

[Back](#)

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# Greg Linnemanstons column: Design customer experience to express true brand promise

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Have you ever gone out to dinner and gotten the impression that your waitress would be happier if you weren't there? You're not alone.

Industry experts tell us that American consumers have never experienced service quality as bad as that which we're seeing today. From the indifferent teenagers working the fast food drive-through window to the automated customer service directory we're forced to use to speak with our (pick one) airline/bank/insurance company/401k administrator, the current state of customer service is a constant affront to our sensitivities as self-proclaimed civilized people.

It's ironic that at the same time service quality is at an all-time low, as a culture we probably have never been more dependent on other people for service in so many different ways. That clearly translates into opportunity for any business or organization able to really deliver a better experience.

So it's no surprise that customer service consultants are hot, and gaining credibility as important advisers to businesses trying to gain competitive advantage. We've got two of them right here in Appleton.

Jim Sullivan, founder and president of Sullivision Inc., has been advising restaurant chains, operators, and the food manufacturers who supply them since 1992. Sullivan is well known in the food service industry for recognizing that waiters and waitresses are actually customer service representatives and sales people, and need to be trained to perform well in those dual roles.

Another local customer service guru is Steve Tyink, president of Attach, a consulting firm Tyink founded recently after a long career with Bergstrom Automotive. Tyink was part of the team that transformed Bergstrom into a service standout among auto dealers, introducing such unexpected touches as fresh flowers in rest rooms and freshly baked cookies in waiting rooms.

There's no doubt that improving your overall service culture can have an impact on your business, through two closely related ways. Your current customers will enjoy the experience enough to come back, and if they liked it enough, they'll tell a friend or two. Or more.

Now, the important question: what do you want people to tell their friends about your business? That should depend on what you want your business to be known for, and what you want people to be attracted to and expect from your business.

Think about it. If I'm in the market for a new Harley and visit a local dealer showroom, a salesman offering cappuccino and a fresh cookie would be downright disturbing. I would be much more motivated by a salesman who looked and acted like Harleys were an important part of his life. Sincere passion and honest commitment to the bikes would matter more than perfect grammar or Sunday manners. He had better be wearing either leather or jeans. Dockers? Don't trust him.

Likewise, if I visited a specialty medical practice for a consultation on a serious condition, access to a self-service snack bar wouldn't be nearly as important to me as being met by someone on the medical staff who would save me from sitting alone in the waiting room and could empathetically explain what I should expect and what was happening next. With that kind of service experience, I could tell my friends with conviction that this practice really understood how patients feel.

Do you think you know what's potentially most important to your customers experience with your business? Start with your core promise, and find service elements that reinforce your promise. Hire frontline people who best represent the true "best" personality of your business, and train them so they can deliver on your promise consistently.

Taking this approach will elevate you from generic good service to true, outstanding service. And that's something worth talking about.