

A Bed is a Bed is a Bed?

By Stan Pohmer

These old bones have spent more nights than I care to remember in hotel beds, so I think I could be considered somewhat an expert on this topic.

The primary business goal of any hotel, be it a one-of-a-kind independent boutique variety or an international chain, is to get as many heads on their respective pillows as possible every night and to do it at a profit. And in my travels throughout the U.S. and around the world, it's a rare occasion when I don't have a choice of at least two or three (and sometimes many more!) different hotel options on any given night in any given location — so I think it's safe to say that the hotel industry is highly competitive.

What amazes me the most about the hotel industry is the vast range of prices available for that *bed*. Each chain has identified their individual niche, the specific customer that they target. In their advertising, these room retailers have honed their individual messages to resonate with the needs or aspirations of their core consumer. And, if you've ever joined one of a hotelier's loyalty clubs and provided them with your e-mail address, you know that their digital messaging is 100 percent consistent with their brand, their image and their other marketing elements.

What each of these chains has done is clearly define exactly what their value propositions are and then put programs and processes in place that are firmly entrenched in their cultures to reinforce and deliver on the expectations they communicate to their customers.

Some chains are ultra-specific, especially at the very low and very high ends of the spectrum; consider price focused chains such as Motel 6 ("Travelling on a budget?") and Econolodge ("Easy on the wallet!") and the Ritz Carlton and Fairmont chains at the high end. Others attempt to cover a broad range of the mid-priced hotels, some catering to the business traveler, and others for those who want more amenities at a reasonable price; examples of these are the Holiday Inn family (Holiday Inns and Holiday Inn Express), the Hilton family (Hilton and Hampton Inn), or the Hyatt family (Hyatt Regency, Hyatt and Hyatt Place). Key to the success of each of these

chains is that they are true to their brand and value proposition; Motel 6 doesn't pretend to be high end, and the Ritz Carlton doesn't compete on having a low room rate.

We in the Lawn & Garden (L&G) industry simplistically look at two buckets of major competition — mass marketers/big boxes and locally owned garden centers (LOGCs) — while the hospitality industry has to deal with more diverse stratification of competitors. But the L&G industry has become more homogenized, especially as we battled our way through the latest recession. Locally owned garden centers became more price-focused and, with the implementation of pay-by-scan, the boxes upped their assortment and merchandising game while maintaining their price competitiveness.

LOGCs need to renew their commitment to up their game in order to differentiate themselves from their price-focused competition, but what's a good model to emulate?

Puttin' on the Ritz

In the hotel industry, there are retailers who sell based on price (transactional) and those that focus on differentiation based on the experience they deliver and the service they provide (experiential), and the best of the best at this is the Ritz Carlton chain.

The Ritz Carlton family of hotels doesn't sell beds at a price, they promote the "Memories by the Ritz Carlton" message. I've said this before and I still strongly believe that to deliver a superior experience and outstanding differentiated service it requires active and consistent management commitment that leads to a corporate culture that embodies the desired results. Ritz Carlton management built outstanding facilities, but they realized that it's the staff, the team, who executes the strategies that create the experiences.

Consider "The Credo," the guiding light of the Ritz Carlton chain:

The Ritz Carlton Hotel is a place where the genuine care and comfort of our guests is the highest mission.

We pledge to provide the finest personal service and facilities for our guests who will always enjoy a warm, relaxed, yet refined ambience.

The Ritz Carlton experience enlivens the senses, instills well-being, and fulfills even the unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests.

Reading this, can any employee not feel inspired or not have a clear understanding of what expectations they need to achieve?

The Reinforcements

To reinforce The Credo, they developed a pocket card that every employee is required to read before their shift every day and to keep

with them as part of their uniform. Though some may think this is a bit hokey, it's indicative of the emphasis and confidence leadership has and in the role staff has in creating a superior and differentiating service experience. Here are just some of the "Service Values: I Am Proud To Be Ritz Carlton" that are listed on this card:

- I am always responsive to the expressed and unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests.
- I am empowered to create unique, memorable and personal experiences for our guests.
- I understand my role in achieving the Key Success Factors, embracing Community Footprints and creating The Ritz-Carlton Mystique.
- I continuously seek opportunities to innovate and improve The Ritz-Carlton experience.
- I own and immediately resolve guest problems.
- I have the opportunity to continuously learn and grow.
- I am involved in the planning of the work that affects me.
- I am proud of my professional appearance, language and behavior.

It's crystal clear to me the Ritz Carlton team doesn't just talk the talk, they truly walk the talk! They set the bar high for their team and the service experience they want to deliver, and then measure it in order to exceed the customer's expectation.

Delivering a differentiated service experience, creating memories that lead to unbending customer loyalty, can't be done by simply coming up with programs and policies; it's only made possible when one cultivates and instills this mindset in your team, creating an environment where they know that staff and management share the same goals and aspirations, and have the tools and latitude to focus on and satisfy the customer.

L&G retailers, especially LOGCs, can learn a lot from studying the highly competitive and stratified hospitality industry where there's clear differentiation of price and service levels. It's time for LOGCs to re-commit again to take the leadership position in creating the superior service experience for their customers and focusing on their true differentiating values in the marketplace, and the Ritz Carlton model can help show you the way to renewed success!

So is a bed is a bed is a bed? It doesn't have to be... **LGR**

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