



ILLUSTRATION: RON RENNELL, LCT ART DIRECTOR

DEVELOPING AN EAR FOR CLIENTS

A LEADING CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERT EXPLAINS WHY OPERATORS NEED TO PAY MORE ATTENTION TO HOW THEY TREAT THEIR CLIENTS IN A TOUGHER ECONOMY.

By *Martin Romjue, LCT editor*

AMITYVILLE, N.Y. — Randi Busse brings a special perspective to the challenges of chauffeured transportation. On a professional level, the founder and president of the Workforce Development Group Inc. advises businesses on how to improve their customer service. On a personal level, she uses the chauffeured services of limousine operators about once a month.

"I draw upon my customer experience to talk about how companies are taking care of customers," said Busse, who advises

companies and groups on customer retention. As a speaker, Busse has appeared before the Maryland Limousine Association, the Long Island Limousine Association, the New England Livery Association, and the Philadelphia Regional Limousine Association. "I am passionate about the experiences I have as a customer. I feel like I'm a voice for the customers."

Upon returning from a business trip that included chauffeured service, Busse shared her insights with LCT Magazine in late October about the state of customer service and what operators are missing.

How has the recession changed service expectations among customers and standards among service providers?

I think companies are starting to realize that customers are being picky about who they are spending money with. If customers are not being treated well, they will not do business with you. We've become more finicky. If we spend money, we want to get good ROI. Companies have to be more competitive and attentive. If all they do is spit out price, they will

not give customers a clear differentiation between companies.

I make test calls and pretend to be a prospective customer. I am amazed what type of conversations and non-conversations I'm having with companies. I call a company and they answer, "Limousines!" Or they sound interrupted when I'm calling. Or they just give me price. No one is asking me for my business. When customers are calling, they have a need. Someone will solve that problem or need for them. They want to call

someone who wants their business, knows what they are talking about, and will do whatever is necessary to delight the customer. You can't look like a million dollars and sound like a \$1.50.

What examples of good customer service practices have you observed in chauffeured transportation?

I wish I had 100 of them to share. But I have to tell you I'm not terribly impressed with the type of experiences I have with test calls and when I'm a

"EMPLOYEES FOR LIFE, CUSTOMERS FOR LIFE." EMPLOYEES COME BEFORE CUSTOMERS. YOU WON'T HAVE THE CUSTOMERS IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT EMPLOYEES TAKING CARE OF THEM.



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passenger. The best type of experience is when the chauffeur reads you and is focused on you.

What then are some examples of bad customer service practices you have observed in chauffeured transportation?

I took a ride [recently] and the chauffeur talked incessantly. I was looking forward to downtime, thinking, making phone calls, and looking through e-mail. He kept talking about the sights, the Yankees, etc. I wasn't interested in having a conversation. That's part of the customer experience. It's knowing your passenger and taking your cue from the passenger. If the passenger is chatting with you, then have a conversation. If the passenger is not talking, then just drive and that's the end of it.

I had another driver who put on classical music, which was nice. He then changed it and put on rock music. That was not my taste of music. The ride should be about me, not about him. When you think of who's touching your customer, the chauffeur has just as much of an impact on the customer experience as the people answering the phone. You have to delight them or disappoint them.

Another driver on a ride was wearing heavy cologne. That bothered me because I have a sensitivity to smell. It was a long car ride. One had a jacket, the other didn't. One had a newspaper in the back of the car, the other one didn't. Consistency is important, especially if I'm using the same company over and over again.

Once at 6 a.m., I had a car waiting for me outside of a hotel. I assumed it was mine. The chauffeur took my bag and put it in the trunk and didn't say anything to me. How did he know I was the right passenger? I said I was "Randi Busse" and gave him the name of my company. He

said, "OK." I told him I was headed to the airport. He said, "OK." I told him I was flying to Ohio. He said, "OK." I was doing all the work. I don't want to do all the work. You need to make it easy for customers to do business with you.

What are the most important qualities for chauffeured transportation employers to look for in prospective employees?

I find a lot of companies are looking for someone with experience in the industry or experience in the job. I don't always agree with that. If you've had a bad experience with a chauffeur or customer service representative at a limo company, those working were experienced with those companies. Just because you've been doing something for a period of time doesn't mean you do it well. I'm a big fan of hiring based on attitude and then training for skills. I can't teach you how to be nice, empathetic, and how to show that you care. If you don't come with basic communication skills and a desire and commitment to the position and the company, I don't want you working for me.

There are so many voices out there advocating specific customer service solutions. How do you separate the worthwhile from the merely generic?

What they should be listening for is... that they should be listening. Customers are looking for connections and being made to feel special. They need someone to hear what they are saying and what they are not saying. We have reports and forms and fields to fill out and we get caught up in tasks. But there is a human being on the other end of the phone, at the counter, or in the back of the car. We should find a way to be present in the conversations we're having with customers, and really listen to them and find out what's important. There is no new way to take care of customers. You need to put yourself in their shoes and think about what you want when you are a customer because you are no different from your customers. We all want the same things. We all put our pants on one leg at a time. When it comes to hiring employees, you need to hire people who have a service mentality.

What are the best motivations and practices in cultivating a positive workforce/staff that truly cares about its clients?

Are your employees thinking and acting like owners of the business? When employees are handling customers, they don't care a lot of times. Some are just here for the paycheck. It's important to help create a culture of ownership among employees, so they are thinking and acting like the owners. If they are, they will be conscious of the experiences they are providing to the customers.

I also look at the way the owner and manager are treating the employees. How they treat employees has an impact on how employees treat customers. I have one client whose mission statement is: "Employees for life, customers for life." Employees come before customers. You won't have the customers if you don't have the right employees taking care of them. If you micro-manage employees and don't empower them, if you don't give feedback, if you yell and scream at employees, your employees are not going to be motivated to provide positive experiences to the customer.

What is an example of a company that has increased its revenues as a result of improving customer service?

Red Bank Limo in Red Bank, N.J. I've never met [operator] Bill Atkins in person but we're on each other's e-mail lists and connected on Facebook. He is living out the customer service differentiation in his company. He had a 29% [revenue] increase September over September. He wrote, "I love to figure out better to do what I do better." What I got from him is he is all about the customer service experience. He goes out of his way so that his customers are happy. He's a guy that models himself after companies that get the whole customer experience, like the Ritz, like Southwest Airlines. You don't have to be one of those big companies; you can scale the experience down to whatever level it is that you are in. He makes careful hiring decisions and makes an investment in his company. **LCT**



Bill Atkins