



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

THE GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME!

Whenever I think of how we compare ourselves with first-world countries the proverb 'the grass is always greener on the other side' always springs to mind. We have a masochistic tendency to benchmark against what we perceive as bigger, better or more sophisticated. However closer examination might reveal that the bigger is only more in your face, better merely an illusion and sophisticated a way of doing things just as badly but with more aplomb. We are quick to lament how badly we provide customer service in Botswana and whilst I do not want to imply that we should curb our efforts to improve in this area, just for once I would like to suggest that we are not as bad as we make out.

During the holiday season I spent three weeks in the United Kingdom, Canada and the US and frankly it didn't matter where I was because everywhere the service sucked. Possibly the Canadians came out fractionally ahead but only because they are geographically positioned next to the US which invariably makes them look marginally better, albeit by default. In the UK the service mirrored the weather; ie cold and miserable. In the hotel we stayed at in Scotland we might as well have been invisible despite the fact that we were the only guests, not many people visiting tiny hamlets on the west coast of Scotland between Christmas and New Year (come to think of it few visit any time of the year). Despite this being my second stay at this struggling manger we managed 4 days without anyone addressing us by name or even asking after our needs, let alone our comfort! When the electricity tripped in our room the housekeeper informed we would have to wait until the manager came to work because "I am useless with those type of things!"

Our trip across the Atlantic did not improve service levels much. Upon arriving at Toronto airport we found we were minus 50% of our luggage - ALL my children's clothes. We were then sucked into the world of telephonic, transatlantic Nintendo which is a virtual reality game played between international airlines and frustrated passengers, to see what level of frustration they can attain using only the 5 options available of 'Press 1 to find out the status of your lost luggage', 'Press 2 for passenger services', 'Press 3 for...' etc.. without ever being allowed to speak to a live operator.

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It's similar to the fashionable Rubik's Cube game of the 1980's - no one ever completed it because it was too bloody frustrating! I was left confused as to why the airline in question just didn't record a message that said, "We are just as irritated that we screwed up your luggage as you are about not receiving it. In fact we're so embarrassed that under no circumstances will we discuss this with you face to face! Please play the game specially designed by calling the following toll-free number. When and if we find it (5 pretty cold days in this case) we will deliver it to you.'

I did try to play the game but I am even useless at Pacman so my inevitable failure was a no-brainer. And when I finally got through to someone it was only to have it confirmed that there was no human system in place to deal with lost luggage! No, the entire airline experience is highly sophisticated, fully automated and the only means of travel whereby you can have breakfast in London, lunch in Toronto and luggage in Beirut!

By far the most disappointing service experience was trying to enter the US. The GI Joe wanna-be at immigration, dressed intimidatingly in black leathers and shades on a day where there was no sun, treated us like first cousins of the terrorists who crashed into the Twin Towers. A completely humiliating debacle ensued, orchestrated by trailer-trash bureaucrats intent on letting me know that they were personally carrying out George Bush's mission to ensure the end of the war on terror. I was a British national travelling with two young girls, off to see a show in New York and apparently we constituted a clear and present danger and a threat to national security according to their highly skilled passenger profiling methods!

It got worse. My flight from New York City to Buffalo was poor service personified. The friendliest air stewardess welcomed us on board and after take-off literally ran down the aisle, distributing snack's and cold drinks in a manner reminiscent of laying a paper chase as she went. As I was the only person who actually wanted coffee, she didn't think it worth her while to brew any and with refreshments scattered like confetti at a wedding she spent the remainder of the flight eating into the airlines profits. Two packets of choc-chip cookies, one packet of blue crisps and two packets of maize snacks were consumed while hungrily devouring a celebrity magazine.

Too engrossed with her picnic in the air she failed to collect headphone sets or check seatbelts for landing. It was okay though - a quick announcement to passengers asking them to bring them forward themselves at the end of the flight took care of this slight oversight and the fact that we didn't crash made the overlooked seatbelt check superfluous. I was tempted to mention to her when disembarking that she was the laziest, most unproductive stewardess I have ever encountered (I had the best viewing seat in the house in Row 1) but as I'd decided she was beyond redemption, what, I thought, was the point!

But this is not a tale of high tech-low touch as is the case with the airlines, nor English aloofness, Scottish highland dourness or American overkill in managing threats against national security. It's all about people. People missing the point, people going through the motions, doing what they've been told, what they think they can get away with or what they think is right without taking time to pause, connect, and consider what the customer wants and needs. Service should be less process driven and more people driven because it's about understanding that people want to be recognised, feel appreciated for their custom and to be treated with respect.

It took a trip away from Botswana to see what we are doing differently and as my plane touched down on the runway at SSKA. It felt good to be back. So maybe the grass is greener on the other side but that's only because it rains more over there! Lets face it, with all its trials and tribulations there is no place like home!

