

Briefly Noted

by
**Nelson
Scott**



VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 6

AUGUST 2008

Service Stars ★ ★ ★ ★

This month's example of service excellence is courtesy of **Briefly Noted** reader and speaker colleague Joanne Blake (www.styleforsuccess.com).

While in Tampa Bay, Florida for the annual convention of the Association of Image Consultants International in May, Joanne and husband/business partner Terry Pithers visited a nearby IHOP (International House of Pancakes) restaurant for breakfast.

Shortly after the manager had shown them to their booth, their server appeared. "My name is Chris and I'm going to take care of you."

And take care of them he did. When they asked to share a large order, Chris returned with their order, two-full size plates, and cutlery. No need to scrape part of the order onto a small side plate. Gesturing toward a carafe on the table, he told his guests that when they needed more coffee all they had to do was remove the lid. "I'll come running," he promised.

After they had paid for their meal, Chris asked them if they would like a coffee to go. When Joanne and Terry declined because it was such a hot day, Chris offered them water instead.

As they were leaving, the couple spoke to the manager to let him know how pleased they had been with the service.

Given the quality of the service, it is hardly surprising that Joanne and Terry returned to the same restaurant a few days later. When they asked for Chris, they learned that he had taken the day off to care for his ill mother. Another server was assigned to take their order.

"I heard about your experience with Chris," she reported. "My name is Constance, but since he is not here, today I will be Christine and I will take as good care of you as Chris did."

And so she did.

"It sets the tone for the whole day and even our attitude toward Tampa and the IHOP company when you have such a positive experience," Joanne says, reflecting on their visits to IHOP.

This Newsletter is prepared by Nelson Scott of SEA Consulting to maintain contact with clients and other readers. Information presented here relates to Nelson's presentations and other services provided by SEA Consulting. Reprint permission is granted when the following credit appears: "© Nelson Scott, 2008. Reprinted with permission from Briefly Noted by Nelson Scott, a monthly Internet newsletter. For your own subscription, go to www.seaconsultingonline.com."

Nelson's Point of View

My most memorable "customer service" experiences

As customers, most of the service we receive is unremarkable, neither good nor poor. It just happens and the experience is soon forgotten. If we were to plot our service experiences on a graph, ranging from really good to really bad, we would likely end up with a bell curve (See Figure 1). Most service moments would be clustered at the neutral midpoint, with a few examples each of outstanding and truly poor service sprinkled at either end.

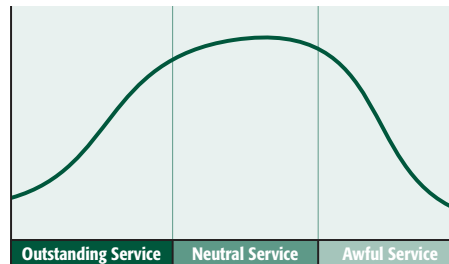


Figure 1: The Service We Receive

If we were to create a second graph showing the most memorable service moments, we would have a much different looking result (See Figure 2). The most memorable experiences would be those times when we received great service and those examples of truly awful service. Of the two, the most memorable are not those times when we were dazzled by the quality of the service we received. No, what we remember best and longest are times when the service provider was rude and disrespectful.

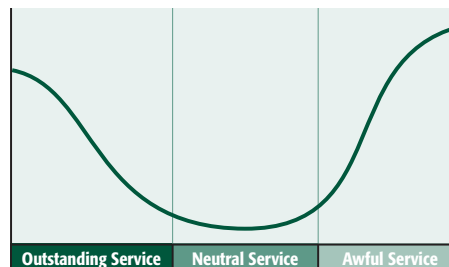


Figure 2: The Service We Remember

As someone who writes and speaks about customer service, I may have a heightened consciousness of the service I receive. In every issue of this newsletter since 2003, I have described a "Service Star" – someone who has provided services that stood out at the time. But as remarkable as these experiences

were then, I confess that I have forgotten most of them, even though they are relatively recent. I would have to re-read these articles to be able to tell others about these service providers.

On the other hand, I don't need notes to recall truly awful experiences. There are only three times in my life when I was on the receiving end of service that was just plain ugly. Each of these events is indelibly burned into my memory, even though none was particularly recent. One dates back nearly four decades, but I still feel the pain when I pass the "scene of the crime". This, despite the fact that the store has long since closed and the building was demolished years ago to make room for an office tower.

What makes service memorable is not what the service provider did or didn't do, but how they made us feel. We may be frustrated when the service provider doesn't know his product, our order is wrong, or the service is slow. This is bad service. We don't like it, but we shrug and move on. We can even deal with indifferent service.

What makes service a truly memorable negative experience is whenever the service provider is disrespectful and rude towards the customer. Emotionally, this is difficult for the customer to handle. This creates a memorable experience for the customer – for the wrong reasons. It is the type of experience that drives the customer away. The customer is lost, but she doesn't forget the experience. It remains in her memory for years – only to come to mind when the talk turns to customer service generally or the company specifically.

Singing Out of Tune

Singing Out of Tune: The year was 1970. I had accompanied my girlfriend as she took her sewing machine to the Singer store in downtown Edmonton to be repaired. As she attempted to explain the problem, the serviceman continually interrupted, often accusing her of not knowing how the machine worked. Unable to take it any longer, I interrupted him to suggest that he could be more "civil". With that, I left the store, leaving my friend to deal with a now contrite service manager. The store is now long closed, the building was demolished years ago to make room for an office tower. But still, nearly four decades later, I continue to recall that experience every time I pass the location.

Quote of the Month

"People are not your most important asset. The right people are. Get the right people on the bus, and the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats."

– Jim Collins
From *Good to Great*

Experiences That Never Grew Up to Become Articles

On Canada Day, I arrived at our neighbourhood Tim Hortons with several empty travel mugs. I watched in astonishment as the person behind the counter poured my order into a paper cup before carefully filling my mugs.

"Wouldn't it be easier to pour directly into the travel mugs?" I asked.

"It would be, but this is what we have been told to do," he replied, dropping the otherwise unused paper cup into the garbage.

I guess everyone was too busy filling customers' orders to notice the incongruity between using paper cups and the message on the video screen behind them, that promised customers 10 cents off if they used a refillable travel mug as part of the company's commitment to the environment.



How often have you come up behind a company vehicle – usually a company truck – bearing a sign that reads:

"How's my driving? Phone 1-555-I-TATTLE."

"If this vehicle is not being driven in a courteous manner, call 1-555-RAT-FINK."

Says a lot about the atmosphere of trust that exists within these companies, doesn't it?



The guest on a recent radio phone-in show described himself as the "chief cultural officer" of an Edmonton coffee shop. His role including training staff, most of whom had been hired from among the shop's customers. In this training he emphasized the importance of treating customers with respect.

During her preamble, the host lamented the quality of service in Alberta businesses and challenges that staff face when dealing with "incredibly rude customers".

When she asked her guest how his staff deals with these customers he hesitated, before replying that he couldn't think of a time when they had to deal with an incredibly rude customer.

The host seemed incredulous. No rude customers? How could this be?

It really shouldn't come as a surprise. The guest had just described an organization that respects its customers and trains its service providers... two simple actions that would pay off big time for any organization!

You Asked . . .

What questions should I ask when doing reference checks?

Answer: I wish I could provide you with a list, but there is no simple answer to your question. Reference check questions depend on the position to be filled and in some cases on information supplied by individual candidates. What I can offer are some guidelines that will help you craft effective reference check questions that are position specific.

When clients ask me to check references as part of my involvement in a recruitment/hiring process, I structure this mini-interview as follows.

Generally, when I do reference checks, I am looking for facts on which a hiring decision can be based. I am not really interested in the opinions of the referees whose names were supplied by the candidates. After all, the candidates are not going to provide the names of people who have poor opinions of their work. Or are they? The truth is, some candidates make bad choices.

With this in mind, the *Opening Question* I ask is what the referee is likely expecting – a request for their opinion:

I have a few questions that I would like to ask you about _____, but before I do, are there any thoughts about him/her that you would like to share with me?

For most referees, this is a time to share all those positive things that they had planned to say about the candidate. But this is not always the case. Sometimes a referee will have some candid thoughts to share. When this happens, pay attention, but be cautious about accepting their word for it. Ask for specific examples of behaviour upon which the referee has based his opinions.

Having given the referees the opportunity to exhaust their opinions about the candidate, I move on to my Core Questions. These are based on the most important topics explored during the interview and usually mirror how the questions were asked during the interview, both in style and content.

Interview Question	Reference Question
Describe an important decision you made recently. What factors needed to be considered? How did you make the decision?	Describe a time when _____ had an important decision to make. How did he/she go about making this decision?
How do you let staff members know they are valued for who they are and for what they do? Describe a time when you let a staff member know you were pleased with his or her work.	How did _____ provide support to staff in their work, show that they were valued for who they were, and appreciated for what they did?

These questions are designed to gather facts – the evidence upon which to base the hiring verdict. You want a description of what the candidate did, not the referee's assessment. The only assessment that matters is yours, based on the factual description of the situation.

Occasionally, a candidate may do or say something during the interview that you may wish to explore further by asking *Candidate-Specific Questions* during the reference checks.

The *Closing Question* is intended to encourage the referee to share any final thoughts about the candidate:

Is there anything else that you can tell me about _____ that I can pass on to those who will be making the hiring decision?

As was the case with the Opening Question, the response will mostly reflect the referee's opinion of the candidate. It's possible that you may have established a degree of rapport with the referee by this point, so she may let down her guard and share thoughts about the candidate that she might not have shared earlier.

High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

- E-mail co-worker's supervisor describing something that he did well. Copy the individual.
- Write a note of appreciation on the back of your business card and leave it on the staff member's desk.
- Honour a long-time employee by naming a meeting room after her... the "Joan Smith Room".
- Create a blog in which you describe the contributions and successes of individual employees.
- During a meeting, invite staff members to tell tales of co-workers' contributions and achievements.
- To recognize an employee who is committed to environmental causes, arrange to have a tree planted on his behalf.

SEA
CONSULTING
Nelson Scott

Tel: (780) 433-1443
E-mail: nmscott@telus.net
www.seaconsultingonline.com

