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## The Lowdown on Customer Service

Steve Gillick

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20 SEP 2013: The Golden Fish Hotel Apartments in Pilsen, The Czech Republic have something that many tourism products and suppliers only pretend to have - a corporate culture based on customer service.



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We arrived at the bus station in Pilsen, which is literally across the road from the historic city centre. And then hopped into a taxi to take us to the Golden Fish Hotel Apartments. We arrived 30 minutes later after weaving through the city streets and I'll admit that we were not so happy to be so far away from the city centre. The check-in was very friendly and included a champagne welcome drink and pleasant conversation. We found out that to get back downtown, we would need to walk about 10 minutes and then take a streetcar. But we had made a commitment to stay at the hotel so we went to our room **◆**very nice and comfortable **◆**only to discover that there was no air conditioning, and Pilsen was in the middle of a very rare heat wave. The front desk confirmed that none of their rooms were air conditioned, so now we had another problem.

Keeping our cool, we went back to the front desk with the result that 1) the hotel allowed us to cancel our reservation without penalty 2) the manager (Jana Ryobva) offered to reserve another

hotel for us across from the historic area 3) the hotel called a taxi for us and offered us cold drinks while we waited 4) everyone at the front desk was very friendly and smiling and 5) as we waited for the taxi, Jana told us that the hotel would pay for our taxi to the other (competitive) hotel. Talk about customer service!

And here I am a few years later, still relating this story in my customer service talks. By the way, the Golden Fish is perfect for business travellers who wish to be away from the touristy part of town and want to relax, play tennis and enjoy some rest and relaxation.

We know from watching CBC's Marketplace and listening to Dave Carroll sing about United Airlines breaking his Taylor guitar, that not all customer service stories elicit feelings of pleasure. Statistics bear out the fact that a dissatisfied customer will tell between 10-20 people about their negative experience and in Dave Carroll's case (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>) he was able to tell his story to 13.3 million people.

When asked to provide examples of grinding frustration in dealing with retailers, customers tend to dwell on four problematic practices:

- 1) Not having emails, telephone messages or even snail-mail correspondence acknowledged. We always impressed on our staff the need to respond to clients within 24 hours and if an answer was not readily available at that time, to inform the client that more time would be required. The point was to let the customer know that we appreciated the time taken to contact us.

The travel industry is infamous for being too busy to acknowledge correspondence on a timely basis (and it is surprising how many in the industry don't use 'vacation messages' when they are away). The point is that in a world where other travel buying options are available (i.e. 'online') travel agents must understand that it is the personal-human approach that gives them a distinct advantage over the impersonal World Wide Web. Play up your personality and that of the agency. Show genuine interest in your current and future clients and treasure their attempts to contact you. Consider the scenario of not receiving any emails or phone calls and how this would affect your business.

2) Computerizing instead of Humanizing. More and more businesses seem to be using telephone trees (call 1 if ♦.call 2 if ♦) or in some cases, avatars ♦ those talking robotic systems (the kind that Bell-uses to 'engage' clients!). And nothing drives consumer-telephone rage more than to be forced to dialogue with an automated phone system.

In the travel industry, have as user-friendly and simple a phone system as possible ♦ if indeed you need one. Otherwise, make every effort to answer the telephones in person. And remember that smiles and friendliness transcend phone lines, as do grumpiness and abruptness. The person on the other end knows what mood you are in.

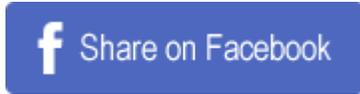
3) Retailers who feel that their efficiency rating will more than compensate for their lack of person-ability. I have been to too many hotels where the check-in was all smiles and greetings, but the check-out consisted of 'did you take anything out of your mini-bar' and 'I need your credit card again'. Not even an "I hope you enjoyed your stay

with us". The implication is "You are no longer a guest. Leave!"

4) No thank you. I know it bugs me when I purchase something and the clerk just hands me my change and my receipt and that's that. No "thank you for your business". The attitude is that they are doing YOU the favour by allowing you to shop there. One of the standing jokes in The Simpson's cartoon series lies with Apu, the owner of the Kwik-E-Mart convenience store who, under any circumstances, whether he is selling, arguing or being robbed, always bids his customers a "Thank you, Come Again". It's a lost art in customer service to actually thank the client for their business. (i.e. thank you for keeping me employed by using our services and I hope you will consider using our services again).

Agencies, whether bricks-and-mortar or home-based need to take customer service to the next level. Some have CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems in place, but they tend to regard these in the spirit of information gathering and not always a template for greeting the client, responding to comments, asking for the sale, reacting to a purchase, and looking after the client during and after their travels. Involve the staff in creating customer service procedures and then hold those procedures to be the sacred, secret success of your company. It's one proven way to bring public attention to focus on travel agents.

It's time to bring the lowdown on customer service to new heights.



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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