

EXCELLENCE WINS IN HOSPITALITY

A guide for serving guests





Photo courtesy of CAMP-of-the-WOODS

At age 11, I declared that I wanted to grow up and work in a hotel. Considering that my small German village didn't even have a hotel or a proper restaurant, my youthful career aspiration did not fare well with my family. To talk about hotel work was like saying you wanted to be a street sweeper or garbage collector. ▶

When I reached age 14 — a fork in the road for European students in those days — I could choose higher academic study or learn a trade. My parents decided to help me in my occupational dreams and reluctantly enrolled me in a six-month boarding school for hotel work 80 miles from our home.

I am humbled and grateful to God and my parents for their brave decision that has led to a still-thriving 50-year career of serving others. You, too, are in this business and ministry of serving others. I admire what you are doing because you are truly serving. But you're not just serving; you are impacting. You are impacting the future of the families, young people and all the other guests that you serve.

Since age 17, in my three-year hotel apprenticeship, my motto has been, "Ladies and Gentlemen Serving Ladies and Gentlemen." We are not just servants in the shadows of the service industry. We can rise to a higher identity of respecting ourselves and respecting others and treating our guests with excellence in all we do.



Photo courtesy of Carolina Creek Christian Camps

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What Customers Want

No matter what field we are in, I can guarantee you (after processing thousands of customer comments) that the people you serve want three main things.

First, they want a product or service without defects. This is not just *physical* defects like a sticky door or noisy toilet, this also includes *process* or *system* defects — the kind that leads guests to say, “Hey, I never got my receipt,” or “Where’s my suitcase?” An alert business stays one step ahead to prevent defects and mistakes and creates the correct processes to deliver what people want.

Second, the people we serve want timeliness. They don’t want to stand or sit around waiting for you. If a meal comes out perfect and tasty (no defects), but takes 45 minutes to be served, your guests will be unhappy regardless of how delicious the food tastes. If someone calls and is put on hold for 10 minutes, it won’t matter if your staff is competent to solve their issue. When those parents bring their kids to your camp, they want to deliver their kids and take off. They don’t want to stay there forever. I know. When I delivered my kids to camp, I wanted to hand them off so I could go to a movie!

Third, your guests want your service staff to be nice. People you serve want to sense a caring attitude. This third desire is greater than the first two combined. It can atone for other shortfalls. Granted, even if your staff members are Christians, challenging days can reflect in how we acknowledge and come across to others. Being kind is the greatest driver of customer satisfaction in everything you do.

I’ve noted two more guest desires have arisen in recent years: individualization and personalization. With individualization, people want to be able to tweak a product to their likes, which makes it challenging for any of us who aspire to serve large numbers of people. But guests don’t think about that. They just know they don’t want to be locked into a fixed menu. The Subway® sandwich chain has risen to the top of its market by letting folks decide how much lettuce, black olives, grated cheese and other ingredients go on their particular sandwich.

In one of our Ritz-Carlton hotels, a housekeeper noticed while emptying the wastebasket in a room that the guest had picked out the nuts from the chocolate-chip cookies he had gotten from the club lounge tray. What did this housekeeper do? Just ignore the information? No, she mentioned to the chef that the guest apparently didn’t like nuts. The next evening when the guest returned to his room, he found chocolate chip cookies without nuts on his bedside table tray. What can you do to take individualization to a new level at your camp and conference center?

Personalization focuses on calling your guests by name and recognizing their worth. No sound on earth is as sweet to a person’s ears as his or her name. In the hotel business, we train doormen to check the luggage tags on the suitcases they are unloading from the cars or taxis curbside. As soon as the guest steps out of the car, the doorman can say, “Welcome, Mr. Johnson.” (Of course, if the name is too hard to pronounce, it’s better not to try and then end up getting it wrong.) ►

The Fine Art of Handling Complaints

7 tips for dealing with guest feedback

In our hotels' measuring of guest satisfaction (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being exceptional), anyone who gives an 8 or under we call and say, "What could we have done better?" Once you know what you could have done better, you can correct your situation. Here are key points about handling guest feedback:

1. **Never try to laugh it off or crack a joke, no matter how ridiculous the complainer sounds to you.** Guard even your facial expression. This is dead serious to the person in front of you.
2. **If you get a complaint, own it.** Immediately say, "I'm so sorry." It doesn't matter whether you caused the problem or not. At that moment, you are the face of the organization, and you speak on its behalf.
3. **Don't say "they" or "them;" instead, say, "I."** It does no good to say, "Hmmm, it looks like *they* messed up." That just frustrates the already agitated person. Instead, take ownership of the mistake or misunderstanding.
4. **Ask for forgiveness.** Go ahead and spit out the words, "Please forgive me." Notice, you say "me," not "us." Take the sins onto your shoulders. This goes a very long way in calming the emotions. After all, what is the complainer going to say, "No, I refuse to forgive you"?
5. **Don't appeal to the policy manual, as in "Well, our guidelines say that ..."** The upset person couldn't care less what policy 14, section 8, paragraph 3 says.
6. **Don't try to parade your expertise, as in, "Well, the reason this happened is because the system is set up to recognize certain signals and blah, blah. ..."** The person doesn't care what you know or how your system is designed. They just want somebody to hear their angst and validate it.
7. **Finally, don't assume that the complainer wants something** (for example, money). Most of the time, they just want to be heard. They want their viewpoint to be respected.



Photo courtesy of Refreshing Mountain

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Lasting Impressions

You are in the service business. Service starts the instant you make contact with the guest. We teach our hotel employees that if a guest gets within 12 feet, you look at him or her and say, "Hello." We teach our employees not to say, "Hi," but to say, "Welcome," "Good morning" or "Good afternoon."

The guests, by the way, get this. They make a decision about you, your business or your camp in the first 10 seconds. So how does your entrance look? How does someone answer your phone? Or do you answer at all? When a guest or a potential guest perceives they've made contact, they start making decisions about your business and customer service.

Once we've made the warm welcome and complied with a guest's wishes, the final part of exceptional service is saying goodbye. It is always important to say, "Thank you for coming to stay with us" or "Thank you for allowing us to serve you."

Everybody talks about customer loyalty and customer satisfaction. Customer loyalty means the customer has developed trust in you and your product. Trust is developed by human contact. It is not developed by what you're delivering. When you go the extra mile with your service, you develop trust with your guests, which leads to keeping them and attracting new guests in the months and years ahead.

We *can* satisfy more than 98% of our public if we put our minds to it. It's simply a matter of attitude. It's also a matter of not settling for excuses when things do go wrong. When we attribute challenges to outside vendors, terrible weather, etc., there is nothing beautiful in an *explanation*. Beauty lies rather in *innovation* — figuring out how to overcome the challenges and press on to success, to customer pleasure, to achievement.

When it comes to excellence winning in hospitality, an organization can't please every human being every time. But it never hurts to try. That is something, even as a teen in my hotel apprenticeship, I began to practice. I invite you to join me in serving people with this same passion and blueprint to uncommon success." ■



Horst Schulze is co-founder and former president of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, leading the company to unprecedented multibillion-dollar growth and crafting the people-focused standards that make the Ritz-Carlton brand globally elite.