

## Customer Experience: If at First Impression You Don't Succeed...You Better Try Again

By Rob Rush, CEO, LRA Worldwide



To begin with, please excuse my mangling of the time-honored maxim “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again” in the headline. I fear I have taken what once were innocent words of encouragement to 19th-Century schoolchildren and turned them into some vague threat.

The potential menace in my message, however, pales in comparison to that posed by disregarding it. Ignore the first “touch” you have with your customers at your own peril.

As those who have regularly read my articles know, my roots (and those of my business) are firmly in the hospitality industry. Of late, those roots have extended to other sectors where the concept of “customer experience” has proven intriguing. The combination of my hospitality background and the aforementioned growth into additional industry sectors inevitably leads to one of two questions:

*“Gee Mr. Rush, we’re the foremost widget manufacturer in Peoria. Can you please draw upon your wealth of experience in the hospitality industry to bestow upon us the Holy Grail of customer*

*experience?”*

Or

*“Rush, I could care less about hospitality – I’m the widget king of Sioux Falls. Can you impart some customer experience wisdom upon me...and I’m pretty sure it has nothing to do with the hospitality industry.”*

In the past, I probably would have answered both questions the same way, demurring that every industry is different, every company within that industry unique. Positing that each and every customer experience is worthy of identifying its own branded touch points of emphasis and differentiation.

And I would have been right. Sort of. While there is no magic silver bullet for how to provide the optimal customer experience, either within a single industry or across industries, there is a fairly universal theme that seems to recur from client to client.

The first human “touch” sets the tone. Period.

Certainly, there is room to recover if the first customer interaction involves a brusque (or nonexistent) greeting or a spilled cup of coffee. And a flawless interlude by no means guarantees that the overall experience won’t degrade over the course of several subsequent flawed interactions. It’s just that there is an overwhelming systemic correlation between those who have rated the quality of their first in-person touch as “top box” with those who rated their overall experience extremely favorably. A positive, engaging first impression provided by your front line of human contact is indeed the universal currency of great customer experiences.

- Front Desk Clerk
- Bag Drop Boy
- Ticket Seller
- Guy Who Spritzes the Produce
- Widget Sales Rep

Whatever the title and actual job duty of that person within your organization, they have a grossly disproportionate influence on how your customers feel about your business, whether you are a hotel, golf course, ski mountain, supermarket or widget manufacturer. And this dynamic has revealed itself, time and again, across industry. The first touch may not ultimately determine the outcome of the experience, but it has a good chance of setting you up for success or failure.

The ramifications of this universality are fairly significant, and have the potential to truly impact how some companies – and industries – do business.

A few years ago, we began working with a prominent golf course management company with a high-end, high-price point portfolio. The conventional wisdom at the time was to invest a whole bunch of cash in a name course architect, beautiful clubhouse and maintenance, so as to keep the fairways green and the greens even greener. The rest, industry practice held, would take care of itself. As the golf course building boom slowed and it became clear that supply would far outstrip demand in the near future, our client turned to us and asked: “Hmm. Is there anything more to this?”

When we set about delving a bit deeper into the overall experience, we found that, indeed, it was important to have a course designed by Nicklaus, a luxurious clubhouse and meticulous grounds. But those were the expectations at that price point, the cost of entry. So what consistently set the lukewarm golfing experience apart from white hot?

The kid at the bag drop. The position on the course where they universally stationed a 19-year old wannabe college golfer with a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes.

Why the importance? This was the first human touch point at the course, where you pulled up in your car, unloaded your bags and hoped for a semblance of recognition, welcome, hospitality or some other sign that you were a VERY IMPORTANT PERSON. Needless to say, this revelation shifted our client’s thinking as to the type of person needed as the de facto face of the golf course. The college kid with the aversion to eye contact was excommunicated to collect range balls and the job description at the bag drop was reworked to describe someone with a bit more savoir faire in the art of extending hospitality.

Why take the risk of a lukewarm experience, you may ask, if one can circumvent this immediate experiential referendum by replacing the first human touch with dependable, predictable, programmable technology? This way the customer can ease into the experience and make his or her judgment based on the more seasoned hospitality pros working in other areas of the operation. Throw out an automatic check-in machine or ticketing kiosk, and the pressure is off, right?

Not quite. You’ve just displaced that first moment of truth from a truly predictable point of contact to one that may be of the customer’s own making. In the customer’s mind, the experience has to begin somewhere; as we’ve found, quite often it is at the first face-to-face interaction. If you replace the humanity with a machine, your guest will just seek the human touch elsewhere and start the experience meter at that point. From an operator’s point of view, it is far better to recognize the front line of the customer experience battle than to leave yourself open to a sneak attack. That guest just used our automatic check-in monitor and is now going to Grumpy Gus the maintenance guy for directions to the elevator! Nooooooooooooo!

The bottom line? Regardless of whether you are running a Westin or a widget plant, you are going to provide your customer with an experience. For better or for worse, that experience is going to be heavily influenced by the first human touch. With apologies to Indiana Jones and the Warren Commission, it is the closest thing we have to the Holy Grail or magic bullet of customer experience.

So if you must engage (and you must!), you better do so on your terms and put some thought, time, energy and potentially money into the delivery of that first moment of truth. Do not leave it to Chance...or Jacob...or Tyler...or whomever else you’ve sent down to the bag drop.

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