



By Jim Bass

SMILE

YOU'RE IN LANDSIDE!

Difficult customers? Happens to the best of us, but your secret weapon is right on your face.

Smile! You're in landside. That phrase came to me one night as I lay in bed thinking about customer service and what we could do at the Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport, Little Rock (BHCNA), to improve or better understand what appears on the surface to be such a simple concept, but can have such complex implications at times.

Nobody in our business likes unhappy customers. Unfortunately, they can be a reality for those of us who work in a service industry, especially parking. It's like everybody wants to park their car but nobody wants to pay for it. What's up with that? I guess that's another story for another time.

It's this kind of logic that can keep a parking professional up at night, thinking about customer service.

Here at BHCNA, we try to be as proactive as possible in providing the best customer service. Our motto is, "Your problem is our priority." And most of us take that motto very seriously.

That said, sometimes it's a challenge trying to be all things to all people. Every so often you get that one customer who refuses to appreciate your willingness to bend over backwards, and who refuses to be swayed no matter what you say or do. I've found the best policy is to go that extra smile. That's not a typo—smile, no matter what the situation is, just smile. Your smile translates your willingness to help in the quickest amount of time.

The Difference

Does it help with the very difficult customers?

Sometimes. But the smile technique is something that

should always be used first thing as you approach the customer and your eyes lock. Just remember: SMILE. It's the **S**ingle **M**ost **I**mportant **L**andside **E**xpression. Nice acronym, huh?

I'm not talking about a crack in the face smile, not grinning like a Cheshire cat smile, not that haunting 1,000-yard, I've-been-in-operations-too-long stare, or the ever-popular looking-lost-from-the-looney-bin smile. The one I want to see is that landside SMILE that projects professionalism, confidence, and a willingness to help. I'm talking about that problem-solving, I'm here to make your airport experience the best it can be, SMILE!

Getting Through

That kind of warming smile can melt even those customers who seem to be frozen in the thickest ice. Believe me when I say it'll work 99 percent of the time.

Even the rudest customers still need to be heard and dealt with professionally and expediently.

Sometimes it's the customers who storm off appearing unmoved by your smile and professionalism who are secretly satisfied and will tell others of your great customer service and the way you solved their problem.

Never underestimate the power of the smile. It can be quite disarming even to the most challenging customer. I tell my landside staff to never get personal or emotional, but always remain cool and calm, and remember why we're here.

Our mission is simple: we are to ensure that every moment is a positive and productive one. Our smile is our secret weapon.

Building a Sandwich

I remembered something a manager friend of mind told me many years ago. He worked for one of those sandwich chains and asked me over lunch one day a question his company's managers asked all their management applicants during the interview process: What's the most important part of the sandwich?

I thought about it for a while. Bread, meat, or condiments were probably wrong—they were too obvious. I decided I'd show him my out-of-the-box mindset and amaze him with my creativity. The answer, I said, was attitude.

He said he was impressed and that I came very close (oh, well). He said most of the answers they received focused around the mechanics of making a sandwich—bread, meat, toppings, etc. The answer they looked for, he said, was the smile.

The smile is the most important part of the sandwich. And we all know what is meant by that: it doesn't matter how proficient you are or how knowledgeable you are concerning your business if your attitude is nonproduc-

tive. If you project negativity, you won't get far in the wonderful world of customer service.

The smile sets the pace, creates the standard, puts your customers at ease, and creates a bridge between you and their problems. It cuts through concerns and issues, and establishes positive lines of communication. And once that connection is made, you're more than halfway there in satisfying the needs of your customers. Every customer's comment, concern, and complaint is an opportunity for you to grow, improve, and further your reputation as a customer service provider.

Smile! It just takes a handful of muscles that when exercised, can indeed make all the difference.

Common Sense

It seems like a simple premise: smile at the customer, smile at each other, and have a happy day. Even when our personal lives make it a challenge, even when you don't feel like smiling, try it anyway. Not only when it make the customer feel better, you'll feel better as well.

Every moment of truth needs to begin and end at the very least with a smile. I'm very big on the moment of truth concept. Most of you know that the moment of truth is the moment of contact or interaction between an external customer and the internal customer. It gives the external customer an opportunity to form an impression about your company based on that interaction. That impression needs to be positive to have a successful moment of truth. So whenever a customer comes in contact with a member of our business unit, the first thing they need to see is a big, beautiful smile.

That smile is very important to the customer, as it almost always conveys an open friendliness, a sense of helpfulness, and that "your problem is my priority" feeling.

Sometimes customers can be very challenging. That old cliché that the customer is always right needs to be retired. We all know that's not always true. The customer is always the customer, however. Without our customers, we in the customer service industry would be without jobs. Even when they're not-so-right, they deserve the best service we can provide. I say great customer service starts with a smile.

After that smile, you listen, repeat their problem back to them, and then do what you can to solve their problem or find someone who can while you stay by their side until the issue has been resolved. It's a simple customer service formula, but it works.

Remember when you come across a sour customer trying to force feed you limes, take a deep breath, call upon your conviction to exude only the best in customer service, and rearrange those letters to give them back a great big SMILE.

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