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Introduction to Customer Service

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Walt Disney – a legacy of customer service



A Disney employee invites children to dance during the parade at Hongkong Disneyland Park.

Photo courtesy of Allison Zhang

What is Disney's edge? It stems in part from Walt Disney's precept that money is not the most important factor in business. Instead he focused on identifying the customers' needs and giving them what they wanted. His business philosophy stemmed from his strong family values, morals, religious beliefs, creative goals and innate psychographic awareness. As he said back in the 1960s: 'Disneyland is a work of love. We didn't go into Disneyland just with the idea of making money'.

During an NBC interview in 1966 Walt stressed that excellence of products and service are more crucial than profits at his theme parks: ‘... my young group of executives are convinced that Walt is right, that quality will win out, and so I think they will stay with this policy because it’s proven it’s a good business policy. Give the public everything you can give them, keep the place as clean as you can keep it, keep it friendly – I think they’re convinced and I think they’ll hang on after – as you say, “after Disney”’.

He laid the framework for the future with his focus on animated films and the invention and development of the quintessential theme park. Today’s Walt Disney Company has diversified further to incorporate cruise lines, TV channels and film studios, and an international professional business training institute. So, how has the company managed to maintain high standards since the pioneering founder’s demise?

Although he died back in 1966, the company still holds true to his basic beliefs. One of Walt’s well-known maxims was that nothing is ever finished, there is always room to grow and improve: ‘Just do your best work — then try to trump it.’ This is borne out in Disney’s quest to expand, renovate and diversify as well as surprising customers by both meeting and then exceeding their expectations in regard to product and service.

Having invented the modern day concept of the theme park back in 1955, the company does not rest on its laurels; it is always going a step further. Disney doesn’t just cater for kids, but also considers adults, bundling (and unbundling) services and attractions to enable customized packages to suit all age groups both during the day and evening at its parks and cruises. Films are made with an overt attraction for kids and an underlying message to adults.

At its theme parks, attractions are not designed with purely the bottom line in mind. Disney designers look at the audience, evaluating the time needed for a full experience, including the ride, interaction with other customers, and immersion in the imaginary environment. It is this painstaking focus on customer satisfaction that Disney execs have dubbed ‘imagineering’ – a concept fully explored in *The Imagineering Workout*. In this book there are tips for travel agents, for example, to stimulate their imaginations in attracting more customers. These include sharing personal experiences with prospective clients and using ‘what ifs’ to paint pictures - and as a positive alternative to saying ‘no’ - to even seemingly impossible requests. Imagineering also counsels research to enhance credibility and confidence and breaking routines to stimulate creative thinking.

Customer service naturally depends partly on staff/customer interaction. Walt Disney introduced a novel way of training his employees by providing a new internal language based on Hollywood terminology. Staff are cast members, customers are guests, shifts are performances, a job description is a script, the HR department is casting, and being on duty is being on stage. This analogy with show business helps immerse both staff and guests in the imaginary world of Disney, putting everyone in the spotlight.

Disney also believed that the front-line is the bottom-line, with a company judged by its face-to-face staff. Staff trainers (presumably 'directors') encourage the cast to discover the guests' 'wow' moments and share the knowledge and celebrate it with other cast members. One question which has often caused inappropriate responses is 'What time is the three o'clock parade?' Despite the occasion for mirth or sarcasm, Disney trains staff to answer with a confirmation of the time, place and other information about nearby facilities. Disney is also meticulous in sustaining the mystique by keeping backstage activities out of sight – for example, Snow White cannot be seen smoking in the park's public areas!

Disney has even turned a 'no' into a 'yes' to some extent without compromising its strict safety rules. Many of its rides have a height minimum but whenever a child is turned away from a ride for not being tall enough, he is given a priority pass for him and his family to return when he is tall enough.

Disney's commitment to its customers is defined by their term 'guestology'. Like 'imagi-neering', it focuses on the guest experience rather than traditional business efficiencies. The customer point of view – both child and adult – is considered critical, resulting in such innovations as child-height peepholes in hotel room doors as well as the usual adult ones and bins located at 27-foot intervals – designated after calculating the average time people will go before dropping litter.

Disney's meticulous customer service training attracted other executives from a wide variety of businesses around the world, resulting in the development in 1986 of the Disney Institute, a Florida-based corporate customer training unit of the Walt Disney Co. Trainers – with around ten years' Disney service – teach principles created and tested by decades of research, data collection and visitor surveys. Attention to details, removing barriers and keeping customers informed were just some of the principles which attracted Miami International Airport to the Institute. Simple ideas such as clothing staff in bright colors and providing easy-to-read name tags were adopted by the airport which had previously had very low ranking for its service culture. Miami Airport - which handles over 30 million travelers each year - paid around \$28,000 per day for a series of full-day training sessions which then empowered company leaders to train those who worked under them in the polished precepts. Ideas such as 'it's not my fault, but it is my problem' are general enough to be easily incorporated into any business.

Over a million professionals have come through the institute earning their Mickey Mouse ears along with new standards for effective leadership, people management, customer service and creative business practices. One of the most recent advocates of 'Disneyfication' is the Federated Hospitality Association of South Africa (FEDHASA) which was responsible for customer service improvements for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The Disney Institute trained 15,000 South African front-line workers over nine provinces in a 34-day program.