

Is Striving for Service Excellence Misguided?

As a means of succeeding in an increasingly competitive marketplace frequently organisations trumpet visions of:

- Delivering outstanding service
- Being recognized as the #1 service provider in (insert relevant industry)
- Striving for excellence in customer service

Similarly attempts are made to inspire staff, not only to satisfy customers, but rather to “delight” them and “constantly exceed their expectations”.

Unfortunately few winners emerge from such strategies. Rather very often these attempts do little more than disappoint or indeed raise the ire of customers as well as increase the level of cynicism and despondency amongst employees.

Why?

Two key issues are apparent.

Realistically, this is the domain only for those operating at the top end of the market.

By definition superlatives like “outstanding”, “excellent”, “unsurpassed” set a very high bar, the delivery of which has cost implications associated with it that typically need to be passed on.

As such, for the majority of organisations limits and parameters must be introduced changing the goal to be no longer really about absolute “excellence in service” anyway but rather obtaining a favourable rating on some “value for money” measure.

However, while understandable and usually justifiable such compromises can make the stated aim of “excellence” seem hollow, leading to disillusionment for both customers and staff alike.

Excellence is very difficult to sustain

Even if “excellence” is delivered the first time, the risk is that this becomes the new standard. In order to delight, exceed expectations and be recognized for excellence in an ongoing sense, it becomes necessary to be continually upping the ante. This is an onerous and exhausting burden for staff to carry, not to mention a potentially expensive one.

Changing the paradigm

As an alternate to getting on the generic “excellence in service” treadmill (along with everyone else), some of today’s most successful companies are now wrestling back control and creating competitive advantage by uniquely defining the experience their staff need to deliver, and customers can expect to receive.

By claiming a distinctive and defined space aligned to the organisation’s marketing messages, the assessment for customers to make and the guidelines for staff to follow, becomes not where the service falls on a broad “good” versus “bad” spectrum but rather whether the service is “on-brand” or “off-brand”. That is, in keeping (or not) with the expectations that have been set based on what the brand promises via its imagery, advertising, shop front appearance etc.

By narrowing the focus and concentrating efforts on this alignment, *differentiated* service is achievable. Not only is this more manageable for the organization and more sustainable and motivating for staff, but it is also ultimately more powerful, in that it is memorable, setting apart the offer from all others.

To illustrate, in order to garner loyalty, the Virgin Blue experience needs to be fun and slightly irreverent with youthful staff potentially singing Christmas carols on board or making lighthearted announcements to passengers... but not necessarily providing any complimentary refreshments.