

MAY 25, 2017 @ 04:03 PM

For Customer Service Secrets And Best Practices, Try Consulting A Master Of Hospitality

Micah Solomon, CONTRIBUTOR



Jeroen Quint (backdrop: movie night at Hotel Irvine) Courtesy Hotel Irvine

If you're looking to elevate your company's customer service, there's a lot to be learned by consulting a hospitality industry professional, one of those people who undeniably has customer service in their blood. Currently the GM of Hotel Irvine in Orange County, California, Jeroen Quint's career has spanned food service and hotel management for some of the marquee brands and restaurant and hotel celebrity players in the hospitality industry.

Micah Solomon: When I first became aware of you, you were working in an honest to goodness castle in Ireland—how in the world did you end up there?

Jeroen Quint: After working for Wolfgang Puck for two years and the Ritz-Carlton Hotels for eight years, I joined the luxury hotel company Capella Hotels and Resorts, which was founded by founding Ritz-Carlton Hotels President Horst Schulze. [Disclosure (and point of pride): Horst Schulze endorsed and contributed the foreword to my book, [*Exceptional Service. Exceptional Profit: The Secrets of Building a Five-Star Customer Service Organization*](#)—Micah.] Mr. Schulze asked me to open a hotel in the Caribbean followed by another in Italy, which led me to serving as general manager for Capella's castle hotel in Ireland. I worked at this hotel, a true, authentic Irish luxury hotel in an actual Irish castle, for three and a half years.

Solomon: You have worked with some legends of hospitality in the course of your career. What are one or two indelible lessons you learned from those leaders and those experiences?

Quint: Always focus on the customer first. I ask myself: "How do I connect and engage with them and how can I create a memory that will last?" Secondly, I always look for ways to improve and strive for excellence.

Solomon: If I only allowed you one, or maybe two, sentences to tell my readers how to achieve great customer service—do you have another timeless secret to share?

Quint: Be genuine, friendly, and timely. Anticipate needs and then exceed expectations. Create memorable experiences, and make them shareworthy. The very best promoters of our hotel are the people who just stayed with us and recommend us to their friends.

Solomon: And if I allowed you *more than a sentence or two to expand on the idea of customer service, what else would you tell my readers?*

Quint: Another customer service secret is to place a very large emphasis on the arrival and departure experiences of our guests. These are the first and last memories our guests will have of our hotel. It is proven when a guest has an initial good impression, it carries throughout his or her entire stay. We reach

out to our guests prior to their arrival to introduce ourselves and to find out their preferences. This helps us to create a warm welcome, and it sets us apart from our immediate competition. Branded hotels largely focus on reward status, so it's our job as an independent hotel to really get to know the guests and tailor their stay to their individual needs.

Solomon: I don't want to push my luck, but how about *even one more customer service tip before we move on?*

Quint: It's important how you treat guests' children. When families travel together they create memories that are more powerful and longer lasting than other events that happen in a child's life. We all remember the times we went away with our parents and enjoyed camping or hotel stays. We then try to recreate these memories later in life with our own children. When done well, hotel experiences can create life-long loyal guests for the hotels we work in. Happy kids equal happy parents. At Hotel Irvine, we have an active kids program – movie nights at the pool, game rooms – in our recreational backyard, in the guest rooms and in our restaurants. We make it very easy for entire families to dine in the restaurant - for instance having healthy, child-friendly menus, and having many promotional offers like "kids eat free" nights, etc.

Solomon: Share some of your insight into working with travelers today—millennials or otherwise?

Quint: Be adaptable and listen to your travelers. Anticipate and accommodate what they want and how and when they want it. Being a lifestyle independent hotel sets us apart from the big brand hotels because we can be more flexible and make everything about the guest. We have specific methods in place to get to know them and personalize their stay, the way that matters to them. That will always be key. Secondly, we focus on always being at the forefront of technology, and millennials and business travelers love that!

Solomon: Your current hotel, Hotel Irvine, is referred to as a “lifestyle hotel,” which typically means it has a relaxed vibe, yet you've told me that it caters to time-stressed Orange County tech professionals and the like. How do you achieve this balance?

Quint: Hotel Irvine is a spot for locals and travelers alike to eat, work and play. We have services that anticipate what our guests desire, including complimentary WiFi, “Reach Me” text service (ordering what you want...when you want); “everyday breakfast” for those on the go who want something simple and similar to their home breakfast; and lastly, a staff who are professional but personable, recognizing each guest as an individual and not as a member seeking points; we're not a chain hotel and we never want to act like one.

Food is also central to what we do here. We try to go far beyond what you consider “hotel food,” and this is a conscious decision. Today's travelers are more tuned in than previous generations, and what are they looking for in an F&B [food and beverage] experience. They're looking for dining experiences designed for them. EATS Kitchen and Bar is an approachable gastro, “pub-feel” restaurant with fresh farm-to-table food in a comfortable setting. We always focus on the quality of the food serving it in a timely manner by friendly staff who remember their guests. Red Bar is our happening spot and happy hour place with lots of access points to work, connect, and have fun. And we even have a “grab and go” that goes far beyond what you'd think from that description: it's called Market Place and it's tailored to the guest—it's almost a mini version of a Whole Foods—with over 1,400 local products priced attractively, quick to get, and easy to take to the room or home.

Solomon: How do you organize your day? And what does a typical day look like for you as a hotel GM?

Quint: It really depends on the activities that take place in the hotel. I enjoy interacting with guests and staff as they are the best source of information, so I do tend to be more visible in the lobby and EATS during peak periods. In addition, I enjoy meeting with business clients and companies to see if we can work with them on their next program.

Solomon: Before I let you go, tell me about something that has been a challenge at in your career or at one of your properties: something embarrassing or troublesome or humorously awkward that you addressed and, ultimately, rose above.

Quint: At one of my previous properties (at a very remote location), we booked a group of high-end executives, but needed an off-property location for a “dine around.” None were available as we were secluded on a small island in the Caribbean. I worked with some local people who lived there and asked if we could use their beautiful ocean view homes as a backdrop. We flew in chefs from Asia, Europe and the U.S. and created a fantastic off-site event. It was a big challenge, but we were creative and rose above it. And we booked the same company for the next year! Happy customers. That's what we work for every day.