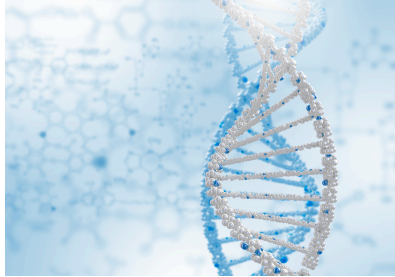


## The Service Gene – *does your front desk team have it in their DNA?*

First in a 2 part series of articles focused on Customer Service and Front Desk Operational Excellence.

After work one cold winter evening I toted my two young sons to the grocery store. As I put the boys back into their car seats, a wayward can of tomatoes rolled out of the shopping cart and under my SUV. Ugh! It was dark and I was in a skirt and heels. The last thing I wanted to do was crawl under the car to rescue those tomatoes. From over my shoulder came the voice of an angel “can I get that for you?” he asked. As I let him crawl under the car in his work clothes, the only thing I could think to say was “can I hire you?” He was exactly the type of person I wanted on my Customer Service team!



Wouldn't it be great if part of the interview process for hiring your front desk service team included following candidates around for a day or two? Imagine all of the things you would observe them doing. Do they hold doors open for others; do they return their shopping cart to the cart collection bin or cram it into a bush in the middle of the parking lot? How do they treat those that serve them - waiters and waitresses or the clerk at the dry cleaners? When shopping for clothing, do they rehang a blouse that is dangling haphazardly on a hanger? How do they drive? Courteously letting others change lanes in front of them – even wave them over and smile or do they use another type of hand gesture? Besides being unrealistic, this technique is simply just a bit creepy.

Short of following them around, how do you find and hire people who have service in their DNA? It may not be as difficult as you think especially if you focus on soft skills first. Studies by the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Mellon Foundation of Fortune 500 CEOs have found that 75 percent of long-term success of an employee depended on their people skills and only 25 percent on technical skills.

*“When the people are right, everything else will be right. When the people are wrong, just about any process or procedure you implement will fail.” Jim Buch – CEO, Entrepreneur*

Your front desk team is the face of your business. When hiring, focus on candidates who possess the authenticity of someone with the customer service gene – they will have an innate desire to ensure the needs of others come first and will do it happily with a sincere, warm and inviting smile. You can teach just about anyone technical skills required for your front desk as long as they have a desire and attitude to learn.

Interviewing a front desk candidate should consist of two parts. First is an assessment of initial impressions of the candidate. How do they present themselves? Do they make direct eye contact with you? Do they acknowledge others in your office with a warm smile and hello? Do they appear to enjoy being in a facility focused on children and families? What does their body language tell you? All are future clues as to how they will take care of your customers and handle tough situations when presented.

The second part of the interview should be full of a robust series of situation/behavioral questions, such as - ***What would you do if...***

- A caller says she received a gift certificate for a free session from Jane, the owner, but lost it.
- A customer comes to the front desk and has specific questions she wants addressed regarding charges on her account – she is angry and visibly upset.
- Mrs. Johnson comes to you to let you know she believes a facility promoting fitness for children should not sell junk food and would like it taken care of.
- All customer service staff members are helping other customers at the front desk. Another customer leans in and reports she has spilled coffee in the lobby and needs someone to clean it up.

Do their answers indicate they have the service gene? Do they put the needs of other first? Are they quick to think of customer friendly solutions and resolve the situation quickly?

If you search online for a list of characteristics customer service professionals possess, you will find words like empathetic, passionate, great communicator, relatable, self-control, patience, caring, compassionate and more. Realize up front you can't screen for everything but you can ask questions that provide insight on how your candidate thinks – be sure to include a few questions about their past service experience:

- Tell me about a particularly challenging customer situation you've dealt with in the past, what made it challenging and what did you do to resolve it? **What you're looking for:** Are they a strong communicator? Did they listen to the full question and provide a complete answer? You may also learn a little about their tolerance or patience level - was the situation truly challenging, or simply an upset customer? Lastly, you will expose their ability to problem solve – was their solution run of the mill or unique?
- Tell me about a situation where you were unable to resolve a problem or satisfy a customer completely and what you learned from it. **What you're looking for:** They may tell you this has never happened - if they're early in their service career, it may be true but highly unlikely. Even the best service providers feel that from time to time they could've done a better job to make someone happy. You also want to hear about what they learned from the situation. Every situation has a lesson attached to it and how they incorporate their learnings into their day to day service repertoire will give insight into their willingness to learn.

In addition to lots of situational and behavioral questions, you may want to implement a customer service screening tool. While I have not found one that is the “silver bullet” to hiring a great service person, search the internet, find one that fits your service style and implement it with your existing staff. If your best service person passes, that's the one for you, however don't use it as your final hiring criteria.

What if your existing team doesn't have the service gene? Is it trainable? Maybe – experience tells us that providing continual training around your expectations will help those who don't come by service naturally become better at their craft. Create continuous training

around real situations, how they were handled and the ideal resolution.

While “cookie cutter” solutions aren't always the right answer, you may want to develop a simple resolution process that can easily be adopted and trained. People without the service gene need more than the “ingredients” - instead provide the full recipe. An easy to remember step by step resolution plan may be as simple as:

**Listen** – Determine the problem. Be patient and never argue. Listen to what they are saying and never assume you've heard the problem before – treat them as if their situation is unique. Give your complete attention to fully understand the problem.

**Sincerely Apologize** – if you can't be sincere then don't say the words. Apologies must be warm, genuine and true – otherwise the customer will see the expression as false. A humble “I am so sorry this happened to you – let's see what we can do to make it right” may be all they need.

**Solve the Problem** - The key to recovering the customer is to solve the problem quickly. Once the situation is resolved, sit back and ask *“Is this Customer truly satisfied”*? If not, what can you do to really provide a WOW (WOW = **W**in them **O**ver with **W**onderful service)? Is there a simple gesture like a complimentary open gym pass to show how much you really care? Lastly, avoid using phrases such as “our policy is...” or “we aren't allowed to...”

Once you have the right people in place, great service continues with meeting customer expectations – they do expect you to be available and present when they need help. According to *The Value of Customer Experience, Quantified* an article published by the Harvard Business Review August 2014, it was determined that customer experience was a major driver of future revenue. They found with membership based business that members with poor experiences only have a 43% chance of being a member a year later while members who gave high service scores a 74% chance of remaining a member for at least another year. They also predicted future membership length based on the quality of experience. The difference: on average, a member who gives the lowest score will likely only remain a member for a little over a year. Compare that to a member who gives the highest score — they are likely to remain a member for another six years.

