

The Guest

R E P O R T

Service excellence

How to short-circuit guests' expectations

Recently, while checking on the status of my telephone bill, after several layers of voicemail greetings and directions, a recorded voice told me someone would be with me "shortly."

Every two to three minutes, the prerecorded voice would return, telling me that I was important and someone would be with me "shortly."

Last month, while traveling in Colorado, I called for a cab and was told the taxi would arrive within 10 minutes. That timing worked out perfectly to get me to my next engagement.

However, after 20 minutes, I called the cab company again and spoke to the dispatcher. She remembered the call, told me the driver was on his way and actually would arrive within a few seconds. Fifteen minutes later, the taxi finally showed up - 35 minutes from the original call and 25 minutes after I was told he would arrive.

When he appeared surprised at my less-than-exuberant greeting, my high anxiety levels from standing in cold Colorado weather and my concern to get to my next engagement, he shrugged his shoulders and muttered that the dispatcher had only dispatched him 10 minutes earlier. He had no idea how long I had been waiting or what I was told.

Thirsty, hungry, grumpy

After learning that our reservations at one of South Florida's newer, exciting restaurants would not be ready for a few minutes, we enjoyed a couple of drinks in the bar. Thirty minutes after our reservation time, we were escorted to our table.

A waiter welcomed us and told us he would be with us "shortly." (I have learned to despise that word.) He disappeared into an abyss of dining duties and left us thirsty, hungry and grumpy for another 25 minutes. Because the hour was late and we were entertaining guests from Canada, my concern for our lack of nourishment, not even bread or water, caused me to go in search of our waiter. After we cornered an innocent busboy and demanded a waiter in any shape, size or form, a new face appeared at our table - 55 minutes after our original reservation.

False expectations

In each of these real life torture sessions, false expectations emerged as the true culprit of service frustration, not the actual lack of service delivery. Had I gotten a more realistic understanding of when the service I was requesting would take place, I could have adjusted my expectations. Instead, I got false promises and developed anxiety intensity not previously there.

Even an "I don't know" would have been better than "shortly" or specific time commitments that were never real or realistic in the first place. Or, each of these service providers could have provided options that would have allowed me to choose whether to hold on, wait or come back another time.

In each of these situations and others like them, a business may think it is providing good service by the promise itself, often with good intentions.

Yet, the waiting and wondering are even worse, especially when no transition or communication update appears to ease the pain.

In Florida, especially during the busy tourist season, many of us are accustomed to long waits and adjust our expectations accordingly. When we are told reservations may take longer than originally anticipated or that the business is unsure of when the next opening might be, we can decide whether we want to stay the course or make other arrangements.

However, when we are held hostage by a false expectation, presuming that the service provider will come through as promised, we are even more let down, disappointed, anxious and frustrated than if we had no expectation at all.

Hospitality managers, trainers and leaders should recognize and address the limbo reactions that develop in this fast-paced environment when real time and real expectations do not coincide. Prepare employees to create expectations based on what they know they can

deliver. If the situation is unclear, say so and let the customer know a revised update is forthcoming. Or, give them some choices on what to do with the undefined time.

With the phone company or any call center, reservations or customer service telephone system, give approximate wait times, tell them they are next or give them options to leave a message, banish the word, "shortly."

Send customers a message that voicemail technology was created to deliver more efficient communication solutions as opposed to punishment for service requests. Reward efforts to call with responsive alternatives.

With the cab company or any transportation solution including airlines, water taxi, buses or limousines, be as sure as possible with pick up times or let the customer know a range of time that the driver may arrive. Provide a number to call if there are any delays and keep customers updated if possible. Establish credibility by assessing situations realistically and honestly communicating with customers. Stick with the philosophy of "underpromise and overdeliver" and strive for accurate estimates.

With the restaurant wait or any unanticipated crowd delay, whether it be the lines at an amusement park, checking into a hotel or queuing up for an event, stay in touch with your customers and keep them posted on progress.

Acknowledge their presence and appreciate their choice to wait. Align the entire frontline team to be sensitive to frustrated patrons and encourage some level of updates or communication.

Expect expectations and recognize your role in creating them.

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— Roberta Nedry