

TAKE CUSTOMER SERVICE TO THE NEXT LEVEL

By MICHAEL PATMAS, M.D.

The Smith family had planned a ski vacation months in advance. The resort they chose is known for its excellent terrain, snow quality, uncrowded runs, and service. The family's goal was to spend one week

at a posh destination ski resort in a slopeside log home and to put the three kids in private lessons.

Little did the Smiths know that their vacation would seriously test the resort's ability to deliver on its renown as a purveyor of outstanding customer

service. What follows is the true story of how the family's vacation started out as a nightmare and was turned around when one instructor stepped up to save the day—and the week!

ONE LEG AT A TIME

Shortly after the Smiths left their home things turned bad . . . and then worse.

Their flight was delayed by weather, and they missed a connecting flight. Fortunately, there was another flight to their destination, but their luggage—including all of the clan's ski gear—didn't make it on to the plane. Not to worry, said the airline representatives; all of the luggage would arrive early the next morning.

The expected two-hour drive to the resort took longer than usual due to heavy snow, and the Smiths didn't arrive until nearly midnight. Exhausted, they were ready to settle in for the night at their ski-in/ski-out residence. Much to the family's Goldilocks-like surprise, someone was already sleeping in their beds—another family was ensconced in the house the Smiths had reserved! It was close to 2 a.m. before the situation was rectified and the family had alternative, comparable accommodations.

A few bleary hours later, the family arose to head out for their all-day, private ski lesson. The lesson was scheduled for 10 a.m., but despite the airline's promises, the skis and ski gear would not arrive in time for the lesson.

So, the Smith family showed up at the private-lesson booking area at 9:30 without skiwear or gear. The three kids were dressed in pajamas and winter coats, and nothing else. No skis, boots, or ski pants. The three little ragamuffins were left wearing only sagging cotton socks and Tony the Tiger pajamas.

Sensing the family's exasperation, the instructor assigned to the family immediately launched into damage-control mode. He calmly took the family to the rental area and assisted with the process of renting skis, boots, and poles. He then escorted Mr. Smith to the retail area to purchase gloves and hats. Mr. Smith then announced that he drew the line at having to purchase three new pairs of ski pants when luggage containing new ski clothes would surely be arriving shortly.

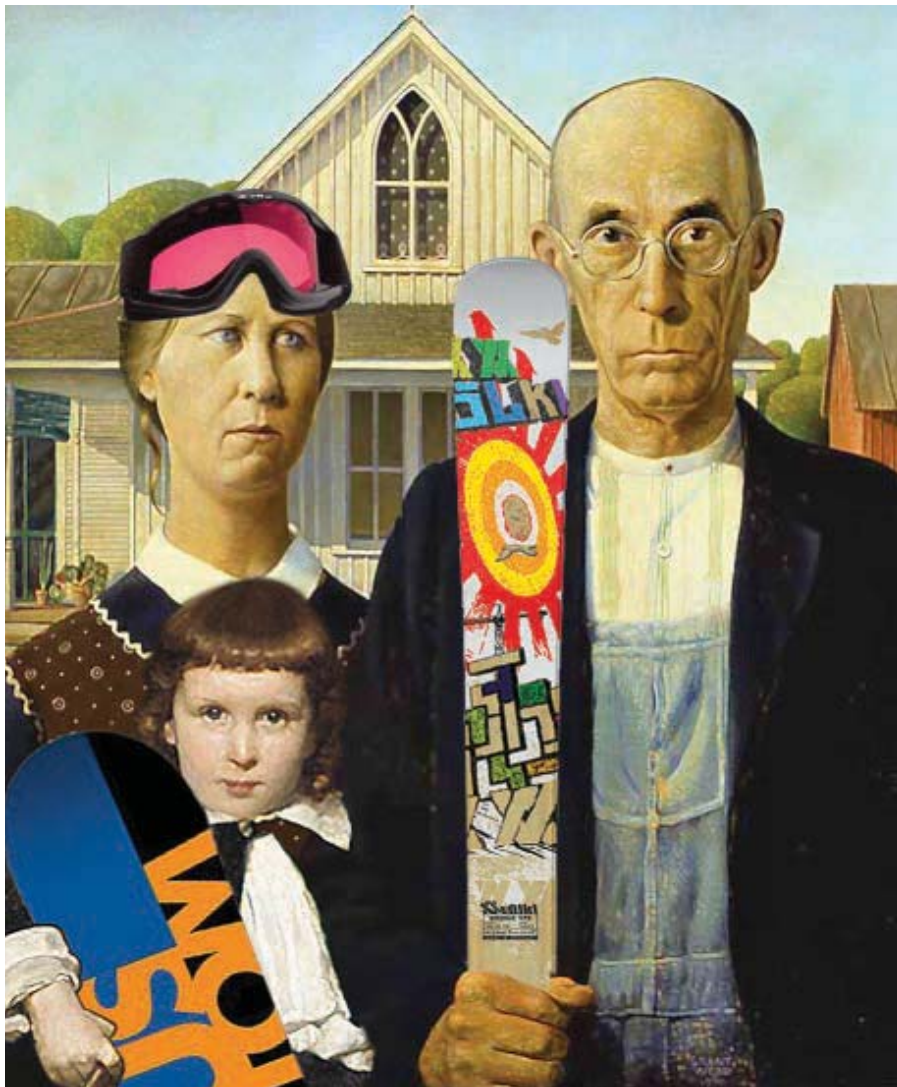


Illustration by Dave Allen

“Isn’t there something you can do in the meantime?” he asked, implying that he’d like the instructor to do something about finding temporary coverage for his children from the waist down. (After all, skiing in pajamas is something only Glen Plake could get away with!)

After a split-second spent contemplating options, the instructor’s mind flashed on the snowsports school’s employee uniform department, where dozens of pairs of ski pants were stored. The instructor told Mr. Smith to hold on for a second and stepped aside to ask a supervisor if it would be okay to “borrow” three pairs of pants until his clients’ luggage arrived. The supervisor shook his head, saying that he didn’t have the authority to permit the use of resort uniform pants and simply didn’t know who would have the authority to help out the family.

The instructor glimpsed a nearby clock: it was almost time for the lesson. The instructor figured he had three options: 1) he could tell Mister Smith that he’d simply have to buy three new pairs of ski pants; 2) he could tell the family to cancel and reschedule the lesson,

effectively wasting the family’s first day of vacation; or 3) he could consciously choose to bend the resort’s rules to help the family out of the situation.

Our fearless instructor chose Door Number Three. The instructor figured he’d take the risk of going against resort policy in order to help his clients have a positive experience. He decided to supersede the status quo to help out a customer in what most people would agree was an extraordinary situation. The instructor strode to the uniform storage area, found three pairs of ski pants, and “borrowed” them for the day.

He handed over the ski pants to the kids and had the entire family out on the slopes at 10:10 a.m.

As the day progressed, the Smiths were simultaneously stunned and overjoyed by the lengths to which the instructor was willing to go to in order to solve their dilemma. They were particularly grateful when the all-day ski lesson went exceedingly well for their children. The kids, in their borrowed alpine duds, had a great time. After the lesson the instructor simply returned the ski pants to uniform storage.

Mr. Smith was so impressed by the instructor’s initiative in delivering outstanding customer service that he gave the instructor a nice tip and lavished

praise on him in a report to resort management. The Smiths hired the instructor for additional private lessons during their stay. A year later the Smiths returned because of the exceptional service the instructor had provided.

SUPPORT FROM ABOVE

Of course, truly delivering on superior customer service requires the support of management. What our fearless instructor did at his home resort might’ve gotten him fired elsewhere. That fact may be the hidden takeaway from this article: resort management must truly embrace customer service and support its front-line employees.

I have seen instructors give clients an extra pair of goggles or gloves, buy hot chocolate for a shivering child, stay with an injured skier during transport to the emergency room, and gone on to check on that person the next day. Such actions create powerful and memorable customer experiences. One thing resort management can do is to acknowledge, celebrate, and reward instructors who undertake such measures. By doing this the organization can hardwire a culture of customer service. In these shaky economic times, dazzling customers with service quality doesn’t just feel good—it’s vital for survival.

CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS: THE “FANTASTIC FOUR”

Not that long ago customer service training consisted of four tips: Smile. Make eye contact. Engage in small talk. Thank the customer. Service-training standards have evolved, so here are four more detailed standards touted as having a direct impact on customer perception:

RESPECT: Be courteous, positive, and upbeat. Do whatever you can to meet the customer’s needs. If you can bend the rules without causing anyone or anything harm to make your customer happy, by all means do so. Managers and supervisors should encourage such behavior, not punish it.

RESPONSIVENESS: Tell customers what to expect. Apologize for delays. Don’t just tell them where the rental shop is; take them to it.

UNDERSTANDING: Identify the customer’s needs and desires. Include them in planning the lesson. As Jerry Warren, the director of mountain operations for Utah’s Sundance Resort, noted in a recent article in *32 Degrees*,

it’s not the turn that matters, it’s the student. Take time to understand what outcome will meet your student’s desires. Tailor the lesson to them.

ENVIRONMENT: Customers pay attention to what their leader does. If your snowsports area has trouble with litter, do what you can to keep public areas clean. Pick up trash, and chances are your student will notice your effort. Maintain a professional appearance in grooming, uniform, language, and behavior. Wash your hands when you use the restroom. Help customers any way you can, from picking up their skis to helping them carry their gear. The opportunities to reach out to customers are endless. All it takes is looking at the resort experience through their eyes.

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PUT YOUR H.E.A.R.T. INTO IT

When things go wrong for a client, they go wrong for you as an instructor. It's never a good thing to see a client unhappy, but when you buy into the melodrama or argue with the individual you're bound to rev up the negative energy in an already challenging situation. Your goal should be to quickly neutralize the situation and attempt to move things into a more positive zone. This means keeping your cool even when your clients do not.

Maintain the strength and equanimity necessary to look at service failures as an opportunity for learning. The idea is to engage in the art and science of "service recovery"—that is, seeing each negative situation as a shot at a "do-over." Studies show that a well-executed service recovery can be as powerful as a flawless first-time service experience in terms of building customer loyalty.

Two popular models for service recovery exist, and the first model goes by the acronym H.E.A.R.T.:

HEAR: Listen to your customers' concerns.

EMPATHIZE: Express empathy for the problem.

APOLOGIZE: Voice your regrets for the service failure.

RESPOND: Admit error and correct the problem.

THANK: Give your appreciation to the customer for bringing the issue to your attention.

Here is one example of how HEART can work: A customer is concerned about where her child is. The lesson was supposed to have been over a while ago, and yet the group has yet to return to the base area. Mom now fears the worst. An instructor who encounters the worried parent hears the mom voicing concern: "Your child is overdue, and now you are worried." What follows is an opportunity to empathize with the parent: "Yes, I understand your concern." This is followed by an apology and a response: "I'm sorry your child hasn't returned yet, but let's see

what we can do to find out what's up."

The instructor alerts a supervisor who in turn radios others to locate the class. Ultimately it turns out that the group was delayed by a lift stoppage, and it is on its way in now. Finally, the instructor thanks the mom for bringing the situation to his attention.

I have watched this scenario unfold at my home resort. The instructor in this example actually waited with the worried mom until the class returned and witnessed the reunion of the mother and child. That level of concern was noted by management and greatly appreciated by the mom.

The second customer service model calls for service recovery "toolboxes." Essentially, resorts place boxes at various locales around the snowsports area, and they contain a variety of

customer service by itself may not save a resort, but having a reputation for poor customer service can't help.

As an instructor, you're on the front line of resort employees, and are uniquely positioned to take customer service to the next level. Providing great lessons and exceptional service will not only be personally rewarding and gratifying, it will also contribute to the success of your resort and your future employment on the hill.

Beyond delivering good service up to the point of sale, instructors can take advantage of digital social networking to extend customer interaction long after the end of a lesson. Postings by instructors that provide advice on skiing in certain situations or dealing with on-snow conditions and circumstances can "virtually" take customer service to a



Sherri Harkin

items, such as gift cards or vouchers for lift tickets, lessons, ski tunes, food, or retail items. To implement this model, resorts need to budget for these toolboxes, and encourage and empower managers, supervisors, and instructors to use them to achieve service recovery.

A former ski school director I worked for used a service recovery toolbox of sorts. He gave each instructor at the resort five vouchers for free lift tickets to be used only for service recovery situations.

AT THE FRONT LINE

It's not breaking news that the world's economy has undergone a significant contraction over the last two years, and that resorts have been affected adversely because of it. Outstanding

whole new level.

To compete in today's challenging economy, every resort employee must understand the new world of service. Apologizing for service failures just isn't enough. To exceed customer expectations in an era when money is tight and customers have an abundance of recreational opportunities, you need to rise above and beyond the status quo. Your high visibility as an instructor gives you an ideal position to lead the way in the new era of customer service. ³²

Dr. Michael Patmas decided decades ago that he'd have to find some way to feed his skiing jones and while living life in style. His work as a medical doctor and hospital administrator helps fund his addiction.