

The Guest REPORT

"No, we don't have that information in our system."

"No, we cannot retrieve your data and locate your lost item."

"No, we are unable to switch your hospitality suite to the one you confirmed over six months ago, even though you invited all your customers to that specific room and have no way to reach them."

No! No! No!

With all these no's, which all relate to personal experiences this past month, one might wonder if the world of service is beginning to shut down. "No" may be perceived as the easy way out and an efficient way to move on to the next customer or guest.

The problem is that that guest may end up moving on as well.

In each of these situations, I longed for someone, anyone, to say, "I'm not sure, let me check" or "let me see what we can do" or "here are some alternatives to meet your needs."

Instead, the door was slammed shut with two little letters and I had to pry it back open, using both hands.

In the first case, I had asked a front desk clerk for the details on the significant room service charges on my hotel bill. I was given the "it's not my department" routine and told the information was not accessible until much later, through a different department.

Luckily, I was able to stay long enough to get the details but I was so surprised by the lack of initiative and readiness to answer my questions.

Had this same front desk clerk responded with, "We don't have that information for you at this moment but I will track it down as soon as possible," my anxiety levels would have been greatly reduced and I would have paid my bill more immediately.

Instead, I did not get my information and the hotel did not get its money until much later. We all also wasted a lot of time in the process.

In the second scenario, I was in a retail location, picking up 10 rolls of film from a special family event. Only nine rolls showed up and when I asked about tracking the lost roll, I was told that the data to track it could not be retrieved. Because I had seen the film processor enter all 10 items into a computer, I found this hard to believe and questioned the associate telling me, "No!" I still got the same answer and asked for a supervisor, who immediately pulled the information out of the computer, down to the specific tracking number.

Had I not pried that NO door open, I would have left frustrated and confused, even angry with this location's disregard. Later I found out that the "No" associate only had been with this store for two weeks. I guess his training did not involve a customer first orientation as he obviously took a shortcut to make up for his learning curve.

Imagine the difference had his orientation included something like, "When customers ask difficult questions or things you may not know, never say 'no'. Tell them you are not sure and will check it out for them with someone who is. Put their needs first and resolve to get the answers."

Providing employees with guidelines and understanding on how not to

Service excellence Don't just be a 'no' at all

say "no" can be invaluable in dealing with unexpected customer questions.

Caring enough to take personal responsibility to find alternatives to meet or exceed your customers' needs can make an enormous difference.

In the third situation, I had booked a hospitality suite months in advance to host four nights for special customer meetings. This reserved suite was printed on the more than 100 invitations that had been mailed. When I checked in, the suite was not available and had not even been noted in the computer system.

I was astonished when I heard, "No, that suite is not available." In this particular case, lack of understanding presented an incredible opportunity for service. The lack of understanding actually occurred between reservations and the front desk. The opportunity for service was standing right in front of them.

Once again, I had to pry the NO doors open to get our original suite back. Had I encountered an apology and a "we'll fix it" attitude, the whole ambiance of my stay would have been different. Instead, I left with a feeling of discontent and dissatisfaction and knew the only reason things worked out is because I made sure they did.

No one on the hotel staff went out of his or her way to soothe my injuries or to help me heal. Unfortunately, I will carry this memory with me and will share my experience with others.

There may be moments when the answer to one question may indeed be no, but there are always alternatives and the alternatives should be presented first.

Remember the expression, "when one window closes, another one opens." Instill employees, managers and all personnel with a "can do" attitude, whatever "do" might be. Encourage them to take responsibility to think through all alternatives, even the not-so-obvious ones.

Support them with structured paths to get answers quickly to questions or situations they may not know how to handle. Promote understanding of and attention to customer and guest needs.

Show them how to focus on those needs and then determine the best solutions. Discourage quick answers that shut down any out of the ordinary or unexpected requests.

Be "in the know" with how to handle "no" and welcome the "YOU-phoric" sound of YES!



Roberta Nedry is the president of Hospitality Excellence, Inc., consultants in guest experience management and service excellence, and is an adviser to The Business Journal's Guest Report. She can be reached at (954) 739-5299 or roberta@hospitalityexcellence.com.