



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

SERVICE WITH A SNARL

Ever wondered why the service at Primi Piatti is so good compared to a lot of other restaurants in town? Every evening before opening the Primi sales team (waiters) is given an upbeat, re-energising pep talk in order to get them in the right frame of mind before meeting the customer, rather like the rousing locker room team speech a good football manager gives his players before a big competition.. What a pity none of our major banks apparently follow suit!

Let me set the scene. Last week I lost my credit card and was issued a new one but without my new PIN so Saturday morning saw me with no money and no option but to go into the bank and withdraw over the counter. I am not lying when I tell you that I have not set foot in a banking hall for more than 5 years as any dealings with the bank are normally delegated to staff. To say the experience was humbling doesn't anywhere near cover it. After standing in the one queue for 20 minutes I finally reached the head, only to be told that credit card withdrawals had to first be processed somewhere else. Another new queue, another long wait, then we have to phone head office to verify the card. Eventually I was granted the supreme privilege of being able to access my own money.

Now all of this is because the card is issued separately from the PIN which, incidentally I am still waiting for 9 days after the card was sent out and like the song says about love and marriage, you can't have one without the other. And this from a supposed service industry. But what really surprised me was that none of the other customers seemed the least bit bothered by the queues, the general lack of efficiency and the fact that tellers wearing beanies not bank uniforms were serving us! Just like I'm betting you're not that surprised to hear my story. It's taken for granted that that's what a trip to the bank is all about in this country, especially at month-end.

And that's why I don't think we are making enough strides in customer service here. We as the customers are just far too complacent. I must admit I do tend to talk with my feet and if the service is not good enough I will just go somewhere else instead of voicing my complaint to the relevant authorities but it's not that easy with a bank. And standing in that banking hall I really felt that the staff of that organization was what was important that Saturday morning – they were not performing for the customer, they were going at their own snail pace, doing their thing and working on their personal priorities. Their goal was not offering good service – it was making it through to lunchtime so they could knock off for the weekend. They had missed the entire point of their very existence, had become complacent and although they thought no one was watching or cared – I was and did.

I remember from my early days when I used to be manic about providing good customer service and spreading the gospel. I used to spit out the usual clichés like 'the customer is not an interruption to your work but the purpose of it' and 'if you don't look after the customer someone else will' to all my staff like an Eastern mantra until it was 'message understood'. I don't think these particular people had ever heard any of that and whose fault is that – theirs or their employer's? . I think the danger is that as our organizations become too big they are often the ones who become complacent. They forget that the customer is re-assessing you all the time and that only the utility companies have a complete monopoly. Sometimes we do lose sight of what is important and get caught up in our 'bigness'

Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsey says it so well. His attitude is that when you are successful you can't become complacent; you mustn't take customers for granted. He said "I got a bit frustrated when I went to one of our restaurants and the manager and one of the chefs were getting irritated by customer demands. One had dietary requirements and the other wanted a bowl of ice on the table. I pulled them both aside and I said, 'The minute you start thinking you are more *@#?/~*# important than the customer, it's time to change your job.'" Not one for diplomacy, our Gordon, but he's got his service priorities right.

The secret to securing a committed customer service culture is ensuring that day in and day out you drum in the same message. You can't just offer a one-off customer service training course and leave it at that. If there's no follow-up it simply gets forgotten. Advertisers know this - the advertising metric for getting a message across is 'say it seven times', based on the assumption that the first time or two your message might not even get noticed, by the 4th, 5th and 6th time the brain is starting to take it in and by No, 7 it's will finally acknowledge and recognize the message and the meaning.

So instead of the once a year customer service rah-rah rally, organizations need to ensure that there is a continual campaign to reinforce to staff the message that the customer is what is all about. Otherwise, a Anne Robinson often asks her hapless contestants on The Weakest Link 'What's the point of you?'

