

Game of Service

It's the game of business.



by Phillip Van Hooser

BUSINESS IS SERIOUS. THERE'S a lot riding on the outcome. But think of the game of business in the same terms as you would any other competitive game, like tennis, governed by a set of rules that are fairly easy to understand, but not always easy to follow. Players are pitted against opponents. For a positive outcome, either or both participants must possess the skill and strategy to accomplish their individual goals.

The individual goals of both parties are where things get sticky. In tennis, the goal is to beat the opponent. However, in business both parties must win. You must make your customers happy by providing quality products and services at a reasonable price, while still making a profit. But you can't just do it once and be satisfied. Sustainable businesses are built on the foundation of repeat business—they prosper when their customers return regularly.

The losers are easy to spot. They are the ones with the "Going out of Business" signs, acting as if business today is the same as yesterday, filing for bankruptcy, or doctoring their books to mislead others. They contest every customer complaint, and undercut the authority and ability of their employees to handle complaints directly.

Those who prosper take the time to learn the service game, starting with satisfied customers who continue to do business with us and who share a goodwill message with others about us and the products and services we offer. Business is all about the customer.

What's In a Name

I hadn't been in Willie's cab for more than 30 seconds before he introduced himself to me and learned my name. During the next 30 minutes, Willie used my name in casual conversation at least two dozen times. And it was all so natural. After our first few minutes together, I forgot that our relationship was that of customer and service provider. It came to feel more like a discussion between friends. Therein lies the magic and power of using a customer's name. People are drawn together.

Of course, customers are not just

those individuals walking into our showroom or calling us on the telephone. Those customers tend to get our immediate attention. Their faces are not as familiar to us. They come from outside the company. We refer to them as our "external" customers.

We should never discount the importance of our "internal" customers. Most of us have them. They are our co-workers, with whom we interact daily, as we strive to serve the needs of the external customers.

Because our internal customers become so familiar to us over time, like family members, we often take them for granted. The need to



acknowledge our internal customers and their contributions cannot be overstated. If you improve your internal customer service activities, your external customers will benefit. If not, problems will ensue.

Yes, the game of business is the game of service, and it starts right where you are. Begin to think of your employees as your customers. Now ask yourself, "What can I do to help meet and exceed their expectations?" The service you offer your internal employees will be a model for the service they are expected to offer your external customers. Service, like charity, begins at home.

A Service Pro at Work

Once I was traveling through the Atlanta airport around mealtime with about 90 minutes before my next flight. As I stepped off the escalator, I found myself on the fringes of the Terminal A food court. This place is as good as any, I thought as I positioned myself in one of the serving lines.

As we inched forward, I tried to keep

my rolling travel case close beside me. Soon someone was shouting questions in my direction and I was shouting my order back to her. In seconds, a large tray was thrust my way, on which was precariously balanced my meal. I worked to balance the tray of food in one hand, retrieve my wallet with the other, while pushing my rolling case toward the cash register with my knees, all the while bumping and dodging other diners. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

When I finally reached the cash register, I heard a voice over my shoulder say, "I'll take that for you." Out of curiosity, I turned just in time to watch a man—a total stranger—drag my case away.

Thankfully, before I overreacted, the stranger stopped beside one of the few empty tables, slid my case under the table, turned my way and smiled broadly as he waited for me. I was still confused. I collected my receipt and change, along with the tray of food and made my way toward him. As I drew near, he produced a towel from his back pocket and with flourish, wiped the crumbs from the table before pulling my chair out for me. He smiled and said, "Sir, enjoy your meal," and walked away.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It took me 13 minutes to eat my meal; however, I sat mesmerized for another 14 minutes watching this gentleman repeat his performance with more patrons. The results were always the same—looks of amazement. Several times this energetic customer servant would look my way and smile, nod, or wink.

I motioned for the young man. "Sir, is there something else I can do for you?" he asked. "No, you've done great. I just wanted you to know how impressed I am with your attitude and service," I said, as I slipped him a tip.

"Why thank you, sir," he said. He then smiled and made his way back in search of others to serve.

This young man did something that anyone in a similar position could have done, yet in doing it, people found it to be unexpected. In short, he redefined the routine activities of greeting and seating patrons. He stepped out of the expected routine and inserted a bit of personality, creativity, and flair. As a result, he benefited financially.

Exceptional service professionals willing to alter their service routines to benefit the customer always stand out in a crowd. **SSE**

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ACTION: Be a service professional.