

Great Expectations

By Stan Pohmer

My wife and I just returned from another “once-in-a-lifetime” 23-day adventure starting in Switzerland, then an eight-day river cruise

down the Rhine River through Germany and France, followed by a four-day stay in Amsterdam and The Netherlands, and finally a week in Paris.

Over the years, I’ve been as guilty as many of you in having a pretty significant problem finding any semblance of balance between work and a personal/family

life, with work dominating the bulk of my time and effort.

And, like most of you, I truly loved what I was doing and believed that the world would end and the walls would cave in if I wasn’t 150 percent actively involved in everything every day. And we’ve been blessed by having wives, husbands, significant others and children that have tolerated us and allowed us to follow our passions and drives.

It wasn’t until almost five years ago that I had a medical life crisis that opened my eyes to just how screwed up my priorities had become, and I’m now trying to get that missing balance back in my life.

I’m still as passionate about my work as I ever was, but I’ve made that commitment to re-focus on my personal life and my family. I’m still a work in process, but making headway, and this trip was one of the steps in my new journey.

But enough of my philosophizing...

The flights to Europe were about nine hours each way, both overnights. Normally, I fall asleep before the cabin doors close (one can sleep on planes when they have clear consciences, or so I like to believe), but these long flights when the lights are dimmed and there are no distractions like phones, Internet and email are great opportunities to do something we rarely have time to do ... uninterrupted thinking.

Credible Cruising

Viking Cruise Lines has heavily promoted their river cruises (and now their new ocean cruises and, soon to come in 2017, Mississippi River cruises) in print publications, Facebook ads, Internet banner ads, direct mail, TV and radio. Their glossy and polished ads and videos set very high expectations on what to expect from the services provided and what you would see and do.

Never having been on a river cruise before, on the basis of all of this marketing, and with some positive endorsements from friends who had already been on their cruises, my wife and I decided to consider a Viking cruise.

When I called their sales office to get more specific pricing information (these cruises aren’t inexpensive!) and tried to make a reservation 10 months out, I found there was very limited room availability left. It wasn’t an issue that they didn’t have a lot of ships on the Rhine River route sailing in both directions, but that these cruises have become so popular they are close to being sold out a year in advance.

So now the expectations I had from their marketing and recommendations from friends was kicked up another notch based on the increasing popularity and difficulty in getting a reservation.

Were they that good? Would my expectations be so high that I’d be disappointed by my actual experience?

Soon after we shoved off from our starting port in Basel, Switzerland, the captain hosted a welcoming cocktail reception for all 180 passengers (that’s max capacity on this ship; they take a concierge approach to cruising).

His key point was that he knew we all had very high expectations before we started the cruise and his and the crew’s mission for the week was to make sure they exceeded our expectations. And then he reinforced his confident message by saying 65 percent of all Viking passengers had sailed with them on a previous cruise somewhere in the world! An amazing retention rate!

Being the cynical Doubting Thomas that I am, I relished the opportunity to see how they executed to achieve their lofty goal.

Fast forward to the end of the cruise, Viking hit the ball out of the park and definitely exceeded our very high expectations, to the point that we’re considering taking another cruise with them in the next year or two.

Their entire operation ran with the precision of a Swiss watch, and every member of the crew, from cabin attendant to captain, did everything possible to ensure their guests were delighted.

The crew shared a common mission and goal and successfully worked together to achieve it.

Do Not Disappoint

That got me thinking about the expectations we establish for our customers and the expectations they have of us.

Let me present a few premises for you to ponder:

The ability to establish and deliver on expectations lies in the hands of who can best control the expectation and deliver the desired outcome.

Nature abhors a vacuum; unless you clearly communicate what the consumer can expect from you and your products, they will set their own expectations, usually at a level that is too high for you to realistically deliver on.



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“ Setting expectations is for the benefit of your consumer, providing them with a benchmark to judge you and your products’ ability to perform. ”

Setting high expectations and not achieving or exceeding them is more harmful than not setting expectations at all. If you set your expectations and delivery on them lower than those your customer has, you are setting them up for disappointment.

Accepting these, the first question we need to ask is: "Are we even establishing expectations for our consumers?" followed by, if so, "Are we/how are we communicating these expectations to them?"

Understand that a focus on communicating plants at a price is a flawed expectation because the only way you can manage that outcome is to continue to sell at a lower price.

However, if you communicate why these plants will benefit them (i.e., lifestyle/quality of life enhancements), how a service you provide will

make their lives easier/more productive or how dealing with you will provide a better experience for them, then you have set achievable expectations; it's then up to you to deliver on them.

Consider that you have two opportunity groups to tap into to grow your business ... your existing customers and those who are not yet purchasing from you.

Your goal with your existing customers is to get them to buy more, more frequently.

With your potential customers, your goal is to get them through your front door in the first place and then retain them.

The levels of expectations you set may be somewhat different for each group based on their experience with the products, but the need to establish and communicate the expectations remains the same for both.

Setting expectations is for the benefit of your consumer, providing them with a benchmark to judge you and your products' ability to perform.

By meeting and exceeding these expectations, delighting your customer, you will also reap the benefits of your efforts through increased sales, higher customer retention and engaging and developing a new and broader consumer base.

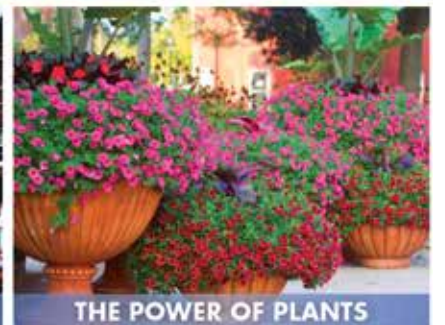
I leave you with this thought ... "He who establishes and clearly communicates realistic and achievable expectations, and then successfully controls the outcome, wins." **LGR**

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