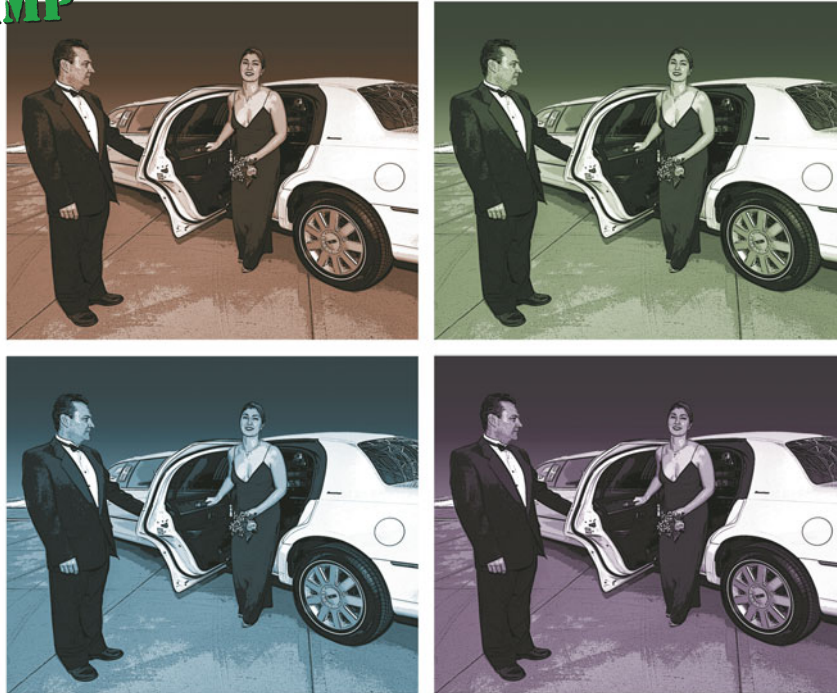


START-UP BOOT CAMP



IF YOU THINK YOU CAN SKIMP ON CUSTOMER SERVICE, YOU'RE IN THE WRONG BUSINESS

QUICK, EASY, AND PAINLESS WAYS TO SECURE LOYAL CUSTOMERS AND BOOST YOUR REVENUE

By Camella Lobo

Two words that are used most frequently in any business that deals with the public are “customer” and “service.” It’s a simple enough concept to understand, however, keeping customers satisfied and coming back to your business is easier said than done. Using those two words is one thing, but truly understanding and effectively implementing them into the fabric of a company takes a lot more work.

Michael Lindsey, president and CEO of Lindsey Limousine, Inc. and Ron Sorci, CFO of Aventura Limousine & Transportation, laid out some clear-cut advice on nailing customer service inside and out. “Our industry needs to do a better job,” says Sorci. Both operators see a dis-

parity in customer service across the board and are looking toward helping peers uphold the true definition of luxury transportation.

The Trickle Down Effect

Once your business reaches a certain size, you hire employees to be an extension of yourself, to be the storefront of the brand you’ve worked so hard to build. But hiring reservationists and chauffeurs is the easy part. How do you ensure that your employees are maintaining the integrity of your business when dealing with your clients on the front lines? There is no way to give great service to your customers without first trans-

WHAT DOES DISNEYLAND HAVE TO DO WITH LIMOUSINES?

Sorci says that all too often, operators make promises to their customers that they can’t always keep. Making claims like, “We’ll never be late,” can only lead to disappointing results. There are many circumstances be-

yond the control of the owner of a company that can extremely damage its credibility. Sorci says to “under promise and over deliver.”

He cites Disneyland as an example of that philoso-

phy. “Disneyland always overestimates the posted amount of time it will take to get through a line for one of its rides,” he says. Sorci adds that although 45 minutes may seem like a long time to wait, guests are

pleasantly surprised when it takes only 30. He says the same rules can apply in a limousine business. “Instead of making promises to a customer that you can’t deliver, you should just be reasonable and never lie.”



“Doing these little things make employees feel a sense of belonging to the place they work.”

MICHAEL LINDSEY

lating that same philosophy into the way you deal with your staff.

According to Lindsey, the concept of customer service starts at the top. Employees who are valued, dealt with fairly, and respectfully, are given incentives to carry on that same attitude in the way they deal with customers. Simply saying thank you and showing your employees they are appreciated members of your team goes a long way, says Lindsey. Creating an environment that facilitates a team-like atmosphere is the first step in creating a sentiment of ownership and pride in the work your employees do. Lindsey suggests creating healthy competition by holding contests and raffles just to show em-

ployees they are valued members of your team. Buying lunch for the office staff and chauffeurs every once in a while is another way to make them feel they are appreciated.

Creature Comforts

Part of that incentive to work hard also comes from the environment in which each employee works. Lindsey says reception areas should be warm and inviting and that individual office space and clean and comfortable surroundings are important to an employee's feelings about where they work. Having a place for chauffeurs to relax and congregate is another necessity in every operation.

“Internet access is a must,” says Lindsey. His chauffeurs also have a full kitchen and their own lockers. “Doing these little things make employees feel a sense of belonging to the place they work.”

These little efforts add to an employee's feeling of pride about where they spend a majority of their time. Cutting corners when it comes to these easy-to-manage

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Top 10 RULES FOR GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE

- 1) Commit to quality service.
- 2) Know the services you offer.
- 3) Know your customers: Sorci says that most software programs allow you to keep profiles of your customers and their preferences (i.e. beverage choice, newspaper preference, type of radio station they prefer.)
- 4) Treat people with courtesy and respect.
- 5) Never argue with a customer: “Don't ever try to win an argument,” says Sorci. “Most people who call you with a problem are doing so because they had a bad experience,” he says, “not because they like to complain.”
- 6) Don't leave customers hanging: According to a National Federation of Independent Business study, if a customer problem is solved within one day, 95% of customers will continue to return to the service they had an issue with.
- 7) Always provide what you promise.
- 8) Assume that customers are telling the truth.
- 9) Focus on making customers, not making sales: Sorci says developing seamless relationships with clients is much more important than individual transactional rides.
- 10) Make it easy to buy: Sorci says that making reservations should be an easy process for customers. Being able to provide inclusive rates as soon as possible is a great way to streamline the process.

DAMAGE CONTROL

The inevitability of any business, the customer complaint, is where a company's caliber of customer service is always revealed. One of the biggest mistakes that a manager can make is to take a complaint personally. “Instead of trying to come to a solution, we can sometimes take a defensive approach to a complaint,” says Lindsey.

Sorci adds that using

your intuitive senses and putting yourself in your customers' shoes is the best way to maneuver when faced with a complaint. He says that most of the time, companies can become fearful of customer complaints, thus losing focus when it comes time to simply solve the problem. “Customers expect to be treated fairly,” says Sorci. “You need to address that and it's critical that they believe you gave them options in deal-

ing with the problem.”

Often, the solution to a customer complaint is very simple — “If you were the customer, what would your expectation be of your service?” says Lindsey.

According to Sorci, the most important part of handling a customer complaint is having all of the information from the incident. “You have to be able to say you've researched everything thoroughly.” He says talking to the individual

chauffeur and the reservationist is imperative because the more information you have, the more credible you are. Cutting out the middleman also makes the solution easier to achieve. Sorci says that a member of management should handle a customer complaint immediately. “There should be no transfers from person to person,” says Sorci. “You don't want a day to go by where the customer can dwell on the problem.”

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efforts can make a big difference in the way your employees treat customers.

Feedback and Communication is a Must

Just as your company depends on the feedback of your clients, so do your employees depend on feedback from those who man-

age them. Holding regular performance reviews is an effective way to reiterate your employees' job descriptions, responsibilities, and what you expect of them. It is also a good time to listen to the concerns of your staff and find future solutions for issues they may be having. When it comes to evaluating the performance of an employee, Lind-



“You don't want a day to go by where the customer can dwell on the problem.”

RON SORCI

sey doesn't believe in ever using the word “negative,” but instead, points out that an employee is in need of improvement.

Having an extensive employee handbook is just one way Lindsey ensures that his employees are aware of his company's policies and what their rights are as well.

Lindsey also says that holding regular meetings with an agenda is an important part of keeping everyone on the same page. He adds that one of the keys to having a dedicated staff is to make sure they understand how they contribute to the company and how integral they are to its success.

Building Your Team

“One of the hardest things is trying to make a team out of people who are spread out in a company and barely see one another,” says Lindsey. Try using some of these tactics to bring them closer to each other and develop a sense of pride in where they work.

- Observe your employees and get to know who is on your team. According to Lindsey, it takes 15 seconds to talk to someone and it makes a huge difference in how the employee feels about his or her employer.
- Give employees the proper equipment to make their job easier and more productive.
- Ask questions: “What would make your job easier?”
- Have regular meetings to promote consistency and an “all in it together” type of attitude.
- Be flexible and understanding.
- Offer benefits, such as health and

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- Offer bonuses and short-term incentives, such as monetary compensation or free limousine rides.
- Provide opportunities for employees to grow within your company.
- Have an employee handbook that employees are welcome to refer to when they have questions about a policy.
- Set up a raffle, contest, or game to add a bit of friendly competition among employees.

Do You Know What You're Selling?

Creating a service-driven mission statement for your company is one of the most important things you can do to define what you do. How can employees promote and defend a company's service when they don't really know what it's all about? Without a mission statement, your employees are selling a product or service they're unfamiliar with. "Find the mission statement for a Fortune 500 company and modify that intent to fit your company and typify what your service is about," says Sorci. Simply typing the words "mission statement" into any search engine will pull up thousands of other companies' statements that may help you construct your own service-driven mission statement, says Sorci.

Are You Selling What You Say You Are?

"When you are committed to providing a luxury service, every level of your company must function professionally at all times," says Sorci. From reservation to dispatch and the chauffeur behind the wheel of an immaculate vehicle, great customer service should be reflected from the first to last moment of your customers' experience.

Lindsey suggests, at the very least, beginning with what he calls "The Basic Three" — on-time service, a clean vehicle, and a knowledgeable

chauffeur. Without these simple concepts in place, the idea of a luxury service is lost.

In addition, great customer service isn't only about providing the basics, it's also about exceeding the expectations of your clients. "Because of the money customers spend in this business, every customer would like to feel as if they received some-

thing extra," says Sorci. Lindsey says that this starts with an email or fax confirmation 24 hours in advance, an early chauffeur, and having the proper software to be able to check flights and make alternate arrangements if a flight arrives early or late. A properly groomed and professionally dressed chauffeur is just the icing on the cake. **LCT**

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