

# Signature Press

## THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: HOW TO MAKE HOTEL GUESTS FEEL LIKE THEY'RE GETTING MORE FOR THEIR MONEY



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*Hotel Executive*

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Have you ever stayed in a luxury hotel and felt that you weren't quite getting your money's worth when it came to service? On the flip side, have you stayed in a limited service property and felt the staff went above and beyond? For me, I have experienced both. In fact, some of my most memorable experiences (the good kind of "memorable," that is) are from those small, not-so-fancy hotels. The bad experiences have sometimes been from the places you'd least expect — where you are supposedly paying for exceptional service.

Nearly 10 years ago, I was traveling to a large conference and staying in a well-known luxury hotel in a major market. I was so excited, as this was going to be my first stay at this landmark property. I expected the royal treatment. To make a long story short, my experience was anything but royal, unless you're talking "royally bad."

The stay was full of service shortfalls, from rude servers and staff to a less-than-clean room to extra charges for everything including Internet service and even the morning paper! The kicker was when I was chased down the hallway by a buffet staffer because I didn't pay for an apple (which, by the way, was apparently \$4). It was an honest mistake. My conference buffet (free) was on the lower level and the guest buffet (pay) was on the second level. Still, I was made to feel like a criminal. But at \$4 per apple, who's the real crook here?

Conversely, my stays at smaller, lesser known properties have been some of my best experiences. Not long ago, I was staying

at a national chain in a midsize market. To be honest, I didn't expect anything special. But much to my surprise, everyone on the staff was very friendly and genuinely seemed to be glad I was staying with them. They treated me like a valued guest — not a nuisance. I still remember the friendly shuttle driver, the upbeat guest services representative, even the general manager welcomed me as he passed me in the lobby. Little things like that go a long way and leave a strong impression.

As a result of today's economy, customers are more likely to seek value rather than luxurious amenities when deciding on a hotel. This is a great opportunity for value properties to snatch up new customers — those who would typically stay at higher-end properties. Yet, the economy will rebound, so you'll want to make sure that you, your staff and your property make the best impression possible in order to gain customers for life.

So, how can you turn a budget property into a four-star experience? Keep reading.

### **Property**

From the moment a guest turns into your driveway, they should see neatly trimmed grass, pruned flower beds and a welcoming entryway. As they walk into the lobby, make sure it is clean and attractive. Your front desk staff should be ready with a smile and friendly greeting. I can't tell you how many times I've walked in to an empty front desk, where I've had to wait for someone to come out. Or worse yet, I've walked in and the first thing I see is a bunch of staffers clustered together chatting. My very first impression is that I'm not a priority.

# Signature Press

## THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

### The Front Desk

The front desk is perhaps the best and most important way to leave a lasting impression. Often, your guests have traveled a long way, and are tired. Make it easy for them! Your staff should be ready to make the guest experience as pleasant as possible.

Recently, I traveled to Phoenix for a business trip. The flight was bumpy and late. After traveling across country, I was tired and just wanted to get to my room. I ambled up to the front desk at my value hotel and was greeted by Heather. She quickly checked me in and while doing so, asked me a few simple questions:

**Q:** Are you here for business or pleasure?

**A:** Business

**Q:** Will you be taking clients out for dinner?

**A:** Yes

**Q:** Will you have any downtime?

**A:** Yes

Heather then went on to recommend a restaurant for my clients, and even offered to make my reservations for me! She suggested some area attractions, and gave me detailed information about transportation options. Sensing I was tired, she gave me background on local nearby dining and provided menus for delivery options because they didn't offer room service. I knew she was busy, but rather than seem inconvenienced, annoyed or disinterested, she was friendly, helpful and welcoming – resulting in a great impression.

Heather demonstrated all the elements of my formula for customer experience, or what I call the “ART” of service:

- **A = Awareness.** Heather knew local restaurants, area attractions and transportation options and was able to give informed recommendations.

- **R = Relationships.** By asking some very easy questions, Heather found out the reason(s) I was staying at the hotel and connected them with related activities.

- **T = Take Ownership.** Heather got on the phone, and within minutes, had made

my dinner reservations.

By having knowledge about the surroundings, local attractions, restaurants and property, Heather was able to take the place of a concierge or bellman, and still provide me with the type of help and service I would expect from a higher-end property.

### Housekeeping

I travel a lot. And even when I have client meetings or conferences to attend, I often end up spending a lot of my time in my room. When I'm not sleeping, I'm working on my laptop or just relaxing and watching television. Since many guests like me spend most of their time in their rooms, it is paramount that the experience be “legendary.” And, you definitely don't need the plushiest towels, fluffiest pillows or the fanciest minibar to create a legendary experience. Here are some simple tips that can help make your rooms shine:

### Room Basics

A great overall experience goes well beyond just having a tidy room:

- No scuff marks on the walls or baseboards.
- All light bulbs in working order (this is one of my pet peeves and happens a lot).
- Television channel card and remote present and/or easily found.
- Alarm clock with the correct time displayed.
- Alarm is off (Admit it. You've been awakened at 5 a.m. too.)
- Telephone instructions available and easy to find.
- Closets neat with a sufficient amount of hangers.
- Ceiling is free of cobwebs and stains.
- Underneath the bed(s) is free of dust and debris (guests sometimes place items here).

### Bathroom Basics

Along with the bedroom area, never forget these easy bathroom housekeeping elements:

# Signature Press

## THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

- Room is free of odors.
- Floor, sink, shower and walls are spotless.
- Light bulbs all working (again).
- Ample space for toiletries.
- Plenty of clean towels, tissues and toilet paper.

I know this all seems obvious, but how many times have just one of these things affected your experience?

And it shouldn't stop there. The interaction with the housekeeping staff is just as important. Housekeepers are representatives of your hotel. In fact, I find that I interact with them at every hotel in which I stay — whether I've requested additional towels or in passing in the hallway.

They should follow suggested customer service protocols just like other guest-facing employees, such as:

- Acknowledge the guests and look approachable; don't avoid eye contact and always smile.
- Speak in a clear, audible manner.
- Exhibit a sincere desire to accommodate any guest request.
- Be well groomed with a clean uniform, and always wear a nametag.
- Display professional behavior — save eating, drinking and smoking for break time in an area away from guests.

A friendly, helpful and knowledgeable housekeeping attendant can elevate a guest's overall experience with a hotel, and none of the above customer service suggestions have a high cost attached to them.

In the end, it's not the finest soaps, plushest towels and grandest views that will leave a lasting impression. Customer service training is what makes the difference. And now more than ever, service is what sets your property and your staff apart and earns repeat business.