

## The Bygone Era of “If You Build it, They Will Come”

By Rob Rush, President and CEO, LRA Worldwide



Mr. Rob Rush

In my business dealings, I've had the good fortune to work with companies both inside and out of the hotel business. To some outside of the industry, the “heads in beds” business still carries an inherent air of glamour, sophistication and service, reminiscent of the golden age of travel. Invoke the wisdom of “lessons learned in the hospitality industry” to folks outside of the hospitality sector and eyes widen and heads nod knowingly, eager to soak up the mystical powers of a turned-down bed and neatly-folded toilet paper wedge.

Indeed, a great deal of this “reverence” is deserved, given the migration of now-standard service expectations that were borne from the hospitality industry. But just as other industries have followed our leadership in the areas of customer service and experience, so are they learning some of the hard lessons that we have digested over the years as well. Most prominent and universal of those, of course, is the “Build it and They Will Come” phenomenon.

No, we are not referring to the fictional effort to lure spectral ballplayers to a baseball diamond carved out of a cornfield, but of the real-life effort to lure guests/fans/golfers/customers to the latest and greatest hotel/stadium/golf course/grocery store. The realization that struck the hospitality years ago – that simply building a state-of-the-art hotel without the top-rate service experience to support it is not a sustainable business model – is slowly but surely creeping into other sectors as well.

Take sports, for example. For many years, the prevailing wisdom in both spectator and participatory sports was “throw open the doors” and the fans or enthusiasts will flock, because...well, because that's what fans and enthusiasts do. To hold their attention, simply provide a shiny new toy – a lush golf course, a faster ski lift, a better stadium. So why are spectator sports attendance figures flat, golf courses closing or going into receivership daily and ski areas hanging on by a thread only because of the snowboarding boom? Because these entities are only figuring out now what the hospitality industry figured out long ago. “Build it and they will come” is for the movies. Without a service and experience promise (and delivery) to support that new facility, what exactly does the sports industry have to offer. Snow. Grass. Chairs. Hmmm, I don't have to look too far to find any of those things.

While the learning curve has been somewhat steep, there are definite signs that the “throw open the gates” old school has been replaced by management teams that “get it.” An article in the November 15<sup>th</sup> issue of *Sports Illustrated* reported on the troubles of the golf industry, due predominantly to the glut of course building that occurred in anticipation of the “golf boom” that...didn't quite develop as planned. While most of the story was dedicated to gloom and doom statistics, there were a few interviewed who clearly could see the light at the end of the tunnel – and knew how to get there. Jim Dewling, the President of Michigan-based course owner/manager Total Golf, Inc., expressed a sentiment that has been the prevailing wisdom in the hotel industry – where customers make a decision with their wallets each individual time they make a reservation – for quite some time.

“You get one shot at the public,” says Dewling, “and you can't fool them. They vote with their dollars. You have to exceed their expectations to get them back.” (*Sports Illustrated*, November 15, 2004, Swift, 88)

Likewise, you can't throw a baseball over your shoulder these days without hitting a franchise in the spectator sports world that doesn't now refer to its “fans” as “guests.” And while that might be the trendy nomenclature of the moment, there are actually quite a few teams that follow through on the designation. At the forefront of this movement is the NBA's “gold-standard” for fan experience, the Seattle SuperSonics. Their hot start to the current season notwithstanding, this is a franchise that has had ample opportunity to realize that you can't always control the product on the court. (That was a diplomatic way of saying that, from time to time, they have stunk!) So what do you do in the lodging industry if the thread count on your sheets is lower than your competition...and everyone knows it? That's right – seduce them with service.

“We know [that as business managers] we can't change the team's success on the court,” explains Pete

Winemiller, the Sonics' Head of Guest Relations and the resident NBA guru on customer service. "But we can control the culture and delivery of first-class service in the arena. As our emphasis on guest relations progresses, our 'guest care' culture has evolved." ([www.creatingcustomerevangelists.com](http://www.creatingcustomerevangelists.com))

There it was, twice in once sentence. You couldn't miss it – the Sonics fan as "guest." And the Sonics treat "guest problem resolution" as seriously as any Marriott or Westin, making it a key component of employee recognition and compensation.

The "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" examples aren't limited solely to the sports industry. Think of one of the more iconic guest service touches in the hotel industry. Think warm. Think gooey. Think chocolate chips. That's right, the Doubletree Hotels Chocolate Chip Cookie. The message Doubletree has sent over the years is clear – when you stay at Doubletree, you're at home...and what could make you feel more at home than a freshly-baked treat?

Apparently, this concept has been S-T-R-E-T-C-H-E-D to the max across a number of industries. A colleague of mine recently took his family to a wedding in Milwaukee, WI, and the travel experience appeared to be scripted by Mrs. Fields. The flight on Midwest Airlines featured – you guessed it – freshly baked chocolate chip cookies! The trip to the Thrifty car rental counter – more warm cookies! His two-year old son's sugar high has just worn off, but the notion of hospitality in the form of a chocolate chip cookie will remain.

Lest you think the hospitality information superhighway has been a one-way street, think again. It would be dangerous for our industry to adopt a "know-it-all" attitude in the area of guest service and experience, as a number of trends and concepts should trickle back to housekeeping, front desk, and the concierge.

The most notable of these trends has been detailed ad nauseum in business journals, its torchbearers exalted for the wisdom and foresight of their leadership. And what revolutionary concept have they championed to receive such accolades? These titans of industry have embraced the notion of "employee as owner," which, on the surface, seems almost trite. In companies where that concept has truly taken hold, however, the rewards have been increased market share and a public position as the market leader. In the business world, the literal equivalent of fame and fortune.

Jack Welch at General Electric. Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines. Both are household names for anyone who has ever glanced at a *Wall Street Journal* or *Business Week*. And they are the two most recognizable champions of empowering employees to the point where each has the training, skill, autonomy and motivation to act as if they own the enterprise. The idea, in the words of the Sonics' Winemiller, that "front-line employees significantly affect the company's bottom line."

This has not always been easily accomplished in the hospitality industry, where the transitory nature of the workforce, not to mention upper management, has never lent itself to an "ownership" culture. That may be changing, however. My folks – who are more likely to complain than exalt - recently took a trip to Chicago, where they stayed at a new hotel, currently a brand of one property with very real designs on expansion. The experience was nothing short of rapturous, and not just because of the complimentary martinis at Happy Hour. They both described a property where employees who *really cared* executed every detail of the stay.

My wide-eyed mother gushed, "It was if they all owned the place."

I'll make a toast to that. But not with champagne. How about a chocolate chip cookie?

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