

York Rite Masonry as a Customer Service Experience

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An excellent customer service orientation has been an important part of the business world for more than 25 years. Far extending the simplistic notion that the "customer is right," as a business places an emphasis on serving a customer, its intent is to retain that person for life, making its products and services "top of mind," and encouraging the individual to spread the good news to others.

A customer service orientation applies to York Rite Masonry in several important ways. Here, I argue that there are strong lessons that we can learn and apply in our fraternity that have already made a significant impact in many types of businesses. I suggest that in order to grow and prosper, such an orientation is an important perspective for us to take.

CONSIDER MEMBERS WHO PARTICIPATE IN YORK RITE EVENTS AS CUSTOMERS

Strange as it may seem, our Companions and Sir Knights in York Rite Masonry are customers of our products and services. In many ways, they parallel customer behavior in many types of businesses. Like customers, they consciously choose to spend their time with us from a variety of other available options. They transfer resources, such as dues and donations, to us. They have expectations that they believe we can fulfill. They tell others, inside and outside of our fraternity, about their levels of satisfaction with what we furnish them.

And, like customers of any business, our members can decide not to attend or participate, as well as discontinue their affiliation with us.

CONSIDER EVERY INSTANCE IN WHICH MEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN YORK RITE EVENTS AS AN EXPERIENCE

Business literature has long considered the interaction between a customer and an enterprise to be an "experience." Indeed, when customers rave or complain about a business, it is the actual experience that they focus on. Many businesses have taken great pains to ensure that the experiences their customers receive are positive. Several industries have significantly metamorphosed their operations to provide unique and fulfilling experiences. Remember that just as any employee "is" the business to a customer, we "are" York Rite Masonry to others. "Take a good look at yourself-you're someone else's impression of Masonry" rings true.

Starbucks is not a coffee shop: It is a place to relax, read, network, and even work on a laptop computer. Booksellers, such as Borders and Barnes and Noble, now have cafes, open reading areas, dedicated sections for listening to music, and rooms for authors or singers to showcase their talents. Home Depot and Lowe's are not hardware stores; they are home improvement stores, with events that are creative, engaging, and enjoyable. Grocery stores are now "one-stop shopping" for a wide variety of products and services, including banking, eye care, flowers, and a host of other things.

The emphasis of all of these enterprises is on the "experience." Each business wants to attract customers, provide them with a pleasant and fulfilling time, and motivate them to return and tell others.

CUSTOMER SERVICE SATISFACTION REACTIONS

Regardless of the business or service, customer satisfaction ranges along four dimensions on a continuum, from low satisfaction to high satisfaction (Schneider & Bowen, 1999). These dimensions are: (1) outrage, (2) dissatisfied, (3) satisfied, and (4) delighted.

Think about a recent trip you made to the grocery store. How was it? If you were highly

dissatisfied, you were outraged, and you likely vowed never to return, even if it meant driving well out of your way to another store or location. If you were dissatisfied, the experience fell short of your expectations, and you will consider shopping elsewhere, or at best, return without great enthusiasm. If you were satisfied, your expectations were met, and you will go back again. If you were highly satisfied, your expectations were exceeded, and you will likely look for ways to go back to the store, even if it is not necessary or it is out of your way to do so.

What was the highly satisfying experience like? Perhaps, several employees warmly greeted you. Maybe the store had several stations where you could sample food items. The store may have had a number of items on sale and the prices were irresistible. You had your choice of several fast-moving checkout lines, staffed by very friendly people.

Satisfaction reactions yield one of three outcomes: (1) defection-you will never partake of the experience again, (2) ambivalence-you will repeat the experience, but you will also look at other options and choices, or (3) loyalty-the experience is "top of mind" to you and a priority. We can apply the satisfaction continuum and these reactions to York Rite Masonry. When members are highly dissatisfied, they defect. They not only do not participate any longer, but they renounce their membership or stop paying dues. They may spread negative news and feelings to others, both inside and outside of our fraternity. When members are dissatisfied or

satisfied, they are ambivalent. We are not a priority to them, but they will continue to support the organization.

When members are highly satisfied, they are fiercely loyal, and they actively look for ways to help the organization prosper.

The telltale sign, however, is when participants talk with others. Notice that there are two conditions under which participants talk. When they are outraged, they tell others about the experience in a negative way and find ways to spread the knight templar news to anyone who wants to listen. When they are delighted, they evangelize about the experience, and in excited and energetic tones, encourage others to partake of the experience. However, when they are ambivalent, they do not talk with others about the experience. I believe that we are ambivalent about most of our experiences as customers. Think about a typical day. You filled up your car with gasoline. You bought a cup of coffee and a bagel. You met with a group of colleagues. You went through a fast-food drive-through to get a hamburger. You went to a hardware store and got a tool. You went home and read the paper. All of these simply met your expectations or fell just short. You were neither outraged nor delighted. You said nothing about them to anyone.

But wait: What if someone came over to your car and washed your windshield, checked the air in your tires, and looked under your hood-at a self-service gas station? You would be delighted.

You would tell others about your experience. What if you had trouble finding the tool you wanted at the hardware store and it took you 15 minutes to find someone to help? And what if that person didn't know how to help you? And what if he returned later and brought someone along who was rude to you? And what if you got to the checkout line, waited for what seemed like forever, and the price was incorrect? You would be outraged. You would tell others about your experience. The reality is that most customers are in the dissatisfied-satisfied area. This means they are ambivalent about their loyalty and are most likely to defect in search of another source. This is as true about York Rite Masonry as it is about other experiences. Our "card-carrying" members, who do not attend regularly, are our greatest risk.

MEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN YORK RITE EVENTS TO FULFILL NEEDS, WANTS, AND DESIRES

I will posit that the reason that our members attend York Rite functions is to fulfill needs. These vary considerably. Some attend for camaraderie and companionship. Others desire to participate in the degrees from our unique ritual. Still others may attend for spirituality, others for food, and others to get their money's worth of activity for the dues they pay. When members have unfulfilled needs and if their expectations are violated, they will express outrage, and they will defect. When members have unfulfilled needs and if their expectations are not met, they will be dissatisfied but won't talk. If their needs are met and they are satisfied but won't

talk, they are ambivalent, and at risk to defect. When members have fulfilled needs and if their expectations are exceeded, they will be delighted, and they will talk. They will be fiercely loyal to our organization.

SELF-ESTEEM IS A POWERFUL NEED, WANT, AND DESIRE MEMBERS WANT MET BY PARTICIPATION IN YORK RITE EVENTS

I suggest that self-esteem is a significant "make or break" principle that either enhances or detracts from our members' satisfaction with York Rite Masonry and that results in their reaction from outrage to delight. Why self-esteem? Regardless of how they spend their time, people want to feel good about themselves. Our members in York Rite Masonry are no exception. People find delight in experiences that make them feel that they have made the proper choices with their time. People want to leave an event feeling better about themselves than when they arrived.

We look for events that reinforce the belief that we have made proper choices in our selections for how we invest our time. The most powerful source for this is the realization that because we have watched or participated in a good degree, updated our mutual lives with our Brethren, eaten a good meal, or felt spiritually fulfilled, we feel better about how we have spent our time. York rite events provide a unique opportunity for members to enhance their self-esteem. Our events provide members with the unique opportunity to experience brotherhood and companionship. All of Freemasonry is built upon instantaneous acceptance, as an individual rapidly progresses from stranger to friend to brother, meeting on the level, with peace and harmony prevailing.

That is the expectation that our members have when they decide to spend their time at a York Rite event. The question is to what extent does the event provide an experience that fulfills their expectations? To what degree does the member leave satisfied with the experience?

WHEN PARTICIPANTS LEAVE WITH HIGHER SELF-ESTEEM THAN WHEN THEY ARRIVED, THEY ALSO LEAVE WITH EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS, DELIGHT, AND HEIGHTENED LOYALTY

Therefore, our challenge in York Rite events is to provide an experience for participants that exceeds their expectations and delights them by raising their self-esteem. This results in loyalty and heightened activity in our organization.

The question remains, then, how do we create a favorable experience? Remember the premise: experiences engage participants in memorable ways.

The most memorable experiences use a mentality of theatre and stage. Anyone who has ever attended a play in New York on Broadway or a production in one of the grand houses in London will not soon forget the pageantry, sophistication, and

opulence of the experience. The work by Pine and Gilmore (1999) first applied the idea of the "experience economy" to business.

I will posit, therefore, that in York Rite Masonry we should make an intentional use of services as the "stage" and activities as "props" to engage an individual and provide an individual with a memorable event. To do this, our events must include four elements: (1) entertainment, (2) education, (3) escape, and (4) esthetics. Entertainment provides the "sense." Education provides the "learn." Escape provides the "be." Esthetics provides the "do."

What about your York Rite events are...

Entertaining? What can you do to get members to attend, stay, and come again?

Educational? What can you teach members that they will learn? Escaping? What

can you do to get members to concentrate on the "here and now"? Esthetical? What can you do to include an art, a spirit, an altering of feelings?

SURPRISE IS THE KEY

Surprise is the difference between what the member perceives he will get from the experience and what he really gets! When members are pleasantly surprised, they have a greater chance of having their expectations exceeded. This will raise their self-esteem concerning how they have spent their time. Therefore, they will respond with delight, tell others, and we are off to the races! Use suspense as a tool. Build in some unannounced elements into your event. Drop some hints, but don't "spill the beans." What about bringing in a singer, a humorist, a special program on something cryptic or esoteric? What about making a special dessert, such as Baked Alaska? The possibilities are endless. Inspire some curiosity. Make sure the surprise is positive! Obviously, delight depends upon the fact that surprise is not only welcomed, but also that it works. A humorist who is not funny will backfire. An educational program that is too simplistic will discourage those who are looking to learn. A dessert that is undercooked is worse than none at all. There are two key points I want to stress. First, every action you take contributes to the total experience you are staging! The devil is in the details. The execution of an event is only as good as the planning that went into it. A simple project planning chart works well for this. Make three columns on a sheet of paper. In the top row put "What," and in that column, list every possible activity that must be accomplished in order to successfully execute an event. In the next column, put "When," and place a milestone or deadline date by every activity. Then, reorder each of the activities from soonest to most distant. Finally, in the last column, put "Who," in order to designate the person or persons responsible for that activity. Second, staging an experience is not the sole responsibility of the presiding officer. Everyone plays a part in crafting a memorable experience. And without involvement, there is no commitment. Every High Priest, T.I.M., Eminent Commander, and all of our other presiding officers should attempt to convert individual tasks to teamwork as much as possible. It is difficult for people who actually contribute to an event to do anything but express excitement and add energy to it.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have suggested three things as we consider York Rite Masonry as a customer service experience. First, build the right experience. Second, delight your members with the experience. Third, they will leave with high self-esteem, they will be back, and they will bring others! Can you think of a better way for us to grow?

References

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