

*Senior Living -- News of Interest*

*(This article is directed to Hotels – yet has a good deal of applicability to Senior Living (nd))*

## Beyond “Outrageous,” and “Legendary” Customer Service Training: Creating “Ordinary Excellence, Daily!”

*By Doug Kennedy , June 2006*

It's time for a new approach to hospitality and customer service training in the lodging industry. It's true that the industry has been innovative in other areas in the last 15 years; witness the re-invention of our “product” many times over, as we have seen the standard hotel room morph itself into a plethora of versions of the four walls and a bed” that comprised our un-exciting inventory in 1990. Now, most destinations feature hotels ranging from boutique to bare-bones-but-clean, from ultra-luxury to micro-economy, and including “suite” hotels ranging from a guestroom with a couch to a fully-furnished, residential-style suite.

Similarly, we as industry have also been innovative in re-engineering complex distribution channels, especially of late when “brand.com” has made a remarkable turn-about in its game of tug-of-war with its online travel agency vendor/partners. Yet when it comes to hospitality and customer service training, we as an industry to a large extent continue to re-circulate the same old-hat customer service training content.

How many times have we all sat in workshops or read articles about “Moments of Truth,” a phrase originally coined by Jan Carlson, CEO of SAS Airlines, who authored a great book of the same name in 1987. How many training programs have we completed that were based on catchy phrases like “Legendary,” or “Outrageous?” When I first read author Ken Blanchard's great writings on Legendary service in the late 1990's, and read T. Scott Gross' wonderful book titled “Positively Outrageous Service” when it came out in 1994, I have to admit it was all quite inspiring. (I've also enjoyed those authors' excellent, more contemporary works too.) Stories about the heroic undertakings of frontline staff members to assist customers in extraordinary



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ways are always fascinating.

Yet often all that lies beneath the lodging industry's many versions of similarly-named service training is content we've all heard before, such as: "Use the guest names three times," "Smile and have eye contact," or "An upset guest will tell 9 to 10 others," a statistic I first heard reported by the TARP Reports in 1986.

While such programs can be motivating, participants often get nothing more than a flyer with a cute acronym about communications techniques and "5 steps to handling a guest complaint." They then return to the real-world, where guest loyalty is either won or lost every shift, every hour, whether on the phone or in person. If you are looking for a more refreshing and practical approach to customer service training, consider creating Ordinary Excellence, Daily!

In short, creating Ordinary Excellence, Daily! means giving guests what they really want, which is more than forced smiles, scripted welcome greetings and to hear their name over-used robotically when their room service tray arrives.

Even though sincere smiles and authentic greetings are nice, if you waste 10 minutes of time fumbling through the PMS system or with a broken card-key machine, a smile won't increase the guest's satisfaction. Likewise, four-step complaint-handling techniques won't "fix" the guest in an unkempt room, or the guest who moved the bed to find enough outlets for her cell phone chargers.

So the first two components of Ordinary Excellence, Daily! are providing a quality physical product that meets expectations or exceeds, and maintaining the technology/systems that allow us to deliver the physical product in a timely and efficient manner.

The good news is that there's a growing number of hotels that excelling in achieving these first two components. Thanks in part to higher brand-standards which have been more consistently applied, (and to brands willing to de-flag franchisee's who don't maintain these standards), the traveling public sleeps in a cleaner, more finely appointed, and safer guest



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room than ever before.

The even better news is many top leaders in the hospitality industry today still believe the pursuit of hospitality is worthwhile. They already aspire to create Ordinary Excellence, Daily, for their guests, although they probably don't call it such. I for one think our industry has steadily raised the bar on "service" and that the overall guest experience has improved significantly in the past 15 years.

I can also tell you that for the 80+ nights I spent on the road last year, I had a lot fewer outrageously bad experiences than I used to in the late 1980's and early 1990's, at least when it comes to the physical product/cleanliness and service/systems efficiency.

While that's all good news, the bad news is that too few hotels have achieved the third component for creating Ordinary Excellence, Daily, which is a corporate culture rooted in hospitality. It is this component that will turn customers into repeat guests and word-of-mouth advertisers, just like "outrageous" and "legendary" training, but is more applicable to every interaction with every customer, every day.

To create such a corporate culture of hospitality, your team must truly understand hospitality at its core. The dictionary tells us that that hospitality means:

"Treating guests with warmth and generosity."

To help your team achieve this paradoxically simple yet elusive missing component of most hotel company cultures, start by helping them understand that hospitality is more than a communication technique or 5-step process; rather it is an operating philosophy for daily living.

Ask your team to commit, along with you personally, to providing an individualized gesture of authentic hospitality for every customer encountered, whether a guest, a travel agent, a third party, or an "internal customer." Ask them to join your commitment to making sure that regardless of who is standing across the front desk or talking on the other end of your telephone line, an authentic gesture of warmth and generosity



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will always be extended.

The Ordinary Excellence, Daily! philosophy is easy to implement and everyone has dozens of chances to utilize it every day. Whether offering a wake-up call during a late-night check-in, volunteering driving directions at check-out, pausing for a heartfelt thank you, or simply saying (and meaning) “It was really nice talking with you today” to conclude a call, the hospitality component of Ordinary Excellence is easy to apply in the real world of hotel operations.

The implementation doesn’t take any extra time, cost any more money, nor require the purchase of any new training program. It is easy to get started and you’re probably already on the road with having a quality physical product and efficient technology/systems, especially if you’re part of a leading brand or membership/affiliation group.

Just make sure before you implement the hospitality component of your Ordinary Excellence, Daily! process, that as a leader you are also willing to make the commitment. Visionary leaders cannot delegate “hospitality” to the next level down the organizational chart while they operate by another protocol.

Oh, and despite being a great model for incorporating service excellence principles into everyday actions, the only bad news about Ordinary Excellency, Daily! is that OED makes a terrible acronym to name a training program!