

Soft Skills At Work: Small gestures can go a long way toward success

By Marcia Hall, For The Capital
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Ten years ago, I went to King's Cleaners in Pasadena and was warmly greeted by owner Lisa King.

My husband and I were pleased with her service and started going there regularly.

One day, early on, I walked in and was surprised to see our cleaning hanging on the rack. I wondered how she knew my name.

It turned out she associates cars with customers and "makes a memory," as Lisa told me. When she recognizes a vehicle, Lisa retrieves the cleaning so there is rarely any waiting time.

During the years when the U.S. state quarters were released, Lisa would look through her cashier drawer to find a state I wanted. In addition, she has a bowl of Tootsie Pops sitting on her counter to the delight of children and adults alike.

I believe Lisa delivers exceptional service through these small gestures. She has created an environment that is fun and friendly, and interestingly, the word "customer" is not in her vocabulary.

"I don't think of them as 'customers,' " Lisa said. "I don't even like to use that term. I think of them as if they're my family. This is a business, but I really enjoy knowing them."

It is not unusual for her clientele to fail to notice that a button has been replaced or a loose seam repaired - at no charge.

When asked about this, Lisa reiterated, "They are my family."

Practicing a similar philosophy is Barry Gossett of Edgewater, who is CEO of Acton Mobile Industries, a nationwide company providing temporary space for mobile offices, construction trailers and custom modular buildings. He told me his viewpoints about exceptional service.

"It's about accommodating customer needs," Barry said. "First, listening to them so we can understand what they want and then tailoring services and goods to what they need."

Once customer requirements are known, Acton Mobile employees follow a series of steps to make certain they exceed expectations.

"We call beforehand, make sure the units are delivered on time, and call afterwards," Barry said. "Then we call two weeks later to see if we or they forgot anything."

Barry talked about flexibility being one of their important strengths. Acton Mobile rents multiple units to the same company, but they may not be on the same purchase order. One of these customers mentioned that a single invoice for all rented units would be easier.

"We can arrange our system to give him a total of four units," Barry said. "Instead of four invoices for \$500 each, we'll send one invoice for \$2,000. But if four invoices are needed to match with purchase orders, we can change back and forth."

According to Barry, a problem with rental units can be equipment failure, prompting customers to call for assistance. But as in any industry, how these calls are handled either creates or kills an exceptional customer experience.

"We train people (employees) to be very nice," Barry said. "If the air conditioner doesn't work, the customer is asked to check the breaker. Eighty percent of the time the breaker is tripped. It may have been left on over night or the filter wasn't changed. Customers are walked through the list of instructions by the unit.

"If customers get pushy, we explain things to them. You don't rub it in if they are at fault. You say, 'We're here to help.' "

To continually provide exceptional service, the hiring process is paramount.

"I look for employees who are customer-oriented, where the ego doesn't exceed the size of their hat," he said.

Barry wants workers who get along with people, are entrepreneurial, risk-takers, not afraid to make mistakes and have a can-do attitude. He often backgrounds them to learn if they are team players, such as being involved in sports, church or

community projects. If they enjoy those activities, that attitude is transferable to the workplace, he said.

"Our employees answer the phones during work hours and customers hear the smile over the phone," Barry said.

Whether it is on the phone or in person, the "smile" to which Barry referred is one of the many attributes needed to create exceptional service. When these qualities are missing, customers may go elsewhere.

Lisa told me a lot of businesspeople say they don't have enough customers particularly during these hard economic times.

"Why not?" she said. "You need to take care of regular customers all the time."

Clearly, providing the type of service that Lisa and Barry embody is the key to lasting customer satisfaction.

CONNECT! Coalition

CONNECT! will host the Workplace Skills Boot Camp, a half-day program for high school juniors and seniors, on April 17 at Anne Arundel Community College. Students will learn what employers expect and how to thrive on the job. Details about the program will be available later this month.

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