

Perfecting the customer experience: What corporate America can learn from a little Hawaiian seafood restaurant

My wife and I recently spent a wonderful week in Hawaii on the Island of Maui. While we were there we went to a seafood restaurant on the beach that was, perhaps, the highlight of our trip. The food was very good, but expensive (even by Maui's standards). However, I would suggest that this establishment didn't necessarily see itself in the food business, but rather in the business of creating a superior customer experience.

While taking pleasure in one of the most enjoyable meals of my life (we could see whales from our table), I wondered if there were lessons from this business that could be applied to businesses of all types and sizes. As usual, I noted a few:

- 1) *Ensure customer-facing people can address any task* – The restaurant was organized into sections (think of them as sales territories) of roughly eight tables each. Each section had a working captain and a crew of approximately three. Everybody did everything. I observed the same person who filled my water glass later take the order of the table next to ours. The obvious advantage to this approach is that we didn't get frustrated trying to find someone who could help us. There was always someone available to help us when we needed something because we weren't waiting for our only server to be done helping another table. We never heard "sorry, I'll have to find your server".
- 2) *Anticipate customer requests* – The service crew never waited until we needed something, they took a very proactive approach. In fact, I don't think we ever had to ask for anything during the entire meal. When my iced tea glass was less than half-full, a crew member would come by with a fresh one and ask if he could replace the one I was drinking. When another crew member brought the check, he asked me for our valet parking claim check so that our car would be ready by the time we left the building (which it was).
- 3) *Hire high quality people* – Everyone with whom we interacted was someone the restaurant was proud to have representing them. They were all well-mannered, well-groomed, highly competent and spoke our language. We had confidence that whatever we asked would be completed with courtesy and diligence. On average, this restaurant probably had a higher payroll than others, but the extra expense was more than justified.

The end result was that we enjoyed ourselves immensely and the restaurant was able to turn its tables much more quickly than others as we were in and out in about an hour (though we never once felt rushed and were welcome to stay as long as we wanted).

Like many industries, the seafood restaurant business in Hawaii is very competitive. Differentiating the food itself is extremely difficult as many restaurants have top-notch chefs and access to very fresh seafood. This business has chosen to focus its efforts on differentiating its customer experience and it has clearly paid off. These same lessons can be applied to almost any business that services customers, especially those in marketplaces with limited opportunity for product differentiation. If our experience eating at a little seafood restaurant in Maui is any indication, customers will come back again and again.

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