



Lessons from Disney: Correcting Mistakes to Ensure Customer Loyalty

By Bruce I. Jones

If there is one certainty in customer service, it's that something will go wrong. But the way you deal with problems is what can separate you from your competition. We have a saying at Disney that it may not always be our fault, but it is our problem. When things go awry, guests tell us that all they really want is an apology and assurance that someone is trying to fix the problem.

In fact, research suggests that the way Disney cast members (aka Disney employees) rectify a disappointing service experience can have a more positive effect on customer loyalty than if the service is flawless. The harsh reality is that guests rarely notice when things go right. With that in mind, consider the following tips as your company works to improve customer service and build brand loyalty.

1. Understand the difference between customer "needs" and customer "wants."

When Disney cast members deliver on customer needs, the most we can hope for is that they feel we have met their expectations. Understanding and delivering what the customer wants, however, leads customers to feel we have exceeded their expectations. It is not necessarily a result of "knock your socks off" service. Paying attention to the small, seemingly insignificant details can have a huge impact on the customer experience.

2. Make sure the process supports employees, customers, and financial results.

Measure customer and employee feedback to allocate resources appropriately. Make sure managers know what it is like to get direct customer feedback – good and bad. At Disney, we regularly ask leaders in our organization to work front-line shifts so they can personally understand the actual processes to make sure they are effective.

3. Allow employees to be flexible.

Our cast members are VIPs – very individual people. Employees should be trained -- and then trusted -- to

personalize customer service rather than apply a strict one-size-fits-all policy. Most employees want to help. If they are empowered to do the right thing for a customer, they will. Disney has seen this policy work time and time again with everyone from teenage cast members to retirees.

4. Continuously improve the process.

Ask customers what they think about your service recovery process. Were they happy with the way the problem was resolved? Also, evaluate how often customer service procedures required a manager's involvement. A high number means the manager is spending more time acting as a mediator than focusing on the strategic management of the business.

5. Always pay attention to the secondary guest

Prior to the opening of Disneyland in 1955, theme parks didn't exist. Children went to carnivals, which were often scary places with scary people and even scarier safety standards. They also weren't much fun for adults. Walt dreamed of a place where he, his wife Lillian, and his two girls could have good, clean fun together.

Walt's idea was an obvious success that led to the concept of the secondary guest – at Disney adults are secondary; kids come first. We work on this concept every day, always trying to find new ways to surprise and delight adults as well as children. There are a variety of ways we do this, but nothing outweighs the impression the Disney employees make on our visitors. Cast members are trained to speak to guests, not at them. For example, they bend down to speak to children at their level. This does two things: It makes the child feel important and involved, and it makes the parents happy because their child feels special.

Each year we receive thousands of guest letters telling us how a cast member went out of his or her way to make everyone in the party feel special. Because of



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that, our Guests will be back. In fact, we have quantified and correlated these interactions with higher levels of intent to return and to recommend - both key drivers of growth and profitability.

The bottom line is that any business can easily apply the concepts we use at Disney because most of them cost little or no money to implement. It's really about adjusting the company's mindset to make sure all staff - from the executives to the customer facing employees - understand their role, and treat everyone as a guest and a potential customer.

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