"people always ask me how we trained Disney's customer service staff to be so friendly. while Disney does plenty of training, the real secret is that they make a point of hiring friendly people." Dennis Snow, author of "Lessons from the Mouse"

Good customer service leads to higher revenue, so it's no surprise managers are always looking for ways to improve it. One important step is simply to hire better people. in particular organisations should use behavioral assessments when recruiting front line staff. But in this white paper we are going to go beyond just talking about good hiring practices. we want you to re-think what customer service is all about. For that we go to Dennis Snow, author of "Lessons from the Mouse" and "Unleashing excellence". Dennis spent years at Disney and has a deep understanding of how they mastered the art of great service. as Dennis shares his insights we'll show how these principles guide us in using behavioral assessments to hire the very best people.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SERVICE

it's no longer just the product that matters to your customers, it is the overall experience. Disney is not selling rides; when you visit their park they are providing you with the whole Disney experience. think of all of the processes you need to go through to ride Space Mountain: you park your car, you buy a ticket, you ask for directions, you get some food—those are all customer touch points. to Disney the "cast member" in the parking lot is involved in customer service just like the ticket agent, the store clerk and the person who answers the phone. together the staff at Disney create a great experience for people—and your staff can do the same.

Snow shares three principles to guide the actions of your front line staff. with these principles in mind you will be able to select people who excel in a customer service role.

PRINCIPLE 1: NEVER LET BACKSTAGE COME ONSTAGE

Disney is meant to be a magical place. everyone knows that behind the pristine walkways there is a huge infrastructure of people and equipment that keep the place running. But no one ever sees that. Just as movie directors take care not to show the boom mike hanging over an actor's head, Disney takes care to preserve the experience by never letting backstage come onstage. Snow tells us that you won't walk into a Disney shop and fnd the broom closet door left open with an old mop and bucket visible. the mop and bucket are backstage and Disney keeps them there.

this concept of backstage versus onstage is not self-evident to managers wrapped up in operations or fnance. if you are running a shoe store or car dealership or insurance offce the idea that you are serving up a magical place may seem farfetched. But the truth is you always want to protect the customer experience. Just think about going to your local coffee shop, they probably don't aspire to be Disney, but you hope the staff are not discussing work schedules while the whip up a cappuccino. Schedules are back stage, the customer wants to think coffee not operations, and the staff needs to know that.

what does this mean for hiring? there is a psychological factor measured by the Drakep3 called 'conformity' which has to do with how inclined people are to follow the rules. if you have a rule to 'never let backstage come onstage' then people with high conformity will adhere to this. people with low conformity may think "i don't think that rule is important so i'll just ignore it." there are other jobs where low conformity is not a problem, but it's a trait you ought to assess when hiring customer service staff.

PRINCIPLE 2: PERFORM WITH A RELATIONSHIP MINDSET

Snow's second principle is for staff to perform with a relationship mindset not a task mindset. Let's explain that concept with an example. if a person needs to replace a broken piece of equipment in an area where customers are present how do they do it? Do they ask everyone to stand back and get the job done quickly and efficiently or should they 'waste' time chatting to the customers and explaining what they are going to do? if you have a task mindset then that's how you see it: some technician wasting time chatting when they should be working. however, if you think of the relationship mindset, then creating a great experience for customers is just as much as part of the job as fixing the equipment.

efficiency matters, but what you are going to differentiate your company on is the experience. the technician who spends a minute chatting to the customers and answering questions will leave them in good spirits—and that is what drives the bottom line.

heading back to the coffee shop let's think about task versus relationship. if the clerk simply takes your order and hands you a coffee they've completed the task. But how does that compare to the barista who smiles, remembers your name and asks some questions? Good staff can turn a mundane transaction into a pleasure.

what traits should we look for when hiring people who can work with a relationship mindset? two of the relevant personality factors assessed by Drakep3 are extroversion and patience. extroversion is a measure of how much a person is driven by an interest in other people. an extravert just naturally wants to talk to the customer; the introvert is more at risk of focusing solely on the task.

Does this mean an introvert can never be good at service? No, of course not. But if you have measured for that trait you are better able to tune their training so that they can fix their behavior to meet the needs of the job.

patience is another important trait because patience is a good part of every relationship. Customers can be trying at times, they can be slow to understand, they can be unreasonable, and they can be grouchy—people high in patience will generally enjoy their service job more than someone low on this trait.

PRINCIPLE 3: LITTLE WOWS ADD UP

we all love to hear stories of customer service reps who have done something extraordinary to please a customer. Snow likes these stories too, but he warns us not to get over enamored with them. the truth is that these dramatic cases of customer service are very rare and you are running a business where you need to please customers day after day. the good news is that you don't need to do one big extraordinary thing—the little wows add up.

imagine if as you drive into the parking lot the attendant points out where you can fnd a space; then the janitor picks up the map you dropped, and the doorman greets you with a smile and a fourish. it feels like a great day—even though no one did something particularly noteworthy.

how do you create this kind of behavior? it's mainly a matter of training, but you can make your job a easier by once again looking for people to whom this sort of thing comes naturally. Before hiring assess the candidate's degree of extroversion. a parking lot attendant who is too extraverted won't like their job because the degree of contact with people is limited—but if you hire for a little extroversion and back that up with training then you have someone who will create one of those little wows that adds up to a great customer experience.

TOWARDS MORE SOPHISTICATED HIRING

the very frst step in successful hiring is to understand the job. Snow's principles help us re-frame our view of customer service and the job of the front line workers who create the customer experience. Knowing what to look for will guide your interviewing process, but interviewing is not enough. it can be very helpful to use a behavioral assessment questionnaire like the Drakep3 to measure the traits that lead to great customer service.

Once you have staff who exhibit the right behaviors you can take the next step of assessing them with the Drakep3 to get an accurate profle of the key personality traits. this top performer profle takes the guess work out of knowing how much of a trait like extroversion is too little and what level might be too much. with the right principles and the right hiring processes you can make a difference in delivering customer service that will stand out from the crowd.

Dennis Snow's two books "Lessons from the Mouse" and "Unleashing excellence" are available from bookstores on the net and in your neighbourhood.

About Predictive Performance International

Predictive Performance International (PPIL) is a software company whose premiere product is the Drake P3 talent assessment system. PPIL continues to expand its presence around the world, and today has representation in Australia, Canada, China, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Clients who use Drake P3 software span small organizations with fewer than 50 employees to large companies with over 50,000 people. Many of these clients have used Drake P3 software for over a decade demonstrating that its value continues to be evident to users year after year. Predictive Performance International is a member of The Drake Group of Companies.

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