

## **THE FRUGAL HOUSEKEEPER**

**“Beyond flying fish: Providing upscale customer service!”**

**By**

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The passenger ran down the entire wing of the airport, across the connecting corridor, and down the entire length of another wing. Out of breath, he reached the boarding counter and presented his ticket to the airline agent. The agent looked at him standing there, puffing and panting like a horse that had just run a race, and with no welcome at all said “The flight is full!” The customer tried to communicate his dilemma about having to catch the flight and a connecting flight to be at his destination for an important and non-negotiable meeting. The agent then stated “I have to count these boarding passes” and proceeded to ignore the customer, who by now was ready to blow his top just like Mount St. Helens. The agent started to count, “One, two, three, four.....” and then she stopped, she had lost count! She then started all over again, by this time the customer’s level of anger was at the orbital phase, and he asked again, “Can you help me get my flight?” and the response was “Sir, I have to count these boarding pass stubs” and she went on counting. In sheer exasperation the customer asked one more time, with increasing decibels in his voice “Can you PLEASE help me, I have to make my meeting?” Finally the agent looked up, eyes glazed, and in a blase voice told the customer to go to the next counter stating “Maybe THEY can help!” This story

is not made up, it really happened, and the airline had one very angry customer on its hands all because of the ineptitude of the gate agent that was not willing to listen to the customer.

Now to phase two! The customer, with smoke blowing out his ears and flames shooting out of his nostrils, stepped over to the other counter. He then tried to relay his story, explaining that he missed his flight and that he had to be at a critical meeting that evening. The agent stayed cool, calm and collected and asked some relevant questions. After a few minutes of discussion, she was able to arrange for the customer to reach his destination four hours earlier than originally planned and gave him a flight coupon worth \$250 for his troubles. The customer was nearly walking on air, and would have done so, but realized that was why he was flying on an airline, he could not flap his wings and fly! On top of this, this agent ascertained that the customer needed to have one additional piece of luggage arrive at his final destination. She facilitated shipping the item (from a third city) at no cost, directly to his hotel!

One airline, two different agents with two totally different approaches. The first agent paid no attention, was more concerned about the task at hand and was not willing to have the customer interrupt that task. The agent did her best to make the customer feel like it was all his fault he had missed the flight, when in fact, the airline had over-booked the flight. The next agent listened to the customer, paid attention to the customer and sought to match the customer's needs with what the airline was able to deliver, and then to over-deliver! Due to the first agent the airline nearly lost a customer for life and thanks to the second agent, the airline has been given another chance. Stories about such types of incidents of service or disservice are not uncommon. What companies often fail to realize is that it is far easier, and much less expensive to keep the current customer happy, than to lose the customer. According to one salesperson that I talked to, it takes nearly ten times the amount

of effort to recruit a new customer than it does to retain the current customer. Thus, common sense customer service can reap rich rewards for any operation, and such service should be kept to scale and represent the critical importance of the current customer.

Many books have been written about customer service and the need for all members of a company to pay attention to the customer. In previous Frugal Housekeeper articles we have discussed *Grinding It Out: The Making of McDonald's* by Ray Kroc, *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service* by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles and *Stop and Sell The Roses* by Jim McCann the founder of 1-800-FLOWERS. However, thanks to a good friend in Colorado, The Frugal Housekeeper stumbled across a wee book (112 pages in all) titled *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results*. The principles in this little book by Stephen C. Ludin, Harry Paul and John Christensen, if applied, could change the life of a company forever, and have a dramatic input on customer service. One of the key statements in the book (p. 37) is “There is always a choice about the way you do your work, even if there is not a choice about the work itself.”

The first airline agent had a choice as to how she could react to the customer and in so doing, she nearly lost the airline a passenger for life. What about the passenger’s family and all those whom the passenger would dissuade by telling of the bad service? What if the passenger were someone who influenced travel for a major corporation? The second agent made a choice about how she would do her work that had a direct and favorable impact upon the customer, she “Made his day” even though he missed the original flight. She out-performed his expectations. Enough of a teaser about the book, the reader is encouraged to seek the book out and apply the four simple principles that can set you, your organization and your customers free, with remarkable results in overall performance.

However, The Frugal Housekeeper is a skeptic, and also doesn't want to plagiarize the key points from the book, so in March, amongst the rain squalls that are so frequent in Seattle, he visited the Pike Place Fish Company. This amazing little fish company has become world famous. Around the fish stand, which is not much bigger than a standard office, stood hoards of people of all ages, with different dress and speaking various languages. They were enthralled as living fish, mostly salmon, went sailing through the air as a customer asked one salesperson for the fish, and he threw it to the person who was going to filet it (free) and pack it for shipment. The place was chaotic as the four or five fish mongers sold their catch, loud choruses of "One salmon flying to Maine!" and "5 pounds of clams to Chicago!" rang out. Everything seemed to be in total pandemonium, however upon reflection, this was organized chaos. The customers were listening, the fish mongers were listening and the fish were flying through the air, as was the cash, as sale after sale of fresh fish was being made. These guys knew their business, selling fish, and they knew how to do it by providing customer service to scale. They probably realized that if they did not sell the fish their profits would falter as the fish got older. They had to sell their fish and they expended an inordinate amount of time selling to customers, they did not wait behind the counter, they went to the customer, sometimes with fish in hand. Remarkably, even though the fish was quite expensive (remember, I am frugal), most customers left with some fish.

What were the keys to their success as perceived by the Frugal Housekeeper that would directly impact any organization involved in customer service?

- ◆ They went to where the customers were! Instead of standing behind the counter or staying in the office, they went out to where the customers were at, they met the customers on their own turf. To this, the customers acted favorably, instead of them

having to go to the fishmonger, the fishmonger and in many case the fish came to them. The lesson is clear, meet the customers on their own turf, as much as possible, and get out of the office!

- ◆ They actually paid attention to the customer! While talking and joking with the customer, these guys were really listening. They asked questions about the customer's wishes and then went and retrieved the biggest fish to meet the customer's wishes. They asked the customer where he or she was from and what they were doing in Seattle and built a common ground. Throughout the whole transaction they made the customer feel like they were wanted and needed, and the customers ALL had smiles on their faces. What a contrast in delivery of services between the fishmongers and the first airline counter agent mentioned earlier.
- ◆ They got the customer involved! After chatting with the customer, listening to their needs, in many cases they handed out samples. The customers became totally involved with all their senses. They could see the fish, smell the fish, touch the fish, eat the fish, and through the crazy antics of the fish sellers, could practically hear the fish talk as the guys selling the fish would make the jaws of the bigger fish move and would mimic "talking" fish.
- ◆ They provided value-added services: After selling the fish, they would cut it up and filet it all at no cost. They would also pack the fish in fancy boxes and could even ship the fish in special containers to anywhere in the world. In addition, on a stand beside the fish counter they sold specialty canned items. Thus, the customer could buy fish and specialty fish products and these could be delivered right to their door

at a time and place of their choosing. The second airline gate agent did this for the passenger, she listened and added value-added services such as getting the customer to his destination earlier than originally scheduled and made arrangements for additional baggage to reach his hotel room the next day.

- ◆ These guys were fun! They joked, they were excited about their work and even though their work was cold (there was ice on the fish, the extra fish were stored in an ice box), one never heard them complaining. Indeed, they talked to the customers about how they enjoyed their job. The customers went away elated and happy that they had visited the fish market. Their work was routine, cold and probably at times very unpleasant, however they were totally positive in their approach to each customer. Our type of service work may be routine, hard and at times pretty dull, but every day we have the opportunity to have an impact upon the customer. The fish place became world famous, in part, because of the attitude that these guys chose to bring to the job and to share with the customers. Each day we choose our attitude!
- ◆ They knew their stuff: These guys knew about fish, probably more than most people know about fish. They were able to inform customers about size, flavor, texture etc. of fish. They listened to customers and provided the right answer. The customers were so impressed they bought the fish, and judging from several conversations, the locals come back for more, and more, and more! The prudent customer service person, in any industry, will learn as much as he or she can about their product. The fishmongers knew their stuff and the fish flew off their counters to destinations world wide, while the cash from the customers flew directly to their cash drawer.

- ◆ They dressed the part: Even though their job must have been quite a chore, picking up fish, cutting fish and packing fish their dress was appropriate to the task. They were dressed neatly, cleanly and appropriately. They had on boots, special aprons and gloves as necessary. All were clean and in good repair, they looked the part, they acted the part and they presented themselves in a professional manner. How important it is to look the part by being clean and smart (no matter what the task).  
Would people really travel around the world to visit dirty and smelly fishmongers?

Much can be learned from the Pike Place Fish Company. They knew that their livelihood was dependent upon selling fish and upon customers spreading the word about their fish. They had to sell a perishable commodity fast, and through providing upscale customer service were able to do an outstanding job. They fulfilled in a few short years something that many organizations and companies would like to accomplish: they became world famous for all the right reasons.

If we in the services industry wish to retain our market share and to keep our customers satisfied, we need to go the extra mile by providing upscale customer service during each encounter with our customers. The fish market is a real story as are the stories about the two airline gate agents mentioned earlier. However the real and remarkable fact is that providing fish in a world class manner or providing quality services at an airport costs little or nothing. Much is based upon having a right attitude and by putting the customer first. By so doing we will retain satisfied customers who will tell the story to others and before we know it, you and I might be world class service providers, just like the fishmongers in Seattle, and that ain't no fishy story!

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