

Signature Press

LITTLE KNOWN WAYS TO IMPACT OCCUPANCY WITH KILLER CUSTOMER SERVICE



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For more from Ely, visit his blog, [Once Upon a Customer Experience](#).

I'm leaving tomorrow for a trip to one of the biggest tourist destinations in the United States. When I booked this trip, without even thinking about what I was doing, I worked through an evoked set of choices for places to stay. With so many choices, I naturally began to pre-select properties that would fit my needs.

An "evoked set" is a textbook marketing term for the options you decide to choose from when making a purchasing decision. Often, consumers mentally organize their evoked sets in order of preference. For travelers, it's hotels they already are aware of, and think well of, when considering a reservation.

Naturally, as a frequent traveler, I have an evoked set of hotels in mind when I go to central Florida. Some are luxury hotels and resorts, others are near the convention center, and still others are used when traveling strictly for business. Each one has made my evoked set list for a specific reason. Most are there because they have provided a memorable level of customer service that has exceeded my expectations on at least one previous trip. In fact, for all segments of the travel industry, most of the companies that make my evoked set are based on the quality of customer service I've experienced in the past.

This trip is for business purposes, and while I won't give you the name of my chosen hotel here, if you are a regular reader of my blog, I'm sure you'll figure it out. I've had great experiences at this hotel, which is why I'm staying again. Hoteliers should never

forget that every guest interaction is an opportunity to affect customer loyalty, and thus occupancy. This is particularly important to remember, given that in this economy, we are all fighting for the same, limited customer pool.

Future occupancy rates are directly impacted by the way a guest feels about his or her experience today. Even small things can make a huge difference. If I feel someone has gone out of their way to help me, it makes an impression.

For example, I remember a guest services representative taking time to help me find a local attraction near the hotel. This saved me precious time both in looking for information, and in finding the best directions. And, on another trip, when I got to a hotel four hours early, the GSR called housekeeping immediately to clean my room instead of making me wait until the "proper" check-in time! Both of these instances occurred several years ago and while I don't expect that level of service all the time, it is no surprise that each of those hotels has earned its spot on my evoked set – and has earned my repeat business.

Here are some tips that impact customer experience today and help your property end up on your customer's evoked set:

- **Take care of complaints.** According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index, only 30 percent of customers feel that their complaints are resolved to their satisfaction, leaving a whopping 70 percent of guests who make a complaint and see no resolution. Forty percent or more will

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take their business elsewhere after just one bad experience. Showing empathy, while important in building trusting relationships with your customers, is not always enough. You need to truly fix a problem whenever possible, and keep in contact with the guest to ensure they also feel the problem has been solved to their satisfaction.

- **Assure customer satisfaction.**

Regularly poll your guests about their experiences through surveys and focus groups, or utilize a mystery shopping service. The only way to know how your customers are being treated and how they feel about their experience with your hotel is to ask.

While hearing positive feedback is usually preferred, it's even more important to hear about the negative. Being able to turn a poor experience into a positive one sometimes resonates with customers even more than just a hotel stay that simply met expectations. When you follow up with those customers who provided negative feedback, they'll realize that your staff genuinely cares about them and their experience, and is willing to go above and beyond to keep them satisfied. Keep in mind that most customers don't complain. They just choose to do business elsewhere.

- **Empower your customer-facing employees to serve the guests.**

Some companies give each employee an "allowance" of funds they can use at their discretion to satisfy a guest. I've heard of cases where employees have up to \$2,000 to resolve a problem. However, you don't always have to spend money to solve problems. Sometimes just giving the employees the power to make a decision on the spot in order to help a guest, is allowance enough.

My personal feeling is that if it's good for the guest, do it (within reason, of course)! You don't want to give away free rooms, but the example I shared earlier is germane – the GSR made a decision to proactively call housekeeping, ask them to drop what they were doing and clean my room immediately.

It made me feel important and valued as a guest, and it put the hotel in my "important and valued" evoked set.

- **Train customer-facing staff to deliver legendary service.** Ensure that all employees understand what it is you're in business for – to provide service to guests! There are many training programs available, from creating legendary customer experiences, to correctly handling complaints, to controlling and encouraging interaction with guests. By having a consistent and ongoing training program, customer service will remain a focus for your staff.

- **Allot funds for customer service initiatives.** On average, a dollar of advertising returns three to five dollars of sales revenue, while each dollar spent on improving customer service can return \$50, or more! So many companies claim that the customer is their priority, yet they continue to function without a formal customer service strategy.

These are just a few examples of how you can impact your occupancy rates through customer service. There are hundreds more (which I'd be happy to share with you). In good economic times and even more so in bad, it's essential to keep the guests you already have. They not only return, but when loyal, they become promoters. Haven't you taken advice from a friend or colleague on a buying decision?

The evoked set is a powerful decision-making process that happens in all of our brains. Every single guest interaction is an opportunity to put your hotel closer to the top of the customer's evoked set or simply secure your place there!