



Defining the Gold Standard

Perspectives on Outstanding Member Service



The “Gold Standard” for club service is often elusive, always pursued, and anything but standard. Truly exceptional service is that which adapts itself to each and every member, while still harkening back to the unique culture of the private club at hand.

Achieving this intangible concept has many elements and varying approaches, but with one indisputable motivating factor: exemplary service is the backbone of the private club industry.

Despite the differing needs of members, clubs have a good place to start: hiring the right people for the right job, going above and beyond the call of duty, and creating a level of quality service from the top down that rewards innovation and adaptability, while providing a set of standard practices on which staff can fall back. These are merely the first steps in creating a service culture unique to your club and tailored to your members.

We’ve compiled pieces from top industry professionals highlighting the overarching elements of outstanding service, while bringing different perspectives on how to achieve that goal—attempting to define that *je ne sais quoi* that takes service from acceptable to unforgettable.



Great Service is About Great Anticipation

BY FRANK VAIN

Getting to CordeValle had taken some time and effort. It had been a four-hour flight to San Francisco, and then more than an hour's drive south of the city. I was ready to settle into my room and relax, but with the check-in procedure still looming, I wasn't there just yet. Having never been to the property, I wasn't sure what I'd find when I pulled up to the security gate. It was late, and I was tired from the road. Would my welcome be smooth and warm, or would it be the typical series of missed opportunities?

My trepidation and weariness quickly melted away when, in response to my query about being in the right place and wanting to check in, the guard smiled and said, "Hello, Mr. Vain, we've been expecting you!" His special turn of phrase was a pleasant departure from the usual drill. You know how it goes—the scanning of a clipboard in silence to determine if I really was expected and the dutiful filling out of that oversized card you're supposed to hang from your rearview mirror. Not here. This fellow had been expecting me! His welcome immediately put me at ease and, in many ways, set the bar high, since if I was expected there was no excuse for them to fail to meet my expectations over the next several days. They didn't.

The second step of my arrival was as superior as the first. When my car reached the clubhouse entrance, the valet opened the door and said, "Welcome, Mr. Vain." Forewarned by the gatekeeper, he used my name, welcomed me, and set about briefing me on the rest of the arrival process. When I entered the lobby and found my paperwork already spread on the counter, I realized this was a special place. They got it. I've been through many a security gate and have stood at countless hotel desks over the years, and this experience at CordeValle stands out as the best. Simple stuff in many ways, but the beauty of these simple acts is that I still remember them years later. They were exactly what I most needed at the time.

In doing some thinking about the "gold standard" for service, this sequence came flooding back to me. We can often describe

in great detail a botched service experience, but what are the components of great service? I think the difference is this: Good service is executing the fundamentals: a friendly and professional attitude, attention to detail and high standards, good communication and, of course, hard work. Great service encompasses all of those elements, but it goes that much farther by knowing what the customer is going to want or need almost before they do. It includes all the essentials, but it has that special touch that puts it above the rest. It isn't grand or flashy, but brilliant in its simplicity and intuition. It's what the iPhone is to the Blackberry, the Mac to the PC.

In order to make your club a provider of great service, you must deconstruct the members' experiences, and identify what they will be looking for at important points along the way. The guests at the gate want to know that they are in the right place, and they are going to be anxious to get on with their experience. Put them at ease by training the security detail to understand these feelings and to provide a warm welcome. Guests are going to have to sign in, so why not have the paperwork laid out for them when they walk in? Make sure the towel is already on the golf cart when they show up to play a round, or have the pitcher of ice-cold water sitting at the entrance to the locker room on a hot day. These little touches are what comprise great service because they say to the members that they are important—that you understand them and you want them to be comfortable and relaxed. *We value you.*

When you think of the great service experiences you've had, you may not recall the fastest server or the most knowledgeable sommelier, but you'll recall a little extra touch that was there when you were only just beginning to think how nice it would be to have it. So train your staff to be effective, but spend an equal amount of time digging into the feel and emotion of the member experience so you can make special features a part of the everyday routine.

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Exceptional Member Experience

BY JIM MULDOWNEY

There were two references to “customer service” on Google that caught my eye. The first is fairly general: “Customer service is often seen as an activity, performance measurement and a philosophy. That is why generally speaking, one single service definition does not exist.” The second is more applicable to the private club industry: “Member service is a proactive attitude that can be summed up as: I care and I can do.”

The second definition reflects my experience in this industry and is what I consider the most important criterion for hiring service personnel. I strongly believe we must hire for attitude and then train for skill sets. If “service posture” attitude does not already exist in the prospective hire, we will never be able to devote enough training on specific skill sets so that man or woman could eventually provide exceptional member service.

The first definition of service, albeit general, still tells us something very important about our industry. When I was with Master Club Advisors, we offered a “Service and Facilities Audit.” This was basically a “secret shopper” service. We visited more than 60 clubs throughout the country over a two year period. While performing these audits, I learned two valuable lessons. The first is that a club typically offered one of three different service levels:

- **Passive service** – The staff acknowledged members and their guests, but never initiated a conversation. Staff was there if needed, but did not intrude.

For private clubs, there really is not an “ideal” service level—and that’s the way it should be. The “ideal” level is whatever members of a specific club want it to be.

- **Moderate service** – The staff greeted members and guests in a friendly manner—and also engaged in small talk or asked if they could be of service to members and guests.

- **High-touch service** – The staff exhibited high levels of energy and were constantly thinking of ways to “exceed the expectations” of members and guests.

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Each of the clubs I audited had developed its own “service culture” that reflected the desires of its membership. I found that clubs in the East (particularly city clubs in the Northeast) generally operated on passive service levels. Midwest clubs provided a moderate service level, and clubs in the West (particularly the newer, developer-initiated clubs) embraced the high-touch service model.

Again, there’s no right or wrong level of customer service. For those of us in club management—as professionals or as Board members—the implication is clear: Look at your specific club and at the customer service needs and expectations of YOUR members. Only then can you determine whether or not you are providing the service culture that satisfies the expectations of your members. Don’t judge your type of service level by what’s being provided on the other side of town—or on the other side of the country. Judge it by what your members expect.

The second lesson I learned from these audits is the importance of consistency in the service level provided throughout the club. At one of the clubs, the food and beverage service attitude was excellent. But at the tennis center, a young man behind the counter greeted us with, “Hey, can I help you dudes?” So take a walk around your club and visit each and



Member Service: What's Different in 2011?

BY CHARLES D. DORN

every operation. You may discover a few “micro-service cultures” that are far different from the overall service level expected by your members.

No matter what the culture, most members appreciate the “Cheers” approach: “Everybody knows your name.” At The Club at Las Campanas, we have a large membership (720 members, nearly half of them seasonal residents), and our members favor the high-touch service level. As we recently transitioned to member ownership and control, we hired many new front-line staff. We’re now in the process of gathering photographs of our members to upload to our point-of-sale software, along with other pertinent data: favorite beverages, menu items, etc. This should help our new hires become more familiar with our members and deliver the service levels they expect.

We also are launching a simple but effective (we hope!) customer service initiative. Every employee will wear a small button saying, “Eme.” This stands for “Exceptional member experience.” Why are the last two letters underlined? Because, as every staff person will tell any member who asks, “Exceptional member experience starts with ME!”

The right service level starts with hiring men and women with the right attitude, then investing a lot of time in skill-set training. It’s also our responsibility to nurture them, assure they are fairly compensated, give them opportunities to grow and provide regular feedback on their performance. This will lead to loyal, long-term staff that will naturally develop the right type of relationship with each member and guest. This also leads to development of a tradition of mutual respect between members and staff—highly valued regardless of the specific service culture.

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Danny Meyer, New York restaurateur extraordinaire writes in his book, *Setting the Table*, “In the end, what’s more meaningful is creating positive, uplifting outcomes for human experiences and human relationships. Business, like life, is all about how you make people feel.” As we emerge from one of the worst economic downturns in our lives, clubs have taken this sentiment to heart and have begun to alter their approach customer service.

So how is customer service in 2011 different than it had been in days past? To begin, one must recognize today’s members are different. While once managers had to deal with “Traditionalists,” we now deal with “Baby Boomers,” “Gen X,” “Gen Y” and the upcoming “Gen Z” or “Zippies” (those under the age of 10). Each of these demographic sectors has different wants and desires and clubs have no choice but to adjust their strategies to appeal to each segment.

Consider how these different demographic groups perceive service. The range is broad. Traditionalists favor slow, formal service laden with precision and formality, while Gen X, Y and Z prefer less formality and place emphasis on speed instead. This disparity can wreck havoc on clubs unless the problem is confronted directly.

When asked about member service, Michael R. Feil, CCM of New York’s Westchester Country Club said, “At one time you delivered a “club product.” Now we deliver a unique experience to each member. If you have 1,000 members, you have 1,000 unique experiences.” Feil went on to emphasize the need for clubs to track member’s individual needs to help ensure a consistent, unique experience for each guest.

Arlene Spiegel, founder and president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates and the former director of the Global Food and Beverage Practice at PricewaterhouseCoopers, said, “A club can become intimate with members’ ‘special needs’ and provide



them before asked. Much like a good hotel knows a guest's favorite pillow, room or wake up time, a club can keep a profile of a guest's favorite seat in the restaurant, preparation of their favorite dish, and even which server they prefer or at which table they like to be seated."

No discussion on great service would be complete without discussing the importance of hiring the right people. The right staff is paramount to the success of service at any club according to John Dorman, General Manager of the University Club in New York City. Dorman said, "It all starts at the employee's date of hire, how they approach their position, and their perception of both the club and their new position." Dorman meets with every new employee to show them how they fit into the club and, equally important, how the club fits into their lives.

Technology also plays a vital role in the success of today's customer service programs. The Four Seasons Hotels' technology platform stores guest history on multiple levels. The primary level is used for guest preferences. Employees will consistently add data to a guest file about likes and dislikes. The second level is reserved for incidents and data that managers may find important, but do not affect the day-to-day experience. According to Wolf Hengst, former president of the Four Seasons, one of the reasons the company has been successful is the employees' adherence to this system.

So how do clubs raise the bar? According to Feil and others, the team needs to be tuned to member needs while the club's technology platform supports their efforts. Accordingly, staff must also have access to this data as part of their day-to-day routine. John Dorman and Danny Meyer might suggest that people are the key to great customer service.

Even after great people are hired, the process has just begun. Training and education play a vital role in upholding customer service standards. Years ago, clubs hired employees, gave them a locker, a uniform and maybe a handbook, and told them to go do their job. Now, we select the right employee, put them through a rigorous orientation and training program, and then give them the tools to exceed our expectations.

If we do our jobs well, members will constantly be impressed with their clubs and how they are being wowed each and every day. Is your standard high enough for your club?

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The Fundamentals of High Functioning Service Cultures

BY DAN DENEHY

Exceptional service experiences are personal, anticipatory and emotional. These concepts are elusive to most memberships, management teams and staff. Yet, when one experiences extraordinary service, it stirs a series of emotions—gratification, satisfaction and excitement and hopefully brings a smile to one's face. In the best service environments, the team that delivers this high level of service will in fact experience those same emotions when delivering these experiences.

The best clubs not only understand these elusive concepts, but also articulate them in their daily delivery of exceptional service. At their core, the finest service environments not only have a pervasive desire to serve imbedded in their culture, but on a transactional level each and every employee has a desire to please members and their guests. In its simplest form, clubs want to make people happy. So how do high functioning service cultures accomplish this? Here are some fundamentals:

- Management and staff are empowered to ensure that the experience is excellent cross functionally. Every organization is departmentalized, yet the desire and expectation to please the guest goes beyond the golf shop for the professional or the dining room for the chef—everyone on the team takes ownership for the entire experience.

- There is a huge commitment to training—from the top down. Excellent training transcends serving from the left and removing from the right.

- The Golden Rule only somewhat applies. It's more complicated than the clichéd "do unto others" philosophy. The best service environments teach that guests have varied needs. That yes, the standard will by and large suffice for most service experiences, but the personalization regarding what will make each member happy varies from guest to guest. Outstanding service environments provide subtle touches that feel as if they were done especially for each guest. Consider doing unto others that which meets their unique and specific needs.

There are standards. Lots of them. So while staff is empowered to shape the member and guest experiences in whatever positive way possible, and are given latitude to accomplish this, there is a rigor and discipline that provide a backbone for member services. The more specific standards are defined and adhered to, the more precise the service process can become. Standards help to define an agreed upon level of service, and help compensate for those staff members who may not be able to anticipate every need on their own. Examples include everything from being greeted by name at least seven times during a dining or golf experience at the club, never waiting more than two minutes after being seated to be greeted by their service person, having a drink order taken and the drink delivered within four minutes of being seated, and having the two club colors used for golf tees and placed in color groups in the golf cart, to having one color tee on one side and another on the opposite side at the beginning of each round.

Preparation is critical in order for the staff to have the tools at their disposal and guidelines in place to enable them to deliver a flawless experience. There should be multiple lists with defined standards in all departments detailing times, frequencies, accountabilities of basic service procedures and how to accomplish each one. Standards and their implicit processes are at the core of excellent service, and yet are so often forgotten within an organization. In a recent member survey we conducted at a client club, there was a phrase that was used frequently: "The staff is caring and inept."

With the prevalence of online surveys today, it is relatively easy to quantify what was once thought to be only "qualifiable." We can measure member perceptions of the guest experience with the ease of a 5 or 10-question online "snippet" survey. These can be done for all member experience areas, periodically measuring improvement over time and giving management a real-time window showing where they should direct their efforts. The intrinsic value of the experience survey enables members to provide feedback to the club. Surveys provide a voice to many who sometimes choose to vote with their feet.

With specific, defined standards that are comprehensive, precise and informed, along with rigorous training, communication and evaluation, management can hold staff accountable for delivering service held to a standard of excellence, in the style set forth by the club.

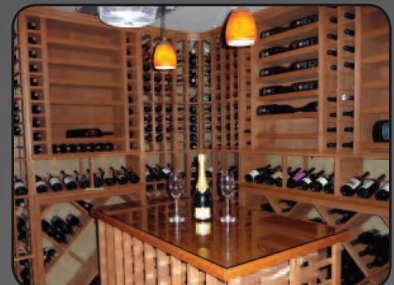
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