

Briefly Noted

by
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Service Stars ★★★★★

The weather-related adventure continued when it was time to return home from our river cruise-turned-bus tour (see main article on this page). On the morning we were to leave Vienna, we arrived at the airport to discover that snow had closed the Frankfurt airport, where we were to connect with a flight back to Canada.

Austrian Airlines rebooked us for the next day, this time connecting with an Air Canada flight at London's Heathrow airport. We were having lunch at a restaurant in the departure area at Heathrow when it began to snow.

If you saw any news reports during mid-December, you know what happened next. No flights left Heathrow for days. We spent that night on the airport floor, under tin foil emergency blankets supplied by Heathrow staff that, in the words of a British journalist, made us look like turkey leftovers.

The next morning, when the flight was officially cancelled, we booked another flight for three days later and began to search for a hotel in which to stay during our unexpected mini-vacation in London.

Luckily, we were able to find rooms at the Gainsborough, where we had spent a few nights during our previous—and intended—visit to the British capital. This small hotel is conveniently located near the South Kensington tube station and on the Piccadilly line that runs from Heathrow.

The clerk had no record of our reservation. When I explained that I had just booked online, he immediately understood the problem—the reservation department was closed on weekends. He would have to call a manager at home who had access to online bookings.

He suggested that we take a seat in the lobby while we waited and offered us tea. A moment later, another staff member appeared with tea. Before we had finished drinking it, the clerk returned with room keys.

While waiting, we scanned the tourist brochures on display. For us, being in London means taking in as much theatre as possible, so we were disappointed when there was no theatre information.

"That one always disappears first," the clerk said. He offered to send a staff member across the street to a sister property to see if they had a theatre guide.

Cancelled cruise prompts exemplary service recovery

"If the good Lord's willing and the creek don't rise" — from *If the Good Lord's Willing* by Johnny Cash

Back in December, it was the Danube River that rose, the result of unusually heavy rain and snowfall. What was scheduled to be a river cruise became a bus tour, instead.

How Uniworld responded to these unexpected circumstance provided an impressive demonstration of service recovery—making things right when things go wrong. This meant going beyond what was promised in the "Terms and Conditions" found in the Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection brochure:

"You can count on the value of Uniworld's experience and regional knowledge to make sure you enjoy your cruise/tour even when conditions beyond our control occur. The very nature of a river, its sources, and networks of bridges and locks, means that there will be times when weather and other conditions in the region require Uniworld to make adjustments and/or modifications to an itinerary... In such cases, we will do everything we can to make sure the locations visited and the excursions taken... are similar to the one originally planned."

Our European Holiday Markets cruise was to take us from Nuremburg, Germany to Vienna, Austria. We spent the first day visiting sites associated with Nuremburg's 20th century infamy, before spending time—and money—at the city's Christmas market. That evening we set sail for what we expected would be a seven-day cruise.

By the next morning, the decks were covered with 20 to 25 cm of freshly fallen snow. The weight of the snow caused trees to bend out over the river. Shortly after breakfast, we arrived in Regensburg, a UNESCO world heritage site that sustained little damage during either world war.

A local guide led us past the city's landmarks—walls dating back to Roman times, a sausage stand that claims the distinction of being the world's first fast-food restaurant and city hall. The tour ended at the Cathedral of St. Peter, the home church of Pope Benedict XVI— and with—of course—with directions to the Christmas markets.

That evening, when the passengers gathered in the lounge for the daily port talk, the captain announced that due to the rain and snow, the River Countess would be unable to pass under a bridge that lay ahead. He expressed hope that the water level would drop and we would be able to resume our cruise the next day.

Bart, the cruise manager, spoke next. He assured

us that we would not miss any of the sites—or Christmas markets—identified on our itinerary. The next day we would travel by bus to Passau. And because we would not be able to return to the ship, passengers would receive €15 each for lunch—more than enough to pay for the sausages and beer most of us would purchase in the market.

At that evening's port talk—which were becoming known as "situation updates"—the captain said that while the river level has dropped, the ship would still be unable to sail the next day. This is when Bart began to offer more than what was promised in the brochure's small print.

As the next day was Sunday, he suggested that we might attend mass at the cathedral to hear the well-known boys' choir conducted by the Pope's brother. Following the service, Bart had arranged for a tour of the Thurn and Taxis Palace. The palace grounds were the site of what turned out to be the best market we would visit. Unlike the others, it charged a €5 entrance fee, which Uniworld paid.

When it became obvious that the cruising part of our vacation was over, Uniworld arranged buses to transport the passengers to Vienna. Along the way, we stopped in Linz, the Austrian city where Adolf Hitler grew up... and the site of another Christmas market. After settling into the Intercontinental Hotel in Vienna, we crossed the street to attend a concert that was part of the planned itinerary. After the concert, Bart offered the first of the Vienna extras—a nighttime walk through the city centre.

The next day began with a scheduled tour of Vienna, but for those who wanted it, there was an extra. Responding to interest shown by a few passengers, Bart arranged for one tour group to visit the Spanish Riding School during a morning practice (for which Uniworld paid the €12 entrance fee). In the afternoon, what had been listed as an optional extra tour of Schonbrunn Palace was available to everyone at no extra cost.

Then, as a final gesture, Uniworld provided every passenger with a \$250 credit to be used toward a future European cruise. "We look forward to welcoming you aboard again soon," wrote Uniworld president Guy Young. Given how well Uniworld treated passengers whose travel was disrupted by conditions beyond its control, I believe that most of them will be cruising on one of Europe's rivers with Uniworld in the near future.

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Quote of the Month

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

— Nelson Mandela

Drop by during these conventions

I have been invited to present at three teachers' conventions this month. If you are going to be at any of them, I hope you will drop by to say hello. When you identify yourself as a Briefly Noted reader, I will have a small gift for you—a tool that you can use to encourage staff recognition.

Here is information on the sessions I will be presenting (where, when and title):

North Central Teachers' Convention

(Edmonton, AB)

Thursday, February 10 • 1:15 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.

Saskatchewan Room, Westin Hotel

Everything I Need to Know About Staff Recognition I Learned from My Dog

Central Alberta Teachers' Convention

(Red Deer, AB)

Friday, February 11 • 10:30 a.m. to Noon

Westerner Park – Frontier Room

Staff Recognition: One Piece at a Time

South East Alberta Teachers' Convention

(Medicine Hat, AB)

Thursday, February 24

Medicine Hat College, Room S103

1:00 – 2:15 p.m.: *Customer Service MAGIC: Turning Complainers Into Allies*

2:30 – 3:45 p.m.: *Everything I Need to Know About Staff Recognition I Learned from My Dog*

Don't see your convention on this list? Why not suggest that organizers invite me to your next convention?

High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

- Here's a way to green up staff recognition: Reusable shopping bags are an eco-friendly alternative to wrapping paper when preparing gifts to be presented to staff members.
- In a diverse workplace, learn to say thank you in the native language of each staff member...and then say it.
- Set a day-long goal for yourself to look for recognition opportunities in every interaction with staff members
- If the use of certificates is part of your recognition plans, go beyond generic messages acknowledging the individual for her achievement or accomplishment. Describe what the employee did that was deserving of recognition.

Breastfeeding mother's experience reveals flaws in store's hiring and complaint resolution practices

A Montreal children's clothing store's response to bad publicity caused me to question its understanding of customer service, hiring practices and the orientation provided for new employees.

Both the CBC and the *Globe and Mail* reported that the president of Orchestra apologized to a woman who was asked to leave the store in a Montreal shopping centre because she was breastfeeding her five-month-old daughter.

In his letter to Shannon Smith, Jean-Claude Yana wrote that company policy does allow breastfeeding and blamed a new employee for the situation. *The Globe* quoted from Yana's letter that the company had taken "appropriate disciplinary measures" against the employee.

While the employee handled this situation poorly, the responsibility for what happen should not have been assigned to her alone. Those within the management chain share responsibility. This may have been evidence of a systemic problem, beginning with how staff is hired, and the orientation and support they received after joining the organization.

According to both reports, the mother accepted the apology. "Of course I'm happy," the newspaper quoted her as saying. "I'll be accepting the apology." She was more magnanimous than I might have been.

While it was appropriate that the company apologize, I feel the president could have done a better job of it. During my seminar called *Customer Service MAGIC: Changing Complainer into Loyal Customers*, I tell participants that they should not respond to a complaint by blaming someone else for the problem. The customer doesn't want to hear who caused the problem. She wants someone to step up and take responsibility. She also wants to know what you are going to do to correct the problem and to prevent it from happening again.

Other information in the *Globe and Mail* story suggests that the company needs to improve its hiring practices and its new-staff orientation processes. Again, the newspaper quoted from Yana's letter to Smith: "Hiring quality employees is not a simple business for an employer and their behaviour is sometimes completely unpredictable, as was the case here."

Maybe the solution is to ask questions during interviews that will yield information that managers can use to predict how a job candidate will behave. In other words, use behaviour description interviewing inquiries that are based on the principle that, "Past performance is the best predictor of future performance."

While an interviewer is unlikely to ask about something as specific as dealing with a breastfeeding customer—at least prior to this incident getting national coverage—a BDI question could be written that would help determine how a job candidate might respond to an unexpected situation:

"In any job, there are times when something unexpected occurs for which your training and experience will not have prepared you. Think about a time something unexpected occurred in a previous job. What happened and what did you do?"

The candidate's response may provide insight into how she would deal with the unexpected in the future, which the manager could consider when making the hiring decision. A similar question could be asked when conducting reference checks, which might provide additional information that could prove useful.

Once someone is hired, the organization should provide an orientation that prepares her to deal with customers effectively, including procedures to follow when dealing with unexpected situations.

The book is coming soon

If you have been reading *Briefly Noted* over the past couple of years, you may have noticed the occasional reference to "the book"—something I have been working on—and procrastinating over—for about a decade.

It's been an interesting process, but now the end is in sight. The manuscript is complete and only a few final steps need to be taken before the book is published.

The book will chronicle what I have learned about staff recognition from several unexpected sources, including a reluctant shopper, Goldilocks and Baby Bear, a graffiti artist, a reclusive executive, television characters, professional athletes and performers, my dog Kojak and others—both real and fictional. There are also at least 200 tips and techniques to help readers move forward in expressing gratitude and acknowledging staff for their contributions and achievements.

Along the way, I discovered that writing a book requires making tough decisions. You have to be willing to let go of what you have written. This meant cutting parts to reduce the book to a reasonable length—no one is going to pick up a book with too many pages.

The most significant victim of my literary downsizing was a 10,000-word parable that had originally been the core of the book—and the source of its working title, *Fire the Employee-of-the-Month* (I am still searching for a new title). I haven't discarded the parable completely. Someday it may become a book on its own.

So, what's left to do? Right now, the book is in the hands of an editor who I anticipate will have several suggestions for improvement. Next the book will be sent to the graphic designer who has already developed a design concept that I feel works well. Then on to a printer.

See the next issue of *Briefly Noted* for another progress report.



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