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Sweating the “Small Stuff” to Drive Revenues

(Version 2)

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Don’t “Sweat the Small Stuff” – A Saying That Works Better for Life than for Service

Have you heard the saying, “Don’t sweat the small stuff?” I don’t know who the original author was, but I’d be willing to bet you two things:

- (1) They didn’t die of a Type-A heart attack, and also,
- (2) They didn’t succeed in the service industry.

As with many absolutely valid aphorisms, this one makes perfect sense in one context and yet is completely wrong in another. “Don’t sweat the small stuff” is usually followed by... how to keep your cool in stressful situations, or how to focus on the really important things in life – like family and relationships, goals, and priorities. I agree. I’m a believer. I mumble these words to myself all the time. I often find myself getting caught up in what my dad often called the “thick of thin things.” So, find out what’s important in your life and let the rest go. Great advice.

However, in the context of the service provider experience, it is actually the “small stuff” that separates the winners from the losers. It is mistakes with the small stuff that the customer uses to make future purchasing decisions. If my towels aren’t fresh smelling, or the fish is greasy, or the remote control battery for my TV is dead... I don’t really care how great your hotel’s branding is, how impactful your advertising appears, or how attractive your décor.

Little mistakes can have large consequences. For example, one of the more notorious typos supposedly found in Bible printing over the years is a prominent error from a 1631 King James edition that reads simply, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” (Little typo, big mistake!) I am amazed at the little things that people have said in job interviews that have kept them from being hired. And it is really sad to see so many marriages begin to fall apart over small things.

The “Boring Everyday” Makes the Difference, Not the Spin That Surrounds It

In fact, I would argue that it is in the “boring everyday” that really great service brands are born. You may have heard the old marketing adage, “Don’t sell the steak, sell the sizzle.” I don’t buy that. Sure, there is the occasional branding success, where “marketing sizzle” creates the opening for “operations steak.” But in 99% of cases, it’s the other way around; the steak comes before the sizzle. The service you provide must be darn close to perfect, or I won’t believe any of the hype you shovel me about it.

Moments of Truth

Jan Carlzon, the former president of Scandinavian Airlines wrote a fabulous book called, *Moments of Truth*.¹ (I’m told the term was borrowed from the “momento de verdad” in the Spanish bullring when the matador and the bull face each other.) Carlzon described a moment of truth as any time that a customer comes into contact with any aspect of a business. Speaking of Scandinavian Airlines, he said,

“Last year each of our ten million customers came in contact with approximately five SAS employees, and this contact lasted an average of 15 seconds each time. Thus, SAS is ‘created’ 50 million times a year, 15 seconds at a time. These ‘50 million ‘moments of truth’ are the moments that ultimately determine whether SAS will succeed or fail as a company.”¹

In effect, what Carlzon said with his understanding of moments of truth, is that **the details** make or break successful companies. Here are a couple of examples:

I walked up to a pizza store once at 9:59 pm – closing time. Guess what happened? The young lady raced me to the door from inside. She got to the door first, turned the lock, and then flipped over the “Closed” sign. We were literally six inches apart, except for the glass door! She mouthed the words, “I have a date.” There was no, “Sorry for the inconvenience.” There was no recognition that I am the money-paying reason that she is even employed. There wasn’t even a smile! I’ve never been back.

My wife and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary in Italy. We stayed at a remarkable hotel, located right in the heart of Florence, for several days. The stay was fabulous – the rooftop terrace was incredible – the service impeccable – the food was outstanding. I mean this was really a strong performance by this service team. My strongest memory, however, will be the 110 mosquito bites I woke up with one morning. I pleasantly showed them to the front desk clerk, who without batting an eye said, “Yes, they’re terrible in that room.” That was it – all he said. Wow! Maybe demand is so high for that hotel, that they won’t even notice that I’ll never return, nor recommend it to anyone, including the three couples who have already asked me where to stay in Florence.

EIWO

Back in the 90’s, Marriott began focusing on the acronym EIWO, which stood for “Everything in Working Order.” There is an entire execution strategy contained in those words. It means light bulbs that work, sinks that drain quickly, internet that works, dresser drawers that slide easily, and so on. It is the epitome of the point I am trying to make here.

But, the “Small Stuff” isn’t Sexy!

I’ve given a lot of thought to why so many service providers fall short on executing the details, and I’m sure there are multiple reasons – so many moving parts, fire drills all around, real-time nature of service, etc. They all play a part, I’m sure. But I’m convinced that far and away the number one reason for the service lapse on details is that focusing on them is **just not as interesting** as working on new ideas, new strategies, etc. (For example, which words are more attractive and interesting to you - “**new and dynamic**” or “**repetition and consistency**”?)

Summary

After 25 years of listening to service industry customers on this subject, here’s my take. With the exception of a few, specialized boutique brands, the majority of consumers are looking for consistency and dependability from their service brands. Most don’t want the sizzle, they just want the performance. The sizzle may work once, but it’s the steak that keeps them coming back. I’ve always loved what Baron Rothschild said upon opening his new hotel in Paris:

*I want my bath to run hot in two minutes flat.
I don't want to hear plumbing noises. I want a good bed and pillows.
I want my breakfast right away. I want good croissants.
I want people to be polite to me, and I don't want to hear their side of the story.*

Listen, I'm not making this stuff up. It's about work, dependability, and consistency. But some companies "get it," and many don't. This kind of thinking has been around since the dawn of time...

The story of the Little Red Hen (*Do the work, earn the rewards*)
The big NBA secret (*Defensive work wins championships*)
The Bible (*Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap*)

Self-help author Robert Collier may have put it best, when he said,

"Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out."

It's all in the daily execution of the details! But then, if we all executed consistently and were truly "sweating the small stuff," I wouldn't be writing columns like this, would I?

Questions to ask yourself

What are the moments of truth for your company? Have you mapped them out? Do you have a required performance standard for each moment of truth? Do your employees know what's expected of them? How are you performing against your standard?

This is how I see it.

About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare

Richard D. Hanks is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, a leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is an author and frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings. Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company's individual needs. For more information please visit: www.mshare.net. To reach Rich directly, contact him at rhanks@mshare.net or (801) 263-2333.

¹ "Moments of Truth," by Jan Carlzon, Ballinger Publishing, 1987.

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