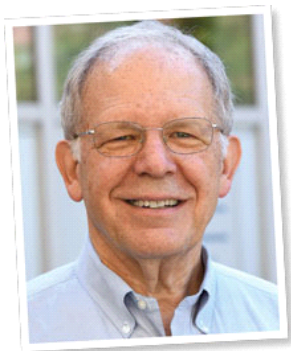


2/1/2025

What Are Your Customers Hearing?

Bill McCurry



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Customer service has eroded over the years. Today's customers are shocked when confronted with superb attention. I was pleasantly surprised by the very upbeat and positive breakfast greetings at the Boardwalk Hotel's Coastal Provision restaurant on Isle of Palms, South Carolina.

One of us at breakfast had severe food allergies. Lexi was our server. She responded professionally, confirming her understanding of each allergy and adapting the menu to that customer's specific needs.

After each person gave their order, Lexi would reconfirm, adding a reinforcing comment: "Perfect." "Those are so delicious!" "You'll enjoy that." She returned to convey the chef's assurance that the allergy needs had been carefully met.

Until you've traveled with someone who has severe dietary restrictions, you may not grasp what happens when these needs are violated. Lexi's attention to detail was in distinct contrast to other restaurants we visited, assuring our repeat patronage.

Where did Lexi learn these skills? "I had good mentors." We asked a senior server, Jessica, about Lexi's training. Jessica told us the team is always discussing little "tricks of the trade," especially how to make the day more pleasant for guests (not "customers"!) and less like work for the staff.

New servers "shadow" more experienced co-workers until they're ready to flip roles. The experienced server then shadows the newcomer to ensure the standards are met or exceeded. Shadowing can take days or weeks, depending on each new employee.

"It's lots of little things," Jessica said. For example, leaving the kitchen with the correct plate in the correct hand so you face each guest as you set the plate in front of them. This opens the server's expression and body orientation, showing welcoming openness and cordiality.

Another concern is what you say. Servers asking, "Are you done?" to determine if the plate can be removed might make a guest feel rushed. That's not how a quality restaurant treats its diners. Instead, the server should point to the plate and ask, "Would you like me to remove this?" The conversation is directed toward the plate and the guest's desires, rather than judgmentally inquiring if the guest has finally finished their meal. It can also cause some people to say they're finished when they are not. Rushing guests closes off the potential of dessert and/or after-meal drinks.

Another common—but discouraged—habit is for the server to answer a request with, "No problem." It implies the

guest is otherwise a problem. Jessica explained that better responses are, “My pleasure” or “I’m happy to help.”

Jessica is also a bartender who designs her own drinks using fresh herbs from a roof garden. She loves sharing her herbal passion with customers. We can all learn from the Boardwalk Hotel’s progressive management and their solid teams.

How’s this related to garden centers? Consider what’s said at checkout. Does it create a warm, encouraging experience or is it a cold transaction? “Is this it?” might be the worst question at checkout. It conveys the idea, “I’m going to complete your transaction and never see you again.” A more open-ended question would be, “What else do you need?” or “Can I help you find something to go with this?” How does your team hand products to customers? An open stance, in which product is delivered professionally with care, reassures the customer they’ve bought a quality product.

Defensive managers might say, “Nope. We can’t do that. We’re too busy.” Granted, the Mother’s Day Weekend may make the finest customer attention difficult. We have it on good authority there’s only one Mother’s Day each year. That still gives us the remaining 51 weekends to increase customer loyalty and encourage return customer visits through extraordinary communication.

What continual daily steps toward small improvements can your team take to raise your overall customer service? The longest journey begins with the first step. Let’s start stepping out today with improved guest experiences. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389.