

An Exceptional Hotel Experience

Catching the Elusive Customer Service Phenomena

By Sandra Ford Walston

An exceptional hotel experience occurred in Portland on my national book tour that included a 13-city month long jaunt. After a two day stay, I didn't want to leave! I received "knock your socks off" customer service that left me stunned in wonderment. Now that's a statement to frame on the hotel's wall. Grab that guest and interrogate them! The general manager at the hotel didn't have to interview me; I was compelled to share in a two page letter why I valued my stay. That's the secret you're going to learn (and more) in this article.

As a leadership consultant (speaker, international author of *COURAGE*, corporate trainer, and Courage Coach), I travel extensively. The memory of great customer service (even in some preferred hotels) vanished a long time ago. This prompted me to stop conducting customer service training. Why? Customer service was an oxymoron. I rarely encountered it in any industry!

Catching the Elusive Customer Service Phenomena

The Portland hotel experiences roused me to stop, scratch my head, and ponder "why." Why was this hotel exceptional? Why was the effect of exceptional customer service elusive and difficult to catch? Could the other hotels on my book tour have implemented the Portland hotel's services without adding costs? What specifically was missing from the other hotels?

My publicist at Random House coordinated and organized all the travel arrangements for my book tour. They generously book their authors at the "best" hotels in each city. This special excursion may sound glamorous, but it is hard work and at times downright trying, such as riding in an escort's car that you do not know for miles across state lines. Escorts are provided to shuttle you around town to autograph books in the outlying city area bookstores. Then they drop you off at your hotel for a brief rest only to turn around and pick you up in the evening to deliver you to your "talk and signing." I usually arrived back at the hotel around 10:30 pm (and yes, the doggies were barking loudly).

While many authors do not enjoy book tours because they are grueling, I was prepared to make this once in a lifetime event memorable. During one of the four weeks, in four days I covered five cities in three states, and I stayed in three hotels. Quick check in and out of hotels becomes blurred, unless you have a stunned customer service incident. Then, you're jolted and wonder, "What just happened?"

As I shared the Portland hotel story with friends and colleagues (that's what you do when you've been taken aback by a noteworthy phenomenon), I started to gather my thoughts to distinguish the elements. One speaker colleague was so shocked to hear my atypical hotel account he responded with this: "At most hotels, the ordinary becomes the special, like a smile or asking if anything else can be done to make the stay pleasurable."

"All Show and No Dough"

The best way I can describe the Portland visit has to do with the game of golf and a phrase called "drive for show, putt for dough." When a golfer in the foursome gains attention for a very long and impressive drive from the tee box that everyone watches, the fellow competitors may shake their heads in awe at the distance and begin to feel that they don't have a chance to win that hole (much less the game). But, if the long hitter ends up blowing it on the short game and three putts, the golf phrase "all show and no dough" starts to surface. They are "all show" on the tee box, but "no dough" at the end. In other words, a great shot that ends with bad results; ultimately, when the game's over, they lose the bet.

The easiest way to highlight this golf saying is to contrast the Portland hotel experience against the equally impressive Louisville hotel. When my escort dropped me off with my carry-on luggage, she proudly shared with me that this particular hotel was an old and grand Kentucky hotel, and the restaurant had won the highly acclaimed James Beard Award. I excitedly entered the established hotel's imposing lobby (I live in Denver, so the lobby reminded me of the Brown Palace). High-vaulted ceiling, beautifully decorated furniture, large vases with fresh flowers, and polished floors uncovered that the lobby was potentially all "show." They had my attention. Stepping up to the registration counter, the "no dough" started to emerge. The receptionist never smiled at me, much less looked me in the eye and said, "Hello" or "Welcome." She was too busy reviewing her paper work or perhaps she had been given additional responsibilities without the proper support. Oh well, I

shook my head and tread wearily to my room to dress for dinner. I was hungry. I enjoy fine dining and I greatly appreciate gourmet food. The “no dough” disappointment continued at the restaurant. While the wait staff was well-trained, the food was so-so.

In summary, for you non-golfers, after the “Wow, look at this beautiful lobby,” the lobby magic subsides and the disappointment starts as you enter your room, such as no counter space for make-up (except the top of the toilet lid), no robe in the room (when I called for a robe I received, “We don’t normally supply them,” and begrudgingly, they delivered one), and the next morning, no cable to watch the tennis tournament (I walked to the “other” hotel for that service).

Customer Service that Wins the “Dough”

What makes for special touches that we call customer service? The last leg of my book tour included four days of driving with escorts to Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky, and Cincinnati and Dayton, Ohio. During that phase, I had been assessing why I lingered in the Portland hotel fulfillment. The general manager and his staff must know how much I appreciated their special touches.

What are the variables, both tangible and intangible, that distinguishes a “dough winning” hotel from an “all show” hotel? Discerning the dynamics was not easy because some of the occurrences were indescribable feelings; therefore, difficult to pinpoint and express. Below you will find the tangible and intangible features of the Portland hotel’s unified, conscious, and unusually great customer service.

Tangible Aspects:

- Upon entering my room in the late afternoon (after three cities in two days), a bottle of chilled sparkling water and an apple were placed in eye view on the coffee table (I was thirsty and hungry since I do not eat airport or airplane food).
- Soft jazz music was playing as if they were waiting for me to come home.
- The modern suite had a “true vanity” area for spreading generously my make-up and toiletries (the rooms in the Kentucky hotel were also recently remodeled, but not conveniently).
- A magnifying mirror was hung for the baby boomer population who do not want to admit their eyes are changing.

- Lovely floral arrangements were spotted throughout the hotel.
- A fresh and inviting robe was provided and draped on the bed (carry-on luggage does not allow extra space to pack a robe). What if there was a fire?
- A great restaurant recently awarded the coveted James Beard Award with compatible/sophisticated wait training to match the superb cuisine.
- A copy of my book was with the concierge. While checking in, I was immediately asked if I would autograph it for the lending library. Now that's impressive!
- A well-done daily newsletter (great marketing idea) was delivered to each room listing the daily restaurant menu enticing me to dine in (I had no regrets that I never ventured out), brief book review from the lending library, quote for the day, and adjoining activities.
- Employees *attempted* to call me by my name, Ms. Walston. Everyone likes to hear their name. Unfortunately, 99% of people say "Sandra Ford Walston" incorrectly.
- A welcome note from the general manager with his signature was on the coffee table.
- A personally typed letter from Tom, Carol and Monica, the concierge staff, was also on the coffee table (in case they didn't catch me when I checked in) requesting I stop by their desk to autograph *COURAGE*.

Intangible Aspects:

- The entire hotel *felt* clean and organized. This sentiment makes my heart sing!
- The environment felt like a leader or the mission statement was etched invisibly in the walls: "Our mission is to provide memorable customer service." The intent was not perfunctory in nature—the staff was "walking the talk."
- The staff was committed to quintessential customer service. They knew it was the "little" things that created the memories.
- There was a sense that customer service training had taken place and people were being held accountable (now there's a concept)!
- It seemed the customer service training continued to be refined rather than a one time shot.

- The “right” people had been hired (not just warm bodies). According to Jim Collins’ book *Good to Great*, you have to have the right people on the bus, then the problem of how to manage and motivate them basically goes away, and if you have the wrong people on the bus, it does not matter whether or not you discover the right direction; you won’t have a very good company with these people.

SIDEBAR

6 Hospitality Tips to Add Dough

Whether you work in a preferred hotel such as the Four Seasons or the Ritz Carlton, or the Holiday Inn, knock your socks off customer service can be accomplished in any hotel. Here are six tips that create memories:

1. Pronounce the person’s name correctly even if you have to ask how to say it. I have been called Sarah, Sondra, Sandy, Susan, and Debra. What’s so hard about Sandra you ask? You tell me, I remain totally miffed. Now my last name, Walston (Walston), is a different story. I am called Watson, Walstron, Wolfson, Wilson, and Goldberg. At my talk and book signing in Denver at the infamous Tattered Cover Book Store, more than 100 people attended this special evening. The introducer won the price when she said, “Please welcome, Sarah Paulson!”
2. If you are a wait person, truly care if the food is properly prepared to the guest’s liking. The wait people at the award-winning Portland and Louisville restaurants cared, but the food (even though it was two different cuisines) preparation was not memorable in Kentucky. How do you differentiate this? The Portland restaurant’s cooking was “prepared with love” (meaning pride in the balance of spices and fresh herbs, and the cooking time was impeccable). To me, a “good cook” may not be gourmet, but they have an innate knack at not over or under cooking the food.
3. Fresh flowers are great, a piano player in the hotel bar area (or at Nordstrom’s) is special, but not as impressive when a clerk takes just a little extra time (that he/she did not have to take) to make sure you feel sincerely greeted. Great service happens between two people, not between a person and a computer screen.

4. No matter what other demands are upon you, be fully present when you speak to the hotel guest. Sometimes I feel like I am bothering the receptionist or perhaps I am invisible, as they talk to another staff member. When I was a vice president of private banking in West Los Angeles, I had stamped on the staffs' pay stubs "Brought to you by the customer." Remember: without the guest you don't have a job!
5. Always say "thank you," and if appropriate, write a thank-you note. A thank-you note is a meager 2-3 sentences in your handwriting. This is a lost art that prompted me to write an article called "Make a Declaration—Send a Thank-You Note." The two-page letter I wrote to the Portland general manager was a heart-felt thank-you. I hope he shared the letter with his staff so they would know they were catching the elusive customer service phenomena.
6. Many times, it's not *what* you give someone, but *how* you give it. When the soft music is playing upon entering your room or an evening lamp is on, my "mood" shifts. I feel that someone took time to think about my journey. As a national speaker, I work closely with corporations, meeting planners, and associations. Only one time, in all my years as a business consultant or Courage Expert™, did a coordinator purchase a welcoming bowl of fruit that was waiting for me in my hotel room. I have never, and I mean never, forgotten that gracious and thoughtful gesture. Thank you, Diane!

In closing, graciousness is the overall intangible I am writing about. Princess Diana portrayed the essence of civility. She had a captivating and alluring presence that is missed today. While people were in awe of her, this appealing quality is in all people. I certainly know when I feel someone is being gracious to me because I feel touched by their aura. This wonderment is not about manners, such as receiving the rare thank-you note I hold dearly, or even a thoughtful "you're appreciated" fruit bowl, nor is it about decorum or gratitude. It's more intangible. There is a feeling of respect that reaches out and lingers in the gesture. Hence, this elusive gift nurtures the spirit.

How are you offering this refined customer service? Are your guests eager to say, “I don’t want to leave!?” Please email your comments. Thank you.

About the Author:

Sandra Ford Walston, known as The Courage Expert and innovator of StuckThinking™, is a learning consultant, corporate trainer and courage coach. Sandra’s expertise allows her to focus on the tricks and traps of the human condition through recognizing and interpreting courage behaviors, courageous leadership and individual personality and leadership styles. As such, she is a sought-after international speaker for companies and institutions seeking conscious change through personnel development.

Published in magazines such as *Chief Learning Officer*, *Training & Development*, *HR Matters*, *Malaysia*, and *Strategic Finance*, she also provides skills-based programs for some of the most respected public and private blue-chip businesses and organizations in the world such as IBM, Caterpillar, Inc., Institute of Internal Auditors, Hensel Phelps, Wide Open West, Agrium, Inc., Virginia Commonwealth University, Procter and Gamble, and Institute of Management Accountants.

The internationally published author of bestseller *COURAGE* and an honored author selected for Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, Sandra facilitates individuals and groups to discover the power and inspiration of their everyday courage.



STUCK 12 Steps Up the Leadership Ladder, Sandra’s follow-up book to *COURAGE*, is directed at any woman, regardless of title or credentials, who wishes to grow professionally by introducing courage actions at work. Her third book, *FACE IT! 12 Obstacles that Hold You Back on the Job* confirms that what holds you back on the job is the same as what hinders achievement—the reluctance to face and live a courageous life.

Sandra is qualified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, is a certified Enneagram teacher, and an instructor at the University of Denver. She can be reached at www.sandrawalston.com where she posts a courage blog and courage newsletter.

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