

# CREATING THE “WOW” CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

“**Y**ou may have the very best structural building, outlets, furniture, and fixtures, but it’s really the quality of the experience that matters most to your customers. You represent your product to your customers, and the ‘Customer Experience’ is the next competitive battleground,” says Theresa Syer, President, Syer Hospitality Group, Inc., and speaker at HSMAI’s Affordable Meetings® Mid-America in April.

Syer is passionate about her topic and adjures her audience, “Now more than ever, in these economic times when every penny counts, you are going to have to make your customer feel appreciated and ‘wowed’ if you’re going to get their business.”

At the beginning of her presentation, she asks, “How many of you have been wowed by a customer experience anywhere in the past month?” She says usually 10 percent or less of the audience typically raise their hand. That means, she says, you can really attract people’s attention if you provide world class or even



above average customer service.

“The ‘customer experience’ is the interaction between a company and a guest, and it takes place from the time they first make contact with you, to their first impression, until the time

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they depart. It is a blend of the company’s physical performance and the emotions evoked, each intuitively measured against guest expectations across all moments of contact.”

Syer continues, “The key components people recognize on an emotional level are to be acknowledged, to be remembered, and to be respected. Every single member of your team must remember that the goal is to take an otherwise *ordinary* situation and make it *extraordinary*. Ask your employees to challenge themselves, raise the bar, and personalize the experience for the customer. For instance, if people are standing in line, acknowledge them, let them know you’ll be with them shortly. They’ll wait longer, and be happier, than if they’re waiting for someone who avoids eye contact while helping someone else.”

First impressions are important. Smile, offer a firm handshake, think about your body language, and dress for success. Keep in mind your eye contact and facial expressions. In face-to-face communication, studies have shown that 55 percent of the impression is made by body language, 38 percent from tone, and your words are only 7 percent of the whole experience for your customer.

Guest experience components include the operational, technical and functional aspects, the setting, and the physical layout, but all of this together only makes up 50 percent of what people will remember and what will cause them to become repeat customers/guests. A full 50 percent is the experiential factor, what you make them *feel*, and whether you WOW them.

Syer guides her attendees through an exercise in which she has them break down their job into specific tasks – for instance, for a restaurant worker, one part might be presenting the bill to the diner. She asks them to write down the operational standard,

and then in groups – and later with their own teams in their own workplace – brainstorm what would be above and beyond, a WOW, for that task. She gives an example of a restaurant where she'd dined that brought with the bill a small box containing a chocolate-drizzled strawberry on dry ice. "When the box was opened, it smoked! How is that for a WOW?"

She suggests having a staff meeting once a week in which employees share WOWs they've thought of and put into practice. One employee might mention he had brought balloons to a guest's room with children staying with their parents, and that might then become a standard practice. Syer tells about a hotel where she asked room service to deliver a basin of warm salt water for her aching feet. The basin came with warm water, covered with a towel, the salts in a separate crystal dish, and the water was covered with rose petals. "Now that's a WOW you'd remember."

How does one motivate a team to create the WOW in customer service? Often your front line people may not be making high salaries, and may have the attitude, "What's in it for me other than helping the business to make more money?"

First, of course, Syer says, "Hire good people." But most of the time you inherit people, and there are other strategies you can employ. Those whose jobs involve gratuities have a strong motivation to please the customer. Studies have shown that the difference in tips between a "satisfied" customer and a "highly satisfied" customer is at least 10 percent. A recent Harvard study looked at Starbucks customers who were "satisfied" versus "highly satisfied." Highly satisfied customers averaged 7.2 visits a month (versus 4.3 visits), spent \$4.42 per visit (as opposed to \$4.06), and over a year, spent \$381.89 (instead of \$209.50) – 82 percent more!

For employees whose jobs do not involve gratuities, you can institute incentive programs – guest comment cards asking for outstanding employees' names, and employee of the month programs, with award winners getting a day off, a gift certificate... something that shows appreciation and respect on the part of the business.

Syer suggests that everyone make up non-negotiable "experience standards." She asks people to go back to their place of business and work with their team to decide what will be their standards. "I can't set them for you – that's your decision for your business," but she offers some examples to get people started, including:

1. Smile and utilize name recognition.
2. 10 feet greet; acknowledge customers within 10 feet and address them within 5 feet.

3. Acknowledge customers when they are waiting in line.
  4. Anticipate customer needs (verbal & non) and deliver on them.
  5. Make the personal connection.
  6. Watch for visual triggers/silent cues.
  7. Notice what customers are wearing (make small talk about a team shirt, etc).
  8. Listen for customers' hesitation or uncertainty and offer suggestions.
  9. Be attentive to special occasions (ask what they're celebrating).
  10. Be sincere, not mechanical.
  11. Remember to say thank you.
- She closes with a final thought to hold, a quote from Carl W. Buechner:

"They may forget what you said; but they will never forget how you made them feel."



**Theresa Syer's** impressive career spans more than two decades and includes all aspects of hospitality sales and marketing. An accomplished speaker and author, Theresa draws from her 'hands on' real life experiences as a former Director of Sales and Marketing with Sheraton Hotels. A successful entrepreneur, Theresa is President of Syer Hospitality Group, Inc. She is a visionary who works with varied sized companies to help them master the 'Guest Experience.' She has a documented record of increasing sales, market penetration, and having teams master both team and personal success. She is a proud member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers (CAPS), and her honors include numerous Adrian Advertising Awards from HSMIA (Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International), Sheraton Canada's Sales & Marketing and Manager of the Year awards, and she was recognized with the prestigious Greater Hamilton Economic Development Lifetime Achievement Award. Contact: [theresasyer@syerhospitality.com](mailto:theresasyer@syerhospitality.com).