



Why Do Some Establishments Deliver Such Fine Customer Service – And What Does This Have To Do With Safety?

Insights

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I'm on my 16 hour flight back from South Africa to Atlanta and processing my experiences. Surely such a varied and unusual adventure will provide me with fodder for some philosophical musings which lead to my usual practical "Action Points" on safety and employment law.

I have marveled this year at the fine customer service I have received while traveling throughout the U.S., France and now, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia. My question is not an idle musing. I never encounter superior customer service in an environment where employees are dissatisfied, claims are frequent, and safety compliance is poor. How do we achieve this exalted state ... and also avoid legal challenges?

Despite being a liberal arts kind of guy, I live and die by objective analysis, so let's see if we can narrow down our variables.

1. In my African travels, I have not traveled cheaply; I flew business class, stayed at nice hotels, enjoyed Sabi Sabi, one of the best safari lodges on the continent, and used South Africa's best travel agency, Thompsons. You receive fabulous service when you go first class. Plus, one receives amazing care when one uses an individual driver/guide or is one of only 16 guests at a lodge.
2. However, I am not a high flier in my business travel or even in most of my recreational travel ... so why have I also received superior customer service from countless Hampton Inns and National Rental Car sites? What is the common factor? Also, what does giant Delta do right as compared to United, American, Air France and others?
3. I am purposely nice to those individuals who provide services to me. I tip well. I ask their names and I show them respect. Certainly that behavior influences their response. So how does one explain the same employee's respectful response to customers who can only be termed as difficult?
4. Customer Service knows no cultural, class or geopolitical boundaries. I received good service from both a bar tender in a Zambian bar and from a highly certified guide at the apex of Africa's rigorous safari guide system. Ladies selling handmade souvenirs in Soweto could not have been more pleasant. Sure ... they all want to make money, and I am a decent guy, but is that all there is to explain their attitudes and the resulting effects on the business?

You guys tell me? My questions are not unique. Countless scholars and consultants offer answers and suggestions. The hospitality industry lives and dies on this issue. What are common elements of an atmosphere that promotes and generates superior customer service ... which usually also translates to an atmosphere of good compliance and less employment-related claims?

These questions are not rhetorical. I hope some of my readers will comment.

I look for basic common sense principles, and here are a few of my admittedly unsophisticated observations ...

1. **“We’re all in this together”** Employers prosper when they create or encourage an atmosphere that emphasizes that all of us employees are dealing with similar challenges, value one another despite our roles, and sink or swim based on our concerted effort. At Sabi Sabi, one of the continent’s best safari lodges, every member of their elite Earth Lodge seemed to value one another despite race or relative position. In such an environment, distinctions are encouraged, and roles clear, but one received the impression that everyone respected one another. That’s no small feat these days. This argues for more effective examples by upper management and more consistent supervisor training and employee engagement efforts.
2. HR and motivational theories are useful, but never forget to **simply treat people decently and with respect**. Nuff said. You don’t need a consultant on this one.
3. **Be purposeful.** We all know what to do and often have good intentions, but the increasingly tough demands of the 21st century work environment steal our focus and time. If one does not develop a plan and a way to monitor success or remind oneself, good intentions never grow into consistent actions. Frankly, this is my primary point ... if we, as managers, do not come up with a plan and a way to keep reminding us of how to act; those good intentions will amount to naught.
4. **Treating people decently does not mean letting employees get away with unacceptable performance or conduct.** I don’t like busting people, but I know that I am creating a festering problem when I fail to address performance or attitude issues because that’s not a pleasant job or “I am too busy.” Do I even need to mention the affirmative defense of an employee’s OSHA violation of “unpreventable employee misconduct” as one reason to discipline employees? We discipline too little, not too much.
5. **Get on the floor ... regularly.** Again, you don’t need a consultant to implement that suggestion.
6. **Train your supervisors “regularly “ and repeatedly in how to counsel, mentor, develop and generally supervise employees.** We have harped on this point for many years, and yet, I still find little commitment or practical efforts to develop front line management in their employee management skills. I have repeatedly written about how retaliation, ADA and other claims result from supervisor ignorance ... not malicious intent.
7. **Don’t assume that corporate policies and values will be practiced at every site or remote location.** Develop ways to monitor and check up on the real world of your work sites. This

process is even more vital when we consider one or two person crews working with immediate supervision. this concern goes double for safety.

8. **Care about your employees.** My dad was a tough boss, but when he died, almost every employee he ever supervised travelled back to his funeral. One of them, Jeb Beavers, summed it up well when he explained, *"Bill Mavity was the hardest boss I ever had, but he was even harder to quit on."* Pretty good eulogy.
 9. **Expect professionalism, no matter what the setting.**
 10. **Respect your company** or do not expect your employees to do so.
 11. **Never stop asking how you are doing** and how you treat your people, or how well your safety processes function. Never rest on your laurels.
- These are a few of my ideas. What do you believe leads to great customer service?

Howard

P.S. Visit South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana. It's safe for tourists, the people are great, and you may learn a bit about customer service. Oh ... and a shout out to my Atlanta Delta flight crews.

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Howard A. Mavity

Partner

404.240.4204

Email