

The Guest

R E P O R T

By Roberta Nedry

Service excellence

Lip service vs. guest service

Saturday is my day to recover from a busy week. I was ambitious recently and scheduled a full day to get my rest in one of Fort Lauderdale's newer full-service day spas. On the agenda: a manicure and pedicure.

When I called for my pampering experience, they told me to plan for 2 1/2 half hours. Perfect. I had a three-hour window and my toes already were wiggling with excitement. I asked the receptionist to confirm that treatments for me and a companion would begin exactly at noon and be completed by 2:30 p.m. so we could make our next relaxing appointment. She reassured me they would.

We arrived at noon, our feet already undressed. The receptionist noted our excitement, remembered our time window and let us know our therapists would be with us shortly. At 12:25, our therapists came out to greet us. My anxiety was slight at this point. I selfishly wanted all 2 1/2 hours to pamper my feet and knew we had just lost 25 minutes.

Nonetheless, we were led to a private room, seated in comfy armchairs, received herbal tea and water -- but then had to wait some more. Our therapists had to assemble lotions and potions to get the job done, and at 12:45, the real treatments began. With increasing anxiety, we began to resent paying the hefty \$65 for 45 minutes that did not involve our feet or hands.

Although flustered, our therapists reassured us we would be out by 2:30. At 2:55, with tissue still between our toes and polish still wet, we had to leave. Although everyone involved knew of our time restraints, our bill was not ready and had to be redone twice before we finally could leave.

The next day, the spa called to tell us we owed an additional \$18. Amazed, I returned the call and spoke to the spa owner. I relayed how upsetting our experience had been, how the time commitment had been broken during each step, how the service was not even close to satisfactory, and how surprising it was to learn that we had to pay even more because of a billing error.

Aghast with my comments, she told me that, in 20 years, no one had ever complained about service at her spa. Although that may be true, I was not looking for a history lesson and certainly was not feeling any better about my first (and final) experience at her spa.

Once we got through all the excuses and defenses, she realized she had an unhappy customer and tried to make amends. She now had a huge opportunity to turn a negative into a positive. Her commitment to me was that she wanted us to come back and have a positive experience. And she said we would not be further insulted by the additional charges.

She promised that her assistant would call me the next morning to set everything straight. That was more than two months ago. I am still waiting for the call.

This entire experience can be summed up in two words -- lip service.

At each point of contact, promises were made and broken. Service was not delivered. It merely was implied to get us in or off the phone.

What message do most organizations communicate to their employees when management does not illustrate the exact service they want delivered? Why did the spa owner pass me to her assistant instead of using her authority to resolve my concerns immediately? What model should employees follow -- lip service or guest service?

Obviously, the employees in this spa follow their leader and leave the guest experience to the guest. If a business makes a commitment to guests and charges money, it has the responsibility to follow through. If it wants customers to return, that business must create a reason. Service must exceed expectations and go beyond guest satisfaction.

When dissatisfaction occurs, that business should address the concerns head-on and work with the guest for a mutually happy solution. This often creates even greater opportunities to secure a customer for life.

Being defensive or challenging a customer's reaction only makes matters worse. Each guest experience is personal and real for that individual guest. Customers want to be happy, and they want their needs addressed. Sometimes, a simple acknowledgment and apology will do. Making amends, where reasonable, is even better. Going above and beyond is superb.

These simple concepts apply to every link in the personnel chain, from top to bottom, back to front. A broken promise is twice as bad as the promise that never was made. Customers and guests remember how they are treated, and they love to tell others. Repeat and referral business affect the bottom line, and those who do not manage the guest experience guided by these facts probably will not be around for long.

As a customer, I will not return to this spa, nor will I recommend it to others. In fact, I'd say my lips are sealed. □

Roberta Nedry is President of Hospitality Excellence Inc., consultants in guest experience management, and an adviser to the South Florida Business Journal's The Guest Report. She can be reached at (954) 779-7772 or by e-mail at roberta@hospitalityexcellence.com.

