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CUSTOMER APPRECIATION REARS ITS BEAUTIFUL HEAD

Steve Gillick

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23 JUL 2018: Thomas, the General Manager of Born and Raised, a high-end 'wish list' steak house in San Diego's Little Italy District, explained the customer service ethic. When I noted the warm,

friendly greeting that I had received and also the fact that managers and staff were visiting the guests to chat and explain items on the menu, and appeared to genuinely enjoy what they were doing, Thomas philosophized that Born and Raised prided itself on a mellow-out atmosphere where the food and service “provoke you into a state of mindful surrender.”



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And with tables of friends and family chatting, laughing and celebrating, he noted that when you enter the restaurant “It’s time to release, relax, recharge, refresh, retreat and realize that there’s a lot out there to enjoy beyond the bonds of employment, obligation and conformity.”

Pardon my steak house pun but all I could think was “holy cow,” this is yet another unbelievable example of San Diego customer service, empathy and appreciation.

There aren’t too many travellers out there who want impersonal service. They can easily get that at home in stores, restaurants and offices.

A new family doctor that I recently interviewed was more R2D2-centric than human-centric. He belonged to a medical corporation based on 'efficiency' and 'profit.' Correspondence with the office was heavily weighted toward email. You even booked your medical appointments online. When you entered the bare essentials office there was a computer screen on which you registered by pushing a button and then proceeding to the stripped down waiting room (chairs, but no magazines or television).

A human receptionist, who sat in an out-of-view room watched you on camera and seemingly made an appearance only if medical forms had to be completed. The screen in the waiting room listed the name of each patient, and then when it was your turn to see a physician, a computer voice directed you to the examining room.

The tiny room was bare, save for two chairs, an examining table, 3 packages of rubber gloves (small, medium and large) and a computer on which the doctor consulted your file. The cold concrete floor of the examining room was certainly in synch with the entire experience. Needless to say, this doctor did not make my short list.

But for some people this may be an ideal situation. No wasted time calling the office to make appointments and no trivial human interaction in the office itself. Get in, Get out, Go back to your cell phone.

There are some business hotels I've used in Japan that seem to be leaning toward a similar efficiency model, but in these cases the convenient locations

and the very agreeable room rates are compensation for minimal human interaction.

There are human beings at the front desk but they direct you to a check-in machine (similar to what airlines use). You register, pay, and get a receipt and then you check out by machine. Quick and Easy. I'll report back on an upcoming trip where I'll be visiting the Henn na Hotel in Tokyo, where the front desk receptionists are in fact robots.

However, for those like me who hold dear to the human connection while traversing the globe, destinations such as San Diego are a genuine breath of fresh air. It started when I arrived at the Hotel Republic, a boutique property in Little Italy where my greeting was as friendly as it could be. And those positive customer service vibes continued in Balboa Park, the sprawling complex in the heart of the city that includes 17 museums, art galleries, gardens, theatres, the San Diego Zoo and the California Tower.

At the Museum of Man, located under the colourful dome of the California Building, Shannon, the Marketing and Communications Manager explained that the Museum's goal was 'to inspire human connections by exploring the human experience.' I told her that that sounded an awful lot like the definition of travel in the year 2018 where travellers are looking for something beyond the customary destination visit. They're looking to interact and establish connections with people at the destination, which vicariously translates into a meaningful relationship with the destination itself.

In my case it's hundreds of conversations, both verbal and non-verbal, over the years. It's that kid

on the mountain in Nepal who yelled out Namaste to me as he spotted me trying to catch up to the group of hikers I was with.

For Shannon, it was one of the new Exhibits called Post Secret, where San Diego locals and visitors were asked to send in anonymous postcards on which, one special secret was written. Over one million cards were sent in and every Sunday, a new selection is put on display. The community has reacted overwhelmingly to the positive message that “you are not alone. We all have secrets.”

And this seemed to mirror that caring attitude that I found over and over again. At Panama 66, a lunch spot in Balboa Park where you order your food and drink at the counter and then wait for a server to bring it to your table, Brandon, the Manager told me that clients are encouraged to bring their drink and wander through the outdoor sculpture garden to refresh their energy. He referred to the restaurant as a casual oasis of impressive architecture, art, beer, wine, cocktails and food. “This is a place to take a load off. There’s no pressure here.”

And again in Puesto, a very popular Mexican restaurant in Seaport Village, CJ the manager said something that you don’t hear from restaurateurs too often. When I asked him to explain the popularity of Puesto he said “It’s a big world out there and it can be lonely at times. Our objective is ‘Mi casa es su casa’ and you are part of the family. We are part of San Diego culture here. No one is like a robot. We tell the staff to let their personalities shine.”

And shine they did. April, my server was, despite a very crowded evening, charming and friendly and

she came by several times to talk with me. CJ was equally magnanimous with his time, arranging and explaining a flight of Tequila, then a taste of Mezcal (for comparison purposes, of course) and then a local craft brown Ale (just for fun!).

While San Diego's food scene is amazing, it's the people behind the food who make it memorable, and the same holds true with the city. It's as if everyone in the hospitality industry had to take a customer relations course, and then prove that they really wanted to pass by enacting what they learned. And they keep re-enacting this—small café owners, major restaurants, taxi drivers, street musicians, artists, shop keepers, and more.

Travel is known for its great ability to stimulate those endorphins in your brain that result in positive feelings of euphoria. Customer service can do the same. The message is to train, practice and excel in Customer Service so that when you complete a travel sale, you have doubly bombarded your clients with positive energy. Now that's a recipe for return business and referrals!





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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