

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

What happens
when a seasoned parking
planner becomes a frontline intern?
(Hint: It's half fabulous and
half hilarious.)

By Brett Wood, CAPP, PE

You know, sometimes it's just interesting to hear how other people perceive you. That's how this all started—I was sitting around with some of my favorite Southwestern parking professionals when the comment came in like a lead ball: "You don't know anything." That was the edict from my good friend Brandy Stanley, who was letting me know that despite the fact that I've had a 10-year career as a parking consultant, she felt my lack of operational experience left a gaping hole in my resume and knowledge base. "You wouldn't last a day on the front lines." And like that, the challenge was dropped and accepted.

In April 2016, I left my cushy office job as a parking consultant and enlisted as an intern for the City of Las Vegas, Nev., parking department. During the course of a grueling week, I'd no longer be the one making recommendations on how to improve parking; rather, I'd be a part of the team implementing those strategies and putting my theoretical knowledge to the test. Frankly, I didn't know what to expect. Would I survive? Would this even be an interesting experience? What would I even learn? Turns out, a whole lot!

My Experience

During the course of the week working with Las Vegas Parking Services, I served in numerous roles and capacities. Brandy tried to subject me to a wide spectrum of the different jobs her staff handle and how the organization works as a cohesive and functioning team. This included working in administration, operational, enforcement, maintenance, and service roles. My head was spinning the entire time I was interning.

Brandy took over the program five years ago and one of her primary missions was to consolidate all parking operations under one organization—a recommendation we parking consultants widely portray as beneficial to the industry. I've made the recommendation for the vertically integrated parking management in so many cities, I sometimes feel like a broken record. But seeing that recommendation implemented from the other side solidified my constant repeating of the phrase. It was gratifying to see how well the organization ran when it worked with one heartbeat. Everything the staff did was focused on the mission of the parking organization rather than individual (and sometimes offsetting) goals of various departments.

Within this organization, a large number of staff members contribute in various roles and often play way out of position to support the needs of the program. Here are some highlights from my experience with the Las Vegas staff:

- **Administration.** I spent the better part of my first day with the administrative staff, learning how they used back-end management systems and various tools to communicate with their customers and manage the large volume of transactions within the program. I learned how the staff actively work to integrate the various technology platforms they use to better handle their workflows. And I learned that most of the administrative staff are going above and beyond their typical roles. An accounting specialist leads the food truck program with great passion; the hearings specialist goes out of her way to communicate to the community through social media to help inform them how to avoid tickets. And they all do this with smiles on their faces and a zest for their jobs that is unparalleled.
- **Technology and Operations.** I got to do a ride-along with the parking technology staff, who showed me how

they interact with the parking meter and access-control technology on a daily basis. They showed me how they maintain and service aging equipment, keeping the technology relevant and ensuring a satisfactory customer experience. And I saw firsthand how the camaraderie within this group and their interactions with the larger organization keeps things flowing smoothly between groups. (Oh, and Roll Tide, Matt!)

- **Maintenance.** I spent an afternoon with the maintenance team, who showed me around their typical duties and tools of the trade. This is the most recent addition to the holistic parking operation. This duty used to be shared by several other city departments, and the emphasis placed on the parking-related tasks was often minimal. Brandy brought this function in-house, and the results were instantaneous. The care and passion this group exhibits is infectious, and the parking system shines under their watch. And as the consolidated management of the system caused private parking owners to approach the city about including their facilities in the public system, the enticement to have a full staff maintenance team made that sell

From Our Perspective

By Brandy Stanley

It's funny, I have long felt that too many consultants, equipment vendors, and software developers in this industry on some level really don't understand what drives their livelihood: parking operations. While it is true that some very successful parking folks didn't season themselves in the trenches (and Brett Wood, the unpaid intern, is indisputably one of these), I sometimes have trouble trusting them to provide a good product or service. I suppose that is ultimately why I threw down the gauntlet, although in my defense, it was late at night during the Southwest Parking and Transportation Association (SWPTA) annual conference, and there were appropriate beverages on the scene.

I really thought Brett would come out of his internship experience with a broad overview and some operational knowledge he could use as a backdrop when developing his recommendations to clients. I knew Brett and our staff would get a kick out of each other during the process, especially when I told them who he is and what he does. They scoffed loudly and immediately determined that nobody would cut him any slack whatsoever during his internship. But we were all also really eager to show off what we do, especially to someone in the industry who already understood on some level why we do what we do.

As Brett will say, he spent a lot of the time "geeking out" on the nuts and bolts of the software systems we use, understanding the municipal code and violations and the reasons we write them, as well as the actual nuts and bolts (we did have to replace the grinder bit he used to try to set himself on fire). But clearly, what really affected him deeply was the commitment, passion, and pride exhibited by every employee in the organization.

I've thought a lot about what he experienced and why this organization is so extraordinary. Honestly, I believe it boils down to two simple, basic premises:

- Municipal employees are highly dedicated and responsible individuals who have felt the call to serve the public. They are a special kind of person who, when encouraged to shine and given the opportunity to excel, will take any organization to towering heights.
- A consolidated parking organization with a clear focus and the autonomy to operate as needed is essential for a holistic and healthy parking system that supports the community rather than hurts it.

Towering heights, indeed! Can't wait to see what comes next.

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a lot easier. My last task with this group was to help cut down old parking signs with a hand saw. As I'm cutting and talking to Karl about how easy this is, I suddenly sensed the distinct smell of burning flesh. Looking down, I quickly realized I had caught my right-hand glove on fire and my skin was quickly feeling the pain. Needless to say, Brandy retired me from that job immediately.

- **Customer Service.** I think I was most frightened going into this role. How in the world do people deal with enraged customers who genuinely feel like they've been wronged by a parking ticket? Well, if you are looking for an answer, the City of Las Vegas staff can give you an amazing playbook. I watched for hours as the customer-service staff went through great lengths to resolve situations with the best interest of the customer clearly evident. The staff used every tool at their disposal to solve problems and make sure the customer left satisfied (albeit unhappy in many cases). Where the staff could have simply done their jobs, they went above and beyond to help try and find a solution that might not be completely evident. One of the last cases I saw involved a man who had sold his car 10 years prior but had recently received a late parking ticket notice. The service agent walked him through finding the new owner, getting a bill of sale, and resolving the process. But then, she went into the DMV database on a hunch and found both the car and the next owner and transferred the ticket to the new owner. All she had to do was say, "I'm sorry, sir," but instead she solved a problem that looked unsolvable.
- **Enforcement.** This was my calling. If I couldn't be a parking consultant, I was meant to be a parking enforcement officer. The rush of working the streets! It was amazing, and every night I went out with Las Vegas' amazing enforcement staff to find the bad guys—parking offenders! Except it wasn't anything like that. Sure, we wrote a lot of tickets (35 tickets for about \$5,000, but who's counting?), but these were all legitimate violations in which the need to enforce parking was driven by the desire to provide customer service. Disabled parking violations, overtime limits, parking without a permit, improper registration—we wrote them all. That said, I bet we could have written 100 more tickets that we didn't because the enforcement officers took the time to help the owners of the vehicles understand their violations and how not to get a ticket or helped people figure out how to pay the meters rather than citing them while they weren't looking. It was refreshing to see these staff members act as ambassadors for the community, helping make Las Vegas a better place to park (amid the many vices it offers).

What I Learned

I really didn't know what to expect from the adventure and thought it would be great to see people at work



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while people-watching in Las Vegas. But I came away from the experience enriched by the people I worked with and the progress Brandy has made creating an amazing organization. In particular, these themes continued to emerge:

- The City of Las Vegas has a full-service parking organization in which Brandy has assembled all groups who touch parking under one operation with one vision. Team members have bought in and work within their roles as well as outside of their normal duties to make things great. This makes it so much easier to set and achieve goals within the program. All staff work toward a common theme and can jump into any role because they buy in and believe the mission.
- The employees take ownership and are given the authority to do their jobs as they see fit. Everyone is also given the tools they need to do their job and support the primary mission of the team. It was beyond comforting to see staff doing all they could to make Downtown Las Vegas a better place to be through parking.
- The employees are also involved in decision-making, which provides more ownership in their jobs. Staff are given the opportunity to champion special projects, and the pride they take in their work is unparalleled. Brandy runs a tight ship. But it's a tight ship with a whole lot of captains invested in finding the best solution.
- Most importantly, customer service is king! Everything Brandy and staff do is focused on the customer, and staff are given the latitude to work with the customer to find the right solution. While customers aren't always right, they are treated in a way that helps to promote consistent and positive experiences.

My main takeaway was that great parking programs are built from the ground up. The staff interacting with customers on a daily basis are the face of the program—their passion for their jobs can really turn an ordinary parking organization into an exceptional one! My week in Las Vegas was amazing, and I came back energized about our ability as an industry to transform the places we work.



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