

Shaken Not Stirred



Friends and Colleagues,

This is the fourth in a series of essays by Frause thought leaders. Each installment is intended to shed a little light on subjects that affect you and your business.

I hope you find these insights and musings of interest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'BF', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bob Frause
Chairman and CEO

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

— Hebrews 13:2

How one treats strangers is a large part of doing good business. Treating new customers well engenders positive word-of-mouth, which in turn leads to more business. Valued customer service is sometimes not given its due credit, though, especially in the current age of Internet retail and automated everything. It should still have a place in any successful business.

Below are some anecdotes that speak to standout service. The examples I give are largely from the hospitality business, but the principles can be more widely applied. In fact, when customer service occurs in an industry where it isn't expected, like a muffler shop or a big box electronics store (see Best Buy's stock v. Circuit City's), the impact on the bottom line can be even greater.

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Erika Schmidt, president of Frause, tells a great story of service unexpected. Last year she arrived a bit haggard at a Portland hotel after a longer than expected trip south on the train. Upon checking in, she remarked that all she needed was a martini and a good night's sleep. The astute desk attendant casually inquired whether she preferred gin or vodka. Shortly after Erika settled into her room, there was a knock at the door. Erika opened the door and there stood a porter with a complimentary martini on a silver platter—a great way to treat a stranger and a simple gesture that has led to a number of repeat stays. She slept like a baby and was rarin' to go the next morning.

The importance of having personable, empathetic people (like the hotel desk attendant) in roles that require customer interaction is a well-kept secret among business owners who are known for over-the-top service.

The 51% Solution

Famed New York restaurateur Danny Meyer recently came to Seattle to promote his new book, *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*. Meyer has thrived in one of the toughest businesses there is—restaurants—in one of the world's most unforgiving restaurant markets—New York City. Since opening his first restaurant, Union Square Cafe, in 1985, Meyer's establishments have consistently been rated favorites by New Yorkers, both for food and service.

Speaking about his secrets of success, Meyer repeatedly emphasized the importance of hiring good people. He said it was all about 51 percent. As he writes in his book, "If the ideal candidate were to score 100 on a suitability test, his or her potential for technical skills would count for 49 percent, and innate emotional skills for hospitality would count for 51 percent."

Hire the Smile, Train the Skill

Nordstrom famously has a similar approach. Assuming that people are best trained by their parents, the approach there is, "hire the smile, train the skill." So err on the side of hiring the person who is a pleasure to be around over the person with the impressive skill set.

A killer smile isn't all it takes, though. It also takes the right attitude. A good employee (even if they are usually the nice and personable type) can, and will, have bad days. Employees should be able to leave personal problems behind when entering



the workplace. If people come to work visibly bearing the burden of home issues, they likely won't be able to put their heart into focusing attention on the customer. (If this is a persistent problem, however, a manager should intervene to determine the root of the problem.) Being able to disassociate from one's own needs is a large part of providing great, gracious service.

In fact, service is sacrifice and detail. This is clearly the case in the military, but it's the case in business as well. It is no wonder that the words "hospitality" and "hospice" have the same root. The idea behind both is the necessity to provide comfort to the weary traveler, whether it is somebody at the end of their life journey, or a vacationer finally catching a break on the beach after a year of the daily grind. Providing genuinely great service is a selfless act, requiring a (temporary) sacrifice of one's own needs.

Keeping this in mind, it's easy to realize the dignity associated with the sacrifice of providing great service. Sometimes this notion is lost. We Americans are a case in point.

Americans pride themselves on their egalitarianism. We're all told from an early age to dream big, because the sky's the limit in America. These notions are fantastic and healthy and shouldn't change. But the American way can also create a determined, sometimes dogged, individualism, too. This individualism often gets in the way of providing great service.

This Is My Day Job

Have you ever gotten the message from a café or restaurant server that their current gig was only temporary? That they wanted you to know they really could, and should, be doing something "better"? That's an indication the person doesn't recognize the necessity of disregarding their own needs (temporarily) to provide great service.

This is not to say customers should regard anybody providing a service as a servant. One of the great pleasures in life, though, is being taken

care of, thoughtfully. Visiting a top-rate hotel or restaurant and having the staff put a premium on meeting your needs, and doing so considerately, is a luxury—one that usually comes at considerable cost. But great service doesn't have to cost a fortune.

It's In Les Details

Some of the most outstanding service I've experienced has been abroad, in countries where hospitality is ingrained in the culture. While in college, some friends and I made a memorable trip to Paris and ate at the famous restaurant Fouquet's on the Champs Elysees. The people watching was second to none, but the most memorable thing for me was our waiter.

We clearly weren't wealthy. In fact, I'm sure we sufficiently displayed our Americanism and student status. Those things made no difference to our waiter. He was a true professional. He waited on us with aplomb; we could tell he took great pride in his job.

At the end of our meal, we asked him for directions. Without missing a beat, and despite the stack of plates in his left hand, he pulled a map of the city from his apron with his right and, with



a flick of his wrist, opened it on our table and explained where we needed to go. Then he gave us the map. (I have since learned that a good waiter keeps his or her dominant hand free in case an unexpected need comes up—like having to unfold a map and give directions.)

I remarked to the waiter how good he was at his job. He proudly responded by telling us that his father had been a waiter, as had his grandfather. He treated his role of waiter like any other devoted professional, displaying dedication, discipline and attention to detail. It made a lasting impression on me.

We were strangers that day in Paris, but our waiter made us feel like our needs were his most important concern, and meeting them his top priority. It was terrific service, and the next time I'm in Paris I will surely revisit his restaurant.

Hopefully there are strangers out there telling similar stories about your business and your employees, stories about workers who put the needs of customers first and pay attention to detail in thoughtfully carrying out their jobs. Because when it's this kind of service ethic that's embodied—in everybody from the receptionist to the warehouse worker to the general manager—word will spread and strangers will soon become loyal customers.

Nathan is that rare breed: a non-hunter with an inordinate love of all things taxidermied. He claims he won't be satisfied until his Eastlake apartment is filled with big-game trophies. At Frause, he manages hospitality accounts and provides support in other categories like real estate, consumer products and professional services. Nathan loves to cook (after college he apprenticed for two months in the kitchen at Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte) and hails from Whidbey Island. Nathan acts as a great mediator between clients and his team members. Some might credit that to the three years he spent as a staffer for U.S. Senator Patty Murray.

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