

The Experience Was Extraordinary Until the Housekeeper Started Yelling Down the Hallway

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Note from Phil: What follows is a guest post from customer experience expert Denise Lee Yohn. I always learn a great deal from Denise, and this post is no different.

Maybe it's because I'm in the midst of launching a new book on customer experience, but I've been more attuned than usual to the experiences I've had lately. And that's why I was particularly impressed with a recent hotel experience — well, until the housekeeper started yelling down the hallway.

You see, the hotel (which shall remain nameless because the point is not to shame it) is a famous, historic landmark managed by a boutique hotel company. The hotel is a gloriously beautiful piece of architecture and design. The operating company is renowned for impeccable service, unexpected extra touches, and distinctive personality.

From the moment my car pulled up to the front door and I was greeted by a fully-costumed doorman (in keeping with the hotel's historic theme), the experience was remarkable. The lobby was adorned with stunning period pieces and furniture, bicycles to rent and doggie treats were on hand, and the front desk clerk went out of his way to place me in a quiet room despite my early arrival. My room was well appointed and clean; the fitness center, fully equipped and well-maintained. When I spoke at a meeting that evening in one of the hotel's conference rooms, the service was attentive, the food was delicious, and everything went smoothly.

Everything was going great until the next morning when I returned to my room after breakfast and was greeted by the sound of a housekeeper yelling at the top of her voice to get the attention of her colleague who was down the hall. I was annoyed by such an unpleasant sound — not to mention glad that I hadn't tried to sleep in that morning because her yelling would surely have woken me.

As I reflected on how that one incident marred such a spectacular experience, I recognized that the woman probably hadn't been trained that such behavior was unacceptable. And then I realized that she probably wouldn't have had to be told that if the hotel had cultivated its culture of service in a way that engaged her well. Certainly the front desk and wait staff had embraced exquisite service and eschewed all impropriety — but the housekeeping staff hadn't.

At that moment, I decided that housekeepers' hallway behavior may be the ultimate litmus test of the culture of a hotel. Whether or not housekeepers clean rooms meticulously and efficiently indicates the effectiveness of the hotel operations. But how they behave in front of guests in the hallways indicates the nature of the hotel culture. Do they look customers in the eye, smile, and say hello — or do they look away or ignore them? Do they move their carts when they're blocking a passage — or do they act as if the guest is in their way? Do they try to make as little disruption as possible — or do they yell in loud voices and slam doors?

To be clear, I understand that hotel housekeepers are some of the most underpaid, underappreciated workers in first world economies. Many of them are immigrants who are barely making a living working a dirty, difficult, and demanding job. They may have little understanding of how to behave in a certain way around hotel guests and/or little



natural inclination to do so.

That's why it's a culture issue. It's the responsibility of the hotel leadership to ensure that everyone who contributes to the guest experience understands and embraces the values of the organization.

Values prescribe the "how" of the "what" an organization does and leaders must engage everyone — from concierge to housekeeper, and even limo drivers and others who aren't employed by the hotel — with them. People must know what the company's values are, why they're important, and how they should interpret and reinforce them in their individual jobs and in their daily decisions and behaviors. The leaders at the hotel where I had stayed should have extended to all its people the refined approach it applied to every other aspect of the experience.

Hotels, as with many other retail businesses, entail so many moving parts, and all those touchpoints and details together to create the hotel experience. I suspect most hotel management places a lot of attention on things like check-in procedures, bed comfort, and lobby decorations — and those elements are indeed important. But they should be as concerned with cultivating a culture that makes an impression on guests even in the few moments they might encounter a housekeeper. That's what makes an experience extraordinary.

About the author: Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do by Denise Lee Yohn profiles seven great retail and restaurant brands and shows how they earn customer love and loyalty by creatively designing and consistently delivering great retail customer experiences. Compelling stories and practical principles make *Extraordinary Experiences* required reading for all business leaders wanting a great brand. Learn more here:

<http://deniseleeyohn.com/extraordinary-experiences>.

