

PERCEPTION STRATEGIES

Service Providers can learn a lot in *Acting 101*

Dave Belanger is a marvel, the kind of person you tell others about. He's a locker-room attendant at Sycamore Hills Golf Club, an upscale club in Fort Wayne, Ind., where he sets out to make every member and guest feel like a million bucks.

From the first time I set foot in Dave's locker room, he has remembered my name with a polite, "Good Afternoon, Mr. Billingsley. How are you today?" *Mister* Billingsley? The first time he said this to me, I was in my 30's. Mind you, I only play the course at Sycamore Hills two or three times a year as a guest or in an outing.

My friends share my admiration for Dave. The true test was the night he offered a "Hi, Mr. Billingsley" at a hockey game. (He then introduced himself with the obvious knowledge that he was putting me at a disadvantage.)

Should I care whether Dave Belanger has a system or took a class to achieve this ability to recall names? Do I care whether he is too polite or his wide-eyed exuberance is just an act?

Of course not. All that really matters is my perception of Sycamore Hills Golf Club, which is embodied in the spirit of this employee. My perception is that, even as a guest, this club thinks I am worthy of special attention. Talk about excellent service. I hope they pay Dave a million bucks.

One customer service expert, Gary Heil, says that if an employee doesn't like people – doesn't like talking to people, serving people or helping people – then that employee ought to find another job. If only it were that easy. You've seen the signs posted by service organizations begging people to "join our family." The majority of people taking these jobs do not have the skills or instincts required to meet customer expectations.

We need to concentrate more on the customer's perception as we struggle with this service dilemma. What do I, as a customer, want from a service provider? I want friendliness, competence and a passion for what they have chosen to do. I also expect employees to be the best their company has to offer, because my perception of the company and any future business I do with them rests on it.

We also need to move away from a “just be yourself” service philosophy. Too many service providers are just being themselves, which is why customers have so many bad experiences. We need to teach service providers how to be someone else. So don’t put your customers through customer service training, put them through an acting class.

The primary goal of putting employees through Acting 101 is to teach employees how easy it is for life to imitate art. We start by letting them know that for the four, six or eight hours they work, they are free to go to another place in order to give the customer what they really want. It’s like training a Disney World employee to play a role.

Acting 101 should begin by teaching service providers to smile, rather than telling them it is their job to smile. Have them practice being more animated and polite. Take it a step further by having them put on nametags or dressing up as actors and actresses they admire or would like to be like.

When they are ready to begin serving customers, you may want to have them wear dual name tags – their own and their alter ego’s. This may cause customers to ask questions and reinforce the positive training experience through the additional attention they receive.

Here are five guidelines for implementing Acting 101:

1. Make it a policy that all service providers must go through acting 101 before they can begin serving customers.
2. Make it fun, but take preparation of the class seriously.
3. Help service providers learn coping and recovery skills by role-playing in which they deal with difficult customers and common mistakes.
4. Test what your actors have learned on real customers. Have employees serve customers as themselves and then as their new alter ego to find out which personality is better received by customers.
5. Keep their acting careers alive by conducting periodic refresher courses.

Recently at an Applebee’s Bar and Grill, my wife and I did a double take when we realized how unexpectedly friendly our waitress, Melissa, was.

When my wife explained that the pasta entrée was not what she expected, Melissa politely commiserated and returned quickly with something new. When she returned to check on our meal, she apologized and explained that the pasta is usually very good and that she was very sorry that the experience was not perfect. Melissa didn’t make excuses, and she didn’t blame others. She invited us back again telling us that she knew it would be better next time and handed my wife a coupon.

That night, Melissa was Applebee's to us. And it's true that our perception of the services almost always outweighs our lasting impression of the food.

It's not that this is an extraordinary service story, but that it was so simple. Why can't we teach others to do this? God bless Melissa if she was just being herself, but that doesn't matter. She did what every service provider should do – be nice and ensure that the customer comes back.

*Reprinted from Marketing News, November 9, 1998. Written by Kevin Billingsley
President, Perception Strategies, Inc.*