leaders that hire and train employees, establish policies and procedures, and set the tone, to front line staff who deal directly with clients, customers, patients, passengers, clients, and guests.

The Rules have proven effective in businesses of every size, from huge multinational corporations to local coffee shops. And they work for manufacturing companies, service companies, retail companies, and every other type of business you can think of, whether they offer products as cutting-edge as a computer tablet or as timeless as shoes and handbags.

If you master all 39 Rules, you will serve your customers with consistency, efficiency, creativity, and sincerity. And if you achieve that, those customers will never want to do business with anyone else. Here, I will focus on a few key Rules that organizational leaders should keep in the forefront of their minds, beginning with Rule Number One.

Customer Service is Not a Department

It's also not a complaint desk, or a website, or a phone number, or an option on a phone menu. Nor is it a task or a chore. It's the responsibility of everyone in the organization, from the CEO to the lowest-ranking front line employee. In effect, everyone in the company is a customer service rep, because each of them has some impact on the customer's experience.

As an executive, you may never see or speak to a customer, but you model how they should be treated with every interaction you have, with vendors, creditors, suppliers, and especially your employees. Treat everyone with sincerity and respect and it will trickle down to your customers.

I constantly meet executives who don't understand that great service serves the bottom line.

They think it's all about the product. I tell them that a good product is just the starting point, and unless their product is (and always will be) the only one of its kind on the planet, they'd better also provide service that exceeds the customer's expectations. That combination is hard to beat. Don't just take my word for it. One study found that 43% of consumers named "negative experience with a staff person" as the main reason for taking their business elsewhere, and 30% said they went elsewhere because they were not made to feel valued as a customer.

Think of customer service as the entire human experience, from the moment someone logs onto your web site or walks through your front door until they log off or walk out. It's the emotional factor in the transaction, and it can be as important to customers as the price or the product. Make sure it's delivered with competence, respect, and care. Great service does not cost any more than bad service, and there's a lot at stake. In this age of social media and instant global communication, you still win customers one at a time, but you can lose them a thousand at a time if you irritate the wrong people.

Be an Ecologist

As in the natural environment, every component of your organization is connected; what happens in one affects all the others. Things that seem far removed from the point of sale have tremendous repercussions on the service your customers receive, and therefore your bottom line. So pay close attention to every decision you make, every policy you announce, every procedure you introduce, every e-mail you send, and every conversation you have.

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As I said earlier, when I worked for Disney World, I hired the best people possible. They were so good that I was often asked, “With all these great people working for you, what exactly do you do?” My answer was: “I’m the chief ecologist.” I focused on nurturing a healthy, non-toxic ecosystem in which everyone had the motivation, the skills, and the means to deliver sensational service.

You don't have to be in charge of operations, as I was, to create a thriving service environment. No matter what position you occupy, you can help make your corner of the organization flourish. Don't worry about what everyone else is doing; focus on what you can do to sustain an ecosystem that is centered on satisfying every customer's needs.

Rehearse, Rehearse, Rehearse

I often compare customer service to putting on a show. As a leader, you're the playwright, the producer, and the director, so I urge you to write a great script, hire the best cast, and rehearse until everyone is razor sharp. Then you'll be ready for a great performance.

By script I mean a detailed, step-by-step scenario of the ideal customer experience from beginning to end. I recommend writing it out as a narrative and sharing the vision with everyone in your organizational domain. But even if your script is Shakespearian and your cast is Oscar caliber, you need to make sure everyone is ready to perform at their best before the curtain goes up. That means rehearsing, again and again. The opportunity to continuously refine your performance is invaluable. That's why premier actors rehearse and world-class athletes practice between games. Why should business be any different? In the hospitality industry, everyone from cocktail servers to concierges goes through on-site practice sessions before a restaurant or a hotel opens. Realistic rehearsals don't cost much, and they pay huge dividends.

One simple but excellent form of rehearsal is role playing. Just assign certain employees the role of clients or customers, and have others perform their usual jobs. In addition to teaching employees how to do their jobs under ordinary conditions, role-playing can prepare them for difficult and unusual situations. Create scenarios that force employees to use all of their skills, and have the “customers” ask tough questions and make difficult demands.

Follow up with both private feedback and on-the-spot critiques by the whole team. If circumstances permit, you might want to shoot videos of the rehearsal and screen them with the team.

By rehearsing the most effective responses, you’ll be able to solve service problems quickly and keep them from metastasizing. Once employees master ordinary performance, they are better able to respond creatively when something unusual crops up—and it’s not a question of *if* something will go wrong, it’s just a matter of *when*. Rehearsals are a great way to make sure everyone is ready to roll. It sure makes better sense than practicing on your customers!

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Serve to WIN

WIN is an acronym for What's Important Now. If great service is your goal, make sure everyone in your organization knows that what's important now—right now, at every moment—is the customer's needs, desires, and concerns. Cleaning up the vacated table in a restaurant? Folding the shirts that were left in the dressing room of a clothing store? Finishing the phone call? Not as important now as the client or customer who is waiting.

As for gossiping with coworkers, checking personal e-mail or watching a YouTube video, such distractions are not to be tolerated. They tell customers that your business lacks a customer service ethic, or talks the talk but does not walk it.

There's no bigger turn-off to a customer than being ignored, even for a few seconds.

Employees should be trained to pay attention at all times. Obviously, if you work in a retail store, a restaurant, a bank, or any business with direct contact with customers, there are times when you're busy and people have to wait. W.I.N. still applies: just let them know that they've been seen, with a nod, a gesture, some brief eye contact or a pleasant "I'll be right with you." People just want to be acknowledged. As business consultant Steve Denning put it, "It's not about a transaction; it's about forging a relationship."

Knowing What's Important Now requires judgment and sensitivity, and you can hire and train with those qualities in mind. Just make sure that everyone knows the WIN principle: what's most important in each and every now is to provide superior service. Everything else can wait.

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Don't Get Bored with the Basics

I've spent just about my whole life thinking about service. It started with teenage jobs in a drugstore and a lumberyard in my small Oklahoma town, and it culminated in executive positions at three companies with worldwide reputations for service excellence: Hilton, Marriott, and Disney. Along the way, I learned a tremendous amount from brilliant colleagues and mentors, and through my own personal experience. But no one ever expressed the basic truth about service as well as my grandchildren. When Margot was twelve, I asked her what she thought was the most important rule for great service. Without a moment's hesitation, she said, “Papi, the first rule is ‘Be nice!’”

When I said I was going to use that insight in my book, Margot's ten-year-old brother, Tristan, said he wanted to be in the book too. I challenged him to give me a good quote about service. "When you serve," said Tristan, "you should always be the giving one."

It doesn't get any more basic than "Be nice" and "Always be the giving one." And that advice is more profound than you might think. Look up "nice" in a dictionary and you find terms like *friendly, polite, pleasant, appealing, kind, considerate, well mannered, refined, and skillful*. Who wouldn't want to be surrounded by such qualities when doing business? As for being the giving one, that's the very essence of service, and it's what every individual in your company should be doing when they interact with customers.

Of course, on the ground, executing great customer service can get complicated. But the stuff that matters most is really quite simple. It boils down to some basic principles that apply to every employee: salespeople and servers, tech support analysts and repair workers, desk clerks and ticket takers, delivery personnel and janitors, and all the way up to the highest echelon of executives. Friendliness, cleanliness, professionalism, honesty, courtesy, safety—what could be more basic? And what could be more important to the customer?

The basics may not seem sexy, but leaders ignore them at their peril. Imagine, for example, a hospital whose staff was technically proficient and as coordinated as a drill team, but didn't bother washing their hands before and after treating their patients. What could be more basic than washing your hands? But that one simple act, repeated thousands of times, dramatically reduces infection rates, which in turn speeds up patient recovery, lowers costs, and sometimes even saves lives.

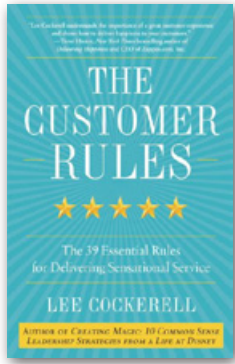
“The basics may not seem sexy, but leaders ignore them at their peril.”

Here's one way to know what the basics are: Ask yourself, “What Would Mom Do?” Mothers know that the little things in life matter a lot. They tell their children, “Be honest,” “Play by the rules,” “Be considerate of others,” “Mind your manners,” “Keep your promises,” and “Always do your best.” They make sure their kids say “please,” and “thank you,” and “I'm sorry” when those key phrases are appropriate. Mothers repeat the basics over and over again, until doing the right thing becomes as natural for their children as eating and drinking.

Great leaders do the same: they define what they consider the basics and communicate them clearly so everyone knows exactly what the organization stands for—and what their leaders won't stand for. Your employees—especially those in direct contact with customers—are your brand. Make sure they always act like professionals. Their appearance, their demeanor, their body language, their facial expressions, their energy levels, their language and tone—all of it matters. You can train them impeccably in every procedure and every technical detail, but if they don't get the basics right, it's all for naught.

The three men who founded the companies I worked for, Conrad Hilton, J.W. Marriott, and Walt Disney, were all passionate about customer service, and they demanded service excellence from every employee in their organizations. It is no coincidence that those three companies are still thriving decades after their creation while many other once-great organizations are long gone. Yes, all three companies have great products, but their real strength is providing sensational service day in and day out. Their founders knew that if they served their customers well, the customers would reward them with their loyalty, and profits would follow as naturally as night follows day. **The same will happen in your organization if you build a culture of service and never lose sight of the basics.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Lee Cockerell was the executive vice president of operations for Walt Disney World for more than ten years. As one of the public faces of the world-renowned Disney Institute, he continues to teach courses in leadership and professional development. A popular keynote speaker, he frequently addresses Fortune 500 corporations, government agencies, educational institutions, and nonprofits across the country. He lives in Orlando, Florida.

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