



# Providing World-Class Service

## How to Stand Out in the Crowd

EDITORIAL | MICHAEL GULD

Today's business environment is becoming increasingly complex and competitive as a result of globalization, advanced technology, increasing product proliferation, brand erosion, market segmentation, consumer skepticism and time poverty, rendering traditional business plans obsolete. For just about every product or service, there is an overwhelming number of options to choose from, leaving consumers dazed and confused.

So how can you stand out in a sea of competitors promoting similar offerings? Become known as *the* company in your field that provides world-class service.





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**What is world-class service?** It is the talk of many but the reality of few. When a company provides a client with world-class service, it often becomes a legendary experience that the client retells to others in a form of free publicity, which can't be bought.

**What companies come to mind when you think of world-class service?** What establishments do you patronize whose service exceeds your expectations on a continual basis? Typically, these are not the places that have the lowest prices. They do not have to — their value is created by elevating the customer experience to a point where paying a premium is not an issue.

First of all, companies should understand the difference between “the product” — the commodity or service being delivered — and “the process” — the method by which that product is delivered. Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle, Washington, has become world-famous for this differentiation. While their product is fish, their word-of-mouth fame was created by the process in which that product is delivered: throwing fish. The product of a doctor is clinical expertise, whereas most people would agree that the process by which that product is delivered (bedside manner) may be just as important. Since realtors do not have exclusives on the homes (product) they show and sell, their sole value is created by the service they provide (process).

Here's the point: Your reputation in your field may be created more by the customer experience you deliver than the product or service you sell.


There are several simple actions that will determine your level of customer service from the customer's perspective. When a realistic and objective assessment is made in each case, coupled with systems and strategies to improve (with training), it can result in immediate and transformational changes in your business. They are:

✦ **How well you listen** — Do you clearly understand the needs of your customers? As Mark Twain once said, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” You do not need to start out offering all the answers — begin by asking all the right questions. What do your customers really want and how can you better serve them?

- ✦ **What you say** — How well do you answer questions, provide information, guidance or direction? Helping your customers understand the range of offerings available (pros and cons) and what best fits their unique needs will build loyalty. Helping them all along the way and being available for service after the sale will build customers for life.
- ✦ **How you say it** — Have you evaluated your nonverbal communication such as body language, tone and inflection? In his book, **Silent Messages**, Dr. Albert Merhabian found that communication is 57 percent non verbal — body language, eye contact, a warm smile and open gestures — 35 percent voice quality — volume, tone and inflection — and only 7 percent the words you say. Yet most people tend to focus their time, energy and training on the words they say.
- ✦ **What you do** — Do you consider your actions taken or not taken? The only thing worse than doing nothing is saying you are going to do something and you don't. It creates disappointment and a loss of trust. Taking the time up front to address your customer's every need, want and desire will keep them coming back.
- ✦ **How you do it** — Are you there to please or appease? Do you find that it's just a job for some people as they are going through the motions while others take pride in their company, their work and truly care about the well-being of their customers? Making customers feel special and appreciated creates an emotional bond that is not easily broken.
- ✦ **When you do it** — Do you consider your response times? Immediate response times that exceed expectations create a positive perception, while long wait and response times create frustrations leading to a negative perception. We are now living in a “drive-thru” world where communication expectations are greater than ever before with the advent of emails, cell phones, PDAs and text messaging.

Most service experiences are unremarkable. We tend to remember only those experiences on the extremes of either side. Poor customer service tends to leave consumers frustrated and disappointed. In the restaurant business there is famous saying: “You are only as good as your last visit.” An

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exceptionally long delay in receiving food may be as damaging to a restaurant’s reputation as a bad meal.

Why is it important to create a world-class service culture? Because not only are the products or services in most categories being commoditized by your competitors — where the lowest price wins — but more and more often the service component is playing a greater role in your customers’ buying decision. For example, if you look in the Yellow Pages under “Automobile Repair and Service” you will find pages of ads with every company communicating basically the same message. Since most people don’t truly understand what is being done underneath the hood, their loyalties lie with the way they are greeted, on the phone or first meeting, and the way they are treated.

And finally, when talking about world-class service, it all comes down to people. When asked why everyone working at Disney seemed so happy, Michael Eisner replied, “Easy. We don’t hire grumpy people.” Robert Spector, author of **The Nordstrom Way**, relays that Bruce Nordstrom’s hiring philosophy was to “hire the smile and train the skill,” noting that he could teach anyone to sell shoes, but he couldn’t teach everyone to smile. If you look at the organizations that provide world-class service, you will usually find they hire the best people and then provide a supportive culture where those employees can flourish.

Now is the time to stand up and provide a wow factor that will create customers for life. 



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