



Customer service is about far more than managing the numbers. If you treat each customer like a respected guest, most will reward you with their loyalty

**Alex Pratt**

## The lay of the bland

**M**ost entrepreneurs never quite switch off, so even on holiday you'll find them checking out how other businesses operate. While garrisoned in a massive resort hotel on an otherwise picturesque Caribbean island, I was reminded of just how rare it is for customers to be afforded an appropriate level of respect.

As you might expect from such an omnipresent, successful brand like Marriott, the hotel's well-oiled business model clinically focuses on standardising and sanitising the visitor experience to cater to the safe tastes of risk-averse American convention-goers, whose numbers are boosted by executive families spending their business accumulated air miles. The resort was, in effect, a B2B operation serving corporate customers from the US—catering therefore to crowds and not individual guests. And it showed.

After a rum punch at registration, you are “managed” by a collection of integrated business processes designed to get you through the week without too many complaints, and preferably without leaving the compound. True, it all worked—and it was wonderfully wireless by the pool—but the treatment is soulless, impersonal and bland.

Contrast such a comfortably numbing offer with the altogether electric, if unreliable experience at a tiny restaurant just outside the perimeter walls, where the engaging chef steps out to welcome you at the door, aproned-up with a smile, a fag, and a Jack Daniels on ice all to hand. Reappearing from time to time with dishes that only vaguely resemble the orders placed, he explains that many ingredients have been held up by the unreliable supply boat. My apple pie never made it to the table before we had to adjourn to the bar to make way for an over-booking. In bland land we'd have been mightily hacked off at what amounted to a panoply of service disasters. Here, amid the passion, pathos and energy of one man dedicated to making a success of a new business, the feeling was more of a welcome guest playing a constructive role in someone else's dream, than of being a Customer King.

Two neighbouring but highly contrasting businesses, one with a steady flow of punters, free-flowing supplies, and a great beach location; the other a one-man band, hidden down a back street, and unable to reliably secure

even the timely supply of a slice of apple pie. Yet for all its glitches, the far-from-perfect experience is a breath of fresh air in comparison to the anodyne treatment as a number in a crowd-management machine.

The divorcing of the customer who pays the bill, from the consumer who undertakes the experience, is, of course, not confined to corporate B2B arrangements. It is a regular theme in public service, where fixed prices are negotiated en bloc in advance, and backed by service level mirages. Your local GP practice probably offers a great example: these days you practically need to sever an artery before being granted an appointment with a qualified doctor, and only then after scaling the roadblocks thrown in your path, including the telephone inquisition, the insistence on seeing a nurse beforehand, and a booking system that only allows appointment booking at 08.02 on wet Wednesdays. Here again, the service is geared towards crowd management and rationing the limited supply of healthcare in the presence of insatiable demand. You can have all the patient charters you like, but the doctor will always be king.

All this made me think about how we treat our own customers, and to be honest we don't think of them as

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kings either, more like guests to treat with respect but not reverence. In some thankfully rare cases, we do actually have to ask unreasonable guests to leave. Recently, we shipped one customer an extra £250 item by mistake, and immediately arranged collection and redirection to its rightful owner. The first customer was miffed, so we gave him £50 of free gifts and his own £200 plus shipping costs back, thereby giving him his product free and gratis, which we felt was adequate recompense for the original mistake. He remained indignant, unsatisfied, and entirely ungrateful. This is the sort of punter we reserve the right not to serve, the ones with enough ego to think they really are royalty.

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