

## Consistency – the Key to Success

By Rob Rush, CEO, LRA Worldwide



OK, let's get down to the bottom of this. Please stand up and raise your hand if you've been "WOW-ed" lately. At the supermarket, dry cleaner, health club or hotel. Where have you had your socks knocked off...and then cleaned, pressed, folded and put away?

How about a truly awful experience? Give me a shout out if you've been mistreated, ignored or taken for granted. Where have you had an experience that brought you from a simmer, to a slow boil...and then to a frothing, steaming, spewing cauldron of frustration?

What's that you say? You have both types of experience on a regular basis, often from the same company? Well, which one makes a greater impact and sticks with you longer, the gauzy sunshine or the raging volcano?

I think we all know the answer to that one. The sour taste of a poor experience is far more likely to overpower the sweetness of a "WOW"...and linger. Yet many companies still try to haphazardly swing for the fences, both in message and delivery, ignoring the negative impact of the whiff in exchange for the rare but intoxicating rush of the home run.

In keeping with the baseball analogy, it might help to illustrate my point by introducing you to the baseball statistic of Slugging Percentage, which measures how far a player makes it around the bases each at-bat. Let's say Player A bats four times in a game, and hits a home run to go with three strikeouts; Player B bats four times in the same game and notches four singles. Both players have an identical slugging percentage of 1.000, indicating that on average they totaled one base per at bat. In reality? Player A brought his team closer to the end of an inning three times in the game, while Player B kept the inning going, each time.

And in baseball – like in business – you can stay at bat forever if you keep hitting singles. However, you will quickly find yourself playing defense if you focus all of your attention on one big hit at the expense of three feeble outs. And the hospitality industry is no exception. You aren't going to keep your doors open by WOW-ing every fourth guest and whiffing with the other three. The recipient of the WOW may become a loyal guest, but certainly won't occupy every room in the joint. Delivering consistently to all four guests? That keeps your RevPAR climbing and the metaphorical inning alive.

I read a recent article in the Wall Street Journal ("[Ailing Sheraton Shoots for a Room Upgrade](#)", 3/25/08) that traced Sheraton's growing recognition of this reality. The article cited the disconnect between the "palatial Sheraton Addis Ababa [and] the cinderblock Sheraton Newton." Observed Hoyt H. Harper III, the SVP in charge of the Sheraton brand at Starwood Hotels & Resorts: "the gap between our good Sheraton hotels and our underperforming hotels...was quite alarming."

As was, I'm sure, the \$12 gap in RevPAR between Sheraton and Marriott in the 4th Quarter of 2007.

So what are the keys to consistency? How do you best set up your organization to keep the customer in his/her comfort zone with metronomic regularity?

I could lay out some consultant-speak, some frameworks and models for operational consistency and scalability, perhaps some Six Sigma Black Belt-derived words of wisdom. And they would be helpful.

(Dreadfully dry and boring for the purposes of this article. But helpful.)

But all you really need to do is remember your last diet or exercise regimen or New Year's resolution. There's probably a common thread throughout the successful efforts and the opposite commonality within those that went down in flames. That thread is best illustrated by the conversation I had with a trainer the last time I embarked on a training regimen.

"What exercises," I asked innocently, "are the best for me?"

He replied after some deep thought. "The best exercises for you are whichever ones you are actually going to do."

Hmph.

So apparently I'm not going to transform myself into a rough, buff triathlon-running machine by training like Jack LaLanne one day and Jack Daniels the next. The key is figuring out what training like Rob Rush looks and feels like and doing that day in, day out.

(Or at least five times a week. Sometimes less if I'm traveling. But you know what I mean...)

The same lessons apply to you and your customer or guest experience. Ask yourself the same question that I asked my trainer - "what is the best experience for me to deliver." Make sure the answer is something that you are going to deliver, day in and day out.

Depending on your service sector, your clientele, average room rate or any number of other factors, your answer may very well be that the every day "WOW" is expected and what you are poised to deliver. Or it may just be a warm bed and a clean bathroom. Either way, you need to be prepared to create the operational and cultural infrastructure to connect on either promise consistently.

By no means is this article meant to downplay the impact of the WOW. In terms of creating a truly loyal, engaged guest, there is no substitute for the unexpected experience or gesture that saves the day or makes the moment. But the long-term strategy of providing a WOW experience is only effective if the investment, commitment and culture is in place to do it consistently. Though it sounds oxymoronic (or maybe just moronic!), in these instances, the WOW must become routine. Not for the guest receiving that special moment, but for the employees who are making it happen. If not, you're right back to being the Dave Kingman of hospitality.

(Google him. Go ahead. Lots of homers. Waaaaaaaay more strikeouts.)

So what's the best experience for your guests? The one that you can deliver with consistency.

And if you misfire a few times, it isn't the end of the world. Just make sure you're a bit more consistent than your favorite baseball player. Even the best in the game make an out seven times out of 10. And that might be the standard-bearer for consistency in their ballpark.

Just not in yours.

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