

Getting to First Base... with your Customer

By Cheryl Crumb

In our game of "Customers for Keeps" we introduced you to the game board, the Customer Relationship Diamond, a baseball metaphor for helping our customer win. His objective: Get a home run, a measure of his competitive success. Our role: Use our knowledge and skills to get him safely to each base.

First base.... Hosting...the entry to the game. How do we advance our customer to this start-off position? We must anticipate his needs and prepare accordingly, thus positioning him with a firm lead-off. At the macro level, our business offers policies, procedures, information and comforts that communicate "you're special". There used to be a wonderful store in the Markham area known as Alive & Well. They entertained busloads of people who journeyed for hours because a day at the store was a pampering experience. Although they sold ladies clothing and household items, their mission was "to make women feel good about themselves".

They welcomed visitors with a fun display of customs border crossing and signs that said, "You don't have to drive to the U.S. for duty free prices". Inside, picture a galleon ship in the centre of the store inviting children to climb, play and watch videos under the Skull and Crossbones flag. Husbands or other politically correct partners were invited to relax in reclining chairs where they were offered beverages and reading material. Signs on the dressing room doors said, "Bring in as many clothes to try on as you wish." Compare that to the locked change room doors and "Maximum of 5 articles at any time" banners of most clothing outlets. The store sent hand-drawn monthly flyers to favoured customers with competitions, quizzes and "did you know" info as well as the ubiquitous bargain specials. In other words, the store's strategy anticipated the mental, physical and emotional needs of its patrons and had systems, policies and practices in place to accommodate. Everything communicated "we are easy to do business with" and "we value your patronage".

We can take this same strategy down to the individual level. Imagine, not only a store that caters to the customer, but a service provider who is attentive and hosting.

Consider that customers have needs coming from three distinct areas: need for information, need for physical well-being and need for emotional wellness.

Our All-Star service provider knowingly anticipates that customers will have a thirst for certain information. So, he has at the ready printed price comparisons between brands, the latest Consumers Reports articles on selected products, an easy-to-install set of instructions that translates the typical Japanese techno-speak into layperson language, leading expert recommendations on the number and placement of speakers for various size rooms, guidelines on what to do and not do when using digital cameras, a list of web site locations that share customer usage tips... All are catalogued for each retrieval. How does

being. We appreciate creature comforts, whether for body, mind or soul. Enter your establishment as a customer might. Where would you want a chair placed? How about an inviting drink of purified water? What kind of background rhythm is conducive to thinking and comparing? What kind of lighting is most relaxing to an enquiring mind? Is the bathroom inviting? Is there an area for young children to play safely while the parent browses? How about a tray of nibbles so a rumbling stomach doesn't interrupt the purchase decision. The service provider's aim is to reduce distractions which interfere with the buying process.

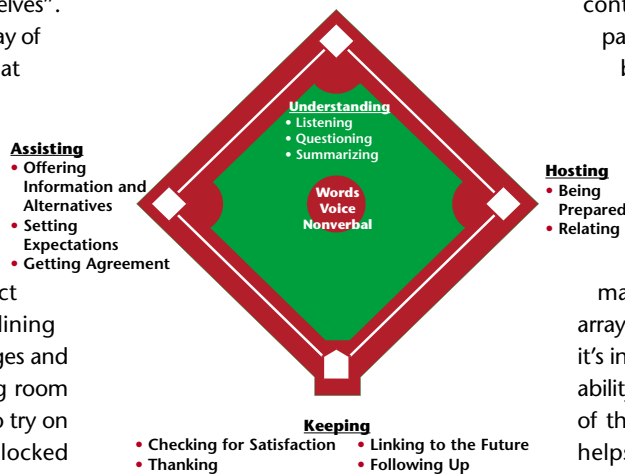
The final element of our hosting trilogy is anticipating the customer's emotional mood, and being prepared to acknowledge that mood. An otherwise normal and collected shopper might walk in with a crying child, and feel the personal frustration of being out of control and slightly embarrassed. Another patron might be very conscious of his lack of background knowledge and fear looking stupid to the retailer or other shoppers.

Yet another might be angry because he had just spent 45 minutes driving in the area, unable to locate your business establishment. Recognizing that customers aren't clinical purchasing machines helps a retailer prepare for the array of moods, and adjust his response so that it's in alignment and harmony. Empathy is the ability to feel what the customer feels. It's one of the most highly rated service practices. It helps us take customers from whatever emotional distractive place they're in, to a rational space of buying intelligence.

So, what is the Hosting lesson? Treat your customer as you would an honoured guest in your home. Ensure your systems, policies, and practices anticipate their spoken and unspoken questions, concerns and needs. Recognize that as customers we simultaneously crave information, a feeling of comfort and personal well-being, and a place where our sentiments are acknowledged.

With this homework done, the customer will be safe at first and you'll have helped him get there!

Customer Relationship Diamond



our superstar know what customers ask questions about and want information on? He has listened very carefully to customers and made a list of common concerns. He's proactively called past customers and asked the question, "what information would you appreciate receiving from me when you are searching to find the right TV - Stereo - CD player - digital camera - appliance - fill in the blank"? Hosting takes homework and it begins with the service provider putting himself in the place of an enquiring buyer.

But information is only one element of our hosting triangle. As Customers, we also have an unconscious need to soothe our well-