

Innovative Customer Service is Random



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Short Communication

I watched a gourmet chef create a dozen breathtaking cupcakes for display in his bakery window. He mixed ingredients as if he had done it a hundred times, poured the batter into molds, and placed them in the oven on a precise degree. Once baked, he covered them with rich icing in different colors. But, then the magical step. He tossed sprinkles over the icing with complete abandon... exactly opposite from the precision used prior to that point. It turned a great cupcake into a truly special one.

The magic of innovative service is its unexpected feature. Great service can be carefully planned, crafted and taken out of the oven so to speak. But, when something unexpected happens; something as random as sprinkles on top of a cupcake, it captivates and enchants. At the end of a great breakfast as I was getting the check, the waitress brought me a complimentary go cup of coffee, a delightful value-added. But, when she unexpectedly pronounced it "our gift to you," masterful became mesmerizing.

The late B.F. Skinner was the renowned Harvard professor who did all that research you studied about in psychology 101. His interest was primarily in how various types of reinforcement impacted behavior. Like most scientist of his ilk, he did experiments on rats and pigeons. One of his most well-known experiments involved pigeons.

A pigeon was placed in a box with a food dispenser. The pigeon quickly learned that by picking a round, medal disk, a pellet of food would be dispensed. Skinner wondered how the schedule

of food dispensing might motivate the pigeon to peck the disk more. He set up three identical boxes, each with a pigeon. Box A gave the pigeon a pellet each time it was pecked (continuous reinforcement), Box B delivered a pellet every fourth time it was pecked (fixed interval reinforcement), and Box C surprised the pigeon with a pellet on a completely random, unpredictable basis. Which pigeon do you think pecked the metal disk the most frequently? You guess it! Box C! Welcome to the slot machines at a Las Vegas casino, the source of 85% a typical Vegas casino's revenue!

So, what does this have to do with customers and innovative service? When was the last time a service provider completely surprised you...I mean something positive that was totally unexpected? Customers don't get real surprise much anymore. The merchant at one time threw in an extra apple or donut once in a while because we were loyal customers. That's gotten too pricey. The front desk clerk at the hotel we frequented would occasionally upgrade us to a more expensive room. Now, the system automatic upgrades guests based on room availability and the guests rank in their affinity program ("You are one of our platinum guests!").

Customers are obviously not pigeons, blindly making decisions based solely on their DNA. But Skinner would tell us, if you want to motivate customers to be loyal by exceeding their expectations, you can elevate the power (he would call it valence) of your value-adds by making them positive, valuable and unexpected! He would be a champion of sprinkles.



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