

Briefly Noted

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by
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Service Stars

In the last issue, there were no service stars to describe. This time, I have two whose actions illustrate what a difference it makes when a bus driver or airline gate agent chooses to become personally accountable for the quality of a customer's experience.

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While he was away, I took the bus to my brother's place to feed his cats. I was just leaving his house when I saw my bus approaching on the other side of the street. But it passed me by just as I reached the end of his sidewalk. The bus driver must have noticed the disappointment obvious in my body language. She pointed toward herself. Did I want to board her bus? Yes, I nodded. She pointed at the next stop and then waited there while I crossed the street.

* * * * *

When returning from New Orleans at the end of May, we connected to a Continental Airlines flight in Houston. Before leaving New Orleans, we noticed that my wife and I would not be seated together on this flight. Rather than requesting a change, we decided to wait until after we boarded the flight to try to get seats together. Under such circumstances, other passengers are usually willing to change seats.

In the end, we didn't have to ask. The agent who was checking our documents noticed our seat numbers. "You and your wife aren't sitting together. Let's see if I can do something about that."

After checking the computer for available seats, she offered us two seats in the exit row. "We usually charge extra for these seats, but you can have them," she said, handing us our new boarding passes. Whoopee, I thought. Extra legroom!



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Readers fill the service star void

When I lamented in the last issue of *Briefly Noted* that I had not discovered anyone whose actions I could describe under the heading of Service Stars, I didn't anticipate that readers would respond with examples of their own.

Two readers emailed me examples of extraordinary service, while another directed me towards a book she felt was relevant. "I read a couple of good customer-service stories in the book *QBQ: The Question Behind the Question* by John G. Miller (Denver, CO: Denver Press, 2001 ISBN: 0966583299)," Deidre Norris wrote.

I followed her lead and was engaged by Miller's simple, but important message about personal accountability. We all make choices about how we will respond to circumstances we encounter. Service stars choose to assume personal accountability for the quality of the customer's experience.

Miller writes that the first reaction in times of stress and frustration is often negative. We blame the situation on others or on circumstances over which we have no control. We ask questions that begin with "who," "when" or "why":

"Who messed up this order?"

"When are they going to provide us with the tools we need to do our job?"

"Why didn't someone tell me?"

He says that these are lousy questions, which he labels "IQs"—Incorrect Questions. "They are negative and they don't solve any problems." He suggests three guidelines to asking better questions:

1. Begin with "what" or "how" (not "why," "when" or "who").
2. Contain an "I" (not "they," "them" or "you").
3. Focus on action.

Asking better questions will lead to greater personal accountability for the experience of others—customers, co-workers, family, community.

"What can I do to ensure this parent receives correct information in response to his inquiry, and receive it quickly?"

"How can I make up for the fact that this customer received poor service during her last visit?"

If more service providers asked—and answered—questions such as these all of us would be encountering service stars such as those described by readers in the paragraphs that follow.

After reading the last Service Stars column, Helen Metella emailed, "Oh my goodness Nelson, I think I ran into all the great service stars that you missed this past month." She continued by describing examples of out-

standing service, three of which I have included here:

- Derek Deibert, owner of Jillian Builders, was the contractor on our thrifty kitchen and basement renovation 15 years ago. Last week, we called him because we are contemplating doing some more renos, but first want to find out which of the things on our wish list will actually return us house value. His firm now works on renos worth six and seven figures and he has employees who can do quotes for him on small jobs. Nonetheless, because he remembered us being one of his early clients, he himself was in touch within a day. Then he came over late in the evening and spent tons of quality time with us.
- I overheard a clerk at Chapters in Old Strathcona giving a literate, enthusiastic and highly appealing pitch for a new book called *Shantamar* to another customer, without sounding like a shill. I was so enthused by his expert summary of the plot, the writing and the author's background that I snuck around the corner once they'd moved on, to pick up the book.
- The discount coupon for dry cleaning that I received from Page the Cleaner expressly states that it must be presented upon bringing in the order. The clerk knew this, but believed me when I said I had forgotten it on my way out the door. She marked the invoice so that I did get the \$5 discount on \$40 worth of dry cleaning. I certainly could have absorbed the \$5, but her extra care ensures that Page will continue to be my dry cleaner of choice.

May Harvie, a former colleague who now lives in Red Deer, described the exceptional service she received at a Save-on Pharmacy:

"I had a prescription for a nasal spray for which the doctor had written poor instructions. While he stated 'nasal,' the directions said, 'two puffs daily.' I picked up the prescription and didn't look at it until I went to use it the next morning, only to discover that I had been given a bronchodilator with the same name.

"I returned it and told them that I wanted the original nasal spray medication. It was not in stock and had to be ordered. Meanwhile, my money was refunded and I was given 1000 extra Save-On points for the 'hassle.'

"Later that day, someone called me to say that it had been ordered and that it would be in the next afternoon. When it arrived, I got another call to let me know. When I went to pick it up I discovered that it was not covered by insurance because it was not the generic brand. The staff member said that there would be no charge because of the confusion."

Quote of the Month

"Mission statements, synergies, strategies, visions—they are often ambiguous to the point of being meaningless."

**—Chip Heath & Dan Heath,
Made to Stick**

High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

What I heard during presentations and in conversations with others attending the Recognition Professionals International convention in San Antonio, Texas, in May inspired this issue's collection of high-value, low-cost staff recognition tips.

- Post messages of appreciation on employees' Facebook pages. Facebook can be an effective tool for peer recognition—expressing appreciation to co-workers for their support and assistance.
- Schedule a visit by an ice-cream truck or catering wagon. Then invite everyone to join you in the parking lot. Today's treat is on you!
- When production ends on a Hollywood production, everyone comes together to celebrate with a wrap party. Hold similar celebrations when your team completes large projects.
- The next time you go to a movie, remain in your seat as hundreds of names are scrolled on the screen at the end of the show. Read through the playbill the next time you visit the theatre. What you see on the screen or stage required the efforts of many people behind the scenes. This is how they get credit for their contributions. What about your big productions? How are the behind-the-scenes people acknowledged for their contributions?
- Before award shows, the stars of screen and stage walk a red carpet lined with scores of photographers. Provide a red-carpet experience at your recognition events by having a photographer present to snap a few shots. Afterwards, send a photo to each of the honorees.
- As staff arrive for meetings, project messages of appreciation onto a screen, highlighting the efforts of individuals and teams.
- Encourage staff members and customers to post notes of thanks on a bulletin board. At the end of the month, remove these notes and send them to the staff members who were named—after adding your own messages of appreciation.

Book preview is now available on website

By now, if you have been reading *Briefly Noted*, have attended one of my presentations on staff recognition, or even have simply met me in the street, you likely know that I have written a soon-to-be-published book on high-value, low-cost staff recognition. I expect it to be available by the fall, but here's an opportunity for a preview—and a chance to win a copy when it is published.

Here's how: I have posted a few chapters, taken from different sections of the book, on my website (www.seaconsultingonline.com/Thanks/). Here are answers to some questions that you likely have been wondering about for years, such as:

- What single question prompted a decade of research and a book on staff recognition?
- What lesson that can be applied to staff recognition programs was learned when a playhouse collapsed even before its construction was complete?
- What are the five ingredients that make staff recognition meaningful (Hint: They're GREAT!)?
- What is it about Baby Bear's understanding of how Goldilocks said thanks that can be applied to many supervisors and managers?
- What five insights into staff recognition come from observing the behaviours of a shaggy, 100-pound dog for 12 years?

After you have read the preview, tell me what you think. When I receive your feedback, I will enter you in a draw. The prize is a copy of a book on staff recognition. If you liked what you read in the preview, the prize will be a copy of my book, ***Thanks! GREAT Job! Improve Retention, Boost Morale and Increase Engagement with High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition.***

What if you don't like what I have written? You will still be entered in the draw—but your prize will be someone else's book on staff recognition.



Why a postal strike is bad for staff recognition

During the weeks and days leading up to a possible strike by Canadian postal workers, much of the conversation focused on whether anyone would notice an interruption to postal service. After all, most of us communicate via email or text message, and shop and pay bills online. Traditional mail volume has dropped by 17 per cent over the past five years. Who cares if there is a strike?

I do, and I think you should too. When there is no mail delivery, we are cut off from a powerful tool with which to recognize staff. For the very reasons stated in the previous paragraph, a handwritten thank-you note (or one saying "congratulations," "well done!" or "happy birthday") that arrives in an employee's home mailbox will really stand out.

When the only mail that people receive seems to be bills, imagine how surprised recipients will be when they receive a hand-addressed envelope. It will be noticed. Its impact will be greater than most messages delivered in the workplace, especially those that come via email or are produced on a computer printer.

Whether delivered to a staff member's home, sent through intra-office mail, or simply left on the person's desk, handwritten notes are a type of recognition that recipients value. In many cases, they will keep handwritten notes for years—pinned to their cubicle wall or kept in a file. Every time that person sees your note, it is a reminder of a job well-done and your appreciation.

Tips for Writing Thank-you Notes

- Write your note as soon as possible after the event or action that prompted you to thank an individual or team.
- Be specific when describing what the person did that you appreciate.
- Describe the impact on the company of the employee's action—refer to values, goals or mission statement—and/or the impact on the person expressing gratitude.