

Prologue

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A Boy with a Dream

I hadn't even gotten home from school that afternoon before my mother heard about the outrageous thing I had said in class. I was still playing *Fußball* (soccer) with my friends when a nosy neighbor came to report me.

“Do you know what your son said in school today?” she asked breathlessly. “He said that when he grows up, he wants to work in a hotel!”

In our small German village, every self-respecting family wanted their sons to aspire to one of two futures: a technical position (for example, engineering or architecture) in a big city like Munich or Stuttgart, or else winemaking here at home, since the hillsides all around were covered with vineyards. If neither of these came to be, you could at least be a carpenter or a mason.

To talk about hotel work was like saying you wanted to be a street sweeper or a garbage collector.

Where had I, at age eleven, gotten such a crazy idea? Our village didn't even have a hotel—or a proper restaurant, for that matter. To this day, I cannot remember the source of my notion; I must have read about it in a book.

But I would not be dissuaded. My uncle from the city, a respected banker, came to visit once and asked what I had in mind. Would I be going on to *Gymnasium* (high school) in nearby Koblenz? I told him my dream, thinking surely he would understand.

“What? Are you just going to be one of those sloppy guys serving beer in the railroad station?” he scoffed, referring to the small bar in the depot where passengers could get a drink while waiting for the train. He was as embarrassed as the rest of the family.

This standoff went on for three years, until I reached age fourteen—a fork in the road for European students in those days. Either you went on to higher academic study, or else you opted to learn a trade. My parents sat me down one day and said, “All right, Horst, tell us about this.”

“I want to work in a hotel. I want to work in the kitchen, in the dining room. I want this to be my work for life.”

They looked at each other and knew I was not going to give up. So with a sigh, they decided to help me. They went to some kind of government labor bureau to inquire about what to do next. There they learned of a six-month boarding school for hotel work that was eighty miles from our village. They reluctantly enrolled me and said a tearful good-bye to their son.

Starting at the Bottom Rung

It was an intense course of study, and I was very homesick. But after I finished the program, the school found an apprenticeship for me at a fine hotel and spa in Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler (*Bad* in German means a mineral bath or spring, thought to be helpful for relieving arthritis and other ailments). Next to the facility was a clinic whose doctors treated the patients. The hotel was named the Kurhaus (“cure house”).

Some wealthy guests didn’t visit the Kurhaus for medical reasons; they just came for the concerts in the big garden every afternoon and evening or for the casino.

I still remember the lecture my mother gave me on the train. “Now, son,” she sternly declared, “this hotel is for important ladies and gentlemen. We could never stay there.” (My

father, a World War II veteran, worked for the postal service.) “You must behave yourself accordingly. Take your shower! Wash your socks! Do not do anything out of line!”

We got off the train at last and schlepped my suitcase the ten blocks to the hotel—taking a taxi was out of the question. We met with the hotel’s general manager, an educated man who carried the title “doctor,” for a brief introduction. He reinforced my mother’s warning. “Young man, this place is for important people. They come here from around the world. They are the upper class who truly understand service. Do not allow yourself to become jealous or envious. You are here to serve them.” I dutifully nodded my head.

After kissing my mother farewell, I moved into a dormitory room with three other boys. The toilet and shower were located down the corridor. By the next day, I was plunged into the busy life of a busboy. Well, to be precise, the only task I was allowed to do in the beginning was to clean ashtrays. “Be careful,” I was told. “Don’t disturb the guests while they are eating.”

A bit later, I was assigned to wash dishes. The hours were long—from seven in the morning until eleven at night. We set up the dining room before every mealtime—not only the tables, but also the utensils and other supplies the waiters would need. We cleaned the floors. Sometimes, at the end of a tiring day, we had to polish the guests’ shoes that had been left out in the hallway. We did everything, it seemed.

Gradually, I was allowed to hand-carry the food orders from the waiters to the kitchen staff and then to bring the food back to the waiters for serving. Then came actually serving the food myself from a side table, dishing up the plates. If meat needed to be carved, however, the maître d’ would come over and handle that part.

This was my life for every day of the week except Wednesday, when our young group was bussed to a hotel school in a nearby town. We arrived back late in the afternoon, changed clothes, and immediately went to work in the dining room.

It was hard work, but I never second-guessed my decision. I found encouragement in my mother's letters, which she wrote every day. She would tell me what was going on in the village, what vegetables she was picking from the garden, and then she would always add, "We love you so much. We think about you constantly. We cannot wait for the next time you get to come home for a visit." Sometimes she would even send me grape sugar tablets, which she was convinced would bolster my energy for my work.

Man of Excellence

The maître d', Karl Zeitler, made a huge impression on me. Though in his early seventies, he still had a stately bearing as he would go from table to table, conversing with the guests. At one table he would speak German; at the next, English; at the next, French. His presence filled the room.

In fact, as I watched, it almost seemed as if the guests were proud to have him stop by their table. They looked up to engage him in conversation. This conveyed to me that, while we young workers naturally viewed him as the most important person in the room, the guests apparently thought so too. *What a reversal!* I thought. *It's almost upside down.*

Herr Zeitler was a great teacher for us young people. Before mealtimes, he would talk through the day's menu, explain any new items, and coach us on how to describe them to the guests. The mystique of the industry seemed to dance in his eyes.

In slow times, he would tell us about the great hotels he had worked in during his long career—in London, in Czechoslovakia. He had been an apprentice himself in Berlin many years before. He told us about his friend who had worked on a transatlantic ship. It all sounded so fascinating. When I went home for a weekend visit every three months or so, I had so many stories to tell.

But Herr Zeitler didn't only inspire us; he also held us to high standards. I got in trouble with him a few times. He once caught me helping myself to a quick swig of leftover wine, and he kicked me in the backside! I never did that again.

One time we were serving a banquet at which the entrée was a beef filet and a veal filet, side by side on the plate. As I served a particular guest, he said, "No beef—just the veal." When I returned to the kitchen, I checked to see if anyone was watching me, and then I quickly slipped the beef filet into the back pocket of my trousers, under the formal tail of my jacket.

Unfortunately, the maître d' saw what I had done. He chased after me and dumped hot sauce in my pocket! And he proceeded to give me quite a scolding.

The Essay

One Wednesday near the end of my three-year apprenticeship, we were all assigned to write an essay about how we felt about our work and what we were learning. I didn't know what to say. I sat that evening in my little room pondering.

I decided to write about Herr Zeitler. I told about what an exceptional human being he was. I described his impeccable dress, his elegant mannerisms, his genuine interest in each and every guest. It came to me that he was defining himself as a true gentleman.

Somewhere near the end of my essay, I coined the phrase *Damen und Herren im Dienst zu Damen und Herren*—“Ladies and Gentlemen Serving Ladies and Gentlemen.” Like the maître d’, we could be ladies and gentlemen as we went about our work. We were not just servants in the shadows of the service industry. We would rise to a higher identity, if we deserved it.

My paper got an A grade (the only A I ever received!). The school’s prefect and my teacher even called the other faculty members together for me to read it to them. In that moment, I thought about my uncle and the others who had been embarrassed for me to go into this field. I said to myself, *See, I was right. I can be proud of myself here. I can be respected by others, and I can respect myself. I can be a gentleman.*

A Motto for Life

Close to my eighteenth birthday, I went to work for the winter season in the Bavarian ski resort of Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Next I went to Bern, Switzerland, to the Bellevue Palace (the official guesthouse of the Swiss government) and also to the Beau-Rivage Palace in Lausanne. Then came the Plaza Athénée in Paris, followed by London’s Savoy—all of these were five-star hotels. At one point along the way, I signed on with a Holland America cruise ship, which brought me to New York for the first time. In those days, it took three days to refresh a ship before the next voyage, which meant we had time to explore the city, using our seaman’s passports.

While most of my friends jumped into taxis to head for the Empire State Building, Madison Square Garden, or the Statue of Liberty, the number one destination on my list was the famous Waldorf-Astoria. I had dreamed of seeing that grand hotel for a long time. Now I stared up at the big clock in the beautiful lobby. It gave me chills of excitement.

Would I ever get to be the manager of a hotel this splendid? There was no way to tell. But I knew that if the chance ever came, I would seek to make it a place where a staff of ladies and gentlemen served ladies and gentlemen with pride. My dream would be turned into reality, for the benefit of not only the guests but also everyone who would serve them, from the newest maid to the highest supervisor. Together we would rise to excellence.

In this book, I will share how my motto has been put into practice along the way.

Part 1: Serving Your Customers

Part One

Serving Your Customers

Chapter 1: Getting Inside Your Customer's Head

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Getting Inside Your Customer's Head

Sometimes what the customer wants may seem completely self-evident. If you're selling hot dogs at the ballpark, obviously the fans want hot dogs—at the lowest possible price. If you're running a school, parents want their kids to be educated—while paying the lowest possible taxes and fees. If you're operating a hospital, patients want to get well and go home as soon as they can—while you do all the insurance paperwork for them.

Yes, what the customer wants seems like common knowledge. It's easy to come up with a quick answer. But that answer barely scratches the surface of what the public is actually looking for. If you don't dig deeper, you will miss important signals. You may, in fact, even wind up responding *against* what your market is craving.

Shortcuts That Mislead

Some of our assumptions can hinder understanding and even be outright dangerous. Have you ever caught yourself saying any of these things?

- “I already know . . .”
- “My wife [husband] said the other day . . .”
- “I was talking to my neighbor [friend or workout partner at the gym or whomever], and they said . . .”

All of these statements are nothing more than a “survey of one.” They tell you the thinking of a single human being—one out of the multiplied thousands you hope to reach. Any statistician will tell you that’s too small a sampling to be reliable.

The practice of bringing together focus groups—eight or ten people sitting around a conference table giving their opinions—can be a bit more helpful, although not unless rigorous follow-up analysis takes place. For one thing, the setting is terribly artificial; a conference table is not where people live their daily lives. If the subjects are being paid \$50 or \$75 to be there for an hour or two, that can skew their remarks even more. And again, the sampling is extremely small.

Widening the Pool

So then, how can you as an organization leader get input from a wide enough pool of individuals for that information to be meaningful?

One way to do this without spending a fortune is to pay attention to ongoing surveys of customer/member satisfaction. All too many leaders are in the mode of “tell, tell, tell” (“promote, promote, promote” or “preach, preach, preach”) without giving the public a chance to answer back. What do they really think of your product or service? What do they like? What is irritating them? What do they think you could be doing better? And perhaps the best yardstick of all—would they recommend you to any of their friends?

This feedback can be gathered in various ways: comment cards, follow-up phone interviews, or online questionnaires. Granted, the purists would say these are not scientifically random samplings, since people can choose whether or not to cooperate. And of course, the loudmouth

complainers will always jump at the chance. That is why you must be careful to watch for *trends* over a period of time rather than simply reacting to individual gripes (again, a “survey of one”).

If you find the load of raw data overwhelming, you may want to hire an outside company to do the analysis for you. They can sift and sort, categorize and summarize, so that you come away with usable information. Yes, it will cost a little money, but you can gain a great treasure of insight. Or you can go to larger firms that specialize in organizing and researching customer service measurements from start to finish. I happen to think that J.D. Power is the best, having used them repeatedly both here and overseas. But there are others worth considering as well. They can analyze *trends of dissatisfaction* but also *trends of demands*—for example, “If you would add X or Y to your services, the public would be much happier.”

Again, I repeat, you don’t need to just react to a few ax-grinders. Instead, you can listen to the market to gain valuable information.

This process is a lot more important than simply comparing ourselves to our competitors. For a while, a big buzzword in business was *benchmarking*—in other words, seeing how you stand compared to the rest of your particular industry or market segment. But that’s not the point. And it’s not necessarily helpful. As I bluntly told one fast-food executive who asked me how I thought his company was doing, “You’re the best of a bad lot!”

A better form of benchmarking is to measure how you’re doing compared to how you were doing a year ago or three years ago. Are you making headway? Do you have a higher percentage of people who are pleased with your service?

Getting to the Bottom

Sometimes the feedback you receive will seem cloudy, so that you're not quite sure what it signifies. Customers may not always be able to articulate what they're truly feeling. I remember one set of focus groups in which people kept saying about their hotel stays, "I want to feel at home."

It was a sweet, warm sentiment. But what did it mean? What did it really tell me? Obviously, I couldn't furnish and decorate every room to look like each incoming guest's personal home.

I hired another firm to listen carefully to the session recordings and try to discern what was really being said. They came back to me with this interpretation: *They want to feel something from their subconscious memory—what they used to feel in their mother's home.*

And what was that? Their childhood home had been a place where everything was done for them. Every need was taken care of. Somehow the lightbulbs got replaced and the grass got cut without them giving a thought as to how those chores happened. They didn't have to worry about a thing.

If anything did seem wrong, they immediately went to their mother. "Mom! Mom! Something is really bad—I don't have any socks in my drawer!"

And what did their mother do? She said, "Come here, sweetheart," and wrapped them in her loving arms. She knew exactly what to do to solve the problem. What she did *not* say was, "I'll call the manager about that"!

But this happens in business every day.

I learned that deep down inside, hotel guests want to feel assured that everything is under control, and that any problem will be resolved right away. They don't want to wait three hours.

They want to unload their feelings on the closest person they see. They want somebody—anybody—to care for them. If this happens, they will feel respected and even honored.

Based on this, I announced a new policy: *Every employee, from the general manager down to the newest busboy, is empowered to spend up to \$2,000 to make sure the guest is happy.*

Suppose a guest comes to the restaurant and hears the hostess say in a cheery voice, “Good morning, sir! How was your night?”

“Not the greatest,” the guest may reply with a frown. “The toilet kept running, and I couldn’t get it to shut off.”

The hostess should immediately answer, “I’m so sorry about that! Please forgive me. I will take care of this right away. And we’re going to buy your breakfast now to make it up to you.” Then as soon as she has seated the guest, she will jump on the phone and insist that the hotel maintenance person fix the toilet before the guest gets back to his room.

When I announced this policy, my peers nearly fainted. The owners of the hotel thought about suing me. I answered, “Look, the average business traveler will spend well over \$100,000 on lodging during their lifetime. I’m more than willing to risk \$2,000 to keep them coming back to our brand of hotels.”

This was not driven by any desire to throw money away, obviously. It was driven by the knowledge of what the customer really wants. I made a decision that we would move heaven and earth to serve that particular expectation.

Real knowledge of the customer is absolutely essential. Without it, you cannot serve your market in a way that is superior to the competition.

Three Universals

You may be saying, “But I’m not in the hotel business. My arena is different.”

No matter what field you’re in, I can guarantee (after processing thousands of customer comments) that the people you serve want three main things.

First, they want a product or service or other output with *no defects*. Let’s say you’re selling them a bottle of water. They want the water to be absolutely pure—no little “floaties” swimming around. They also want the bottle to be leak-proof. They want to know they can trust this purchase 100 percent.

When I talk about defects, I’m thinking not just of *physical* defects—say, a sticky door or a noisy toilet. I’m also including *process* or *system* defects—the kind of thing that leads customers to say, “Hey, I never got my receipt,” or “Where’s my suitcase? I have to be dressed for a banquet in three hours!”

My collaborator on this book, Dean Merrill, recently flew from his Colorado home to Dallas for a family funeral. The death had taken the man’s children by surprise because he had seemed to be feeling all right, even at age eighty-six. But one day, his daughter-in-law showed up at his home with her father-in-law’s usual morning coffee and doughnut, only to find he had collapsed on the carpet.

In the midst of the family’s shock and grief, they took an EMT’s recommendation of a funeral home less than a half mile down the boulevard. Early arrangements went smoothly. But when family and friends showed up for the 10 a.m. Monday morning funeral, it was a different story.

First, the information placard telling people how to get to the chapel had a completely different man’s face and name on it. “Oh, sorry about that,” said the person working in the

office. “That was left over from a viewing last night; we’ll switch it out right away.” *Defect no. 1.*

The service began with a welcome, the reading of Psalm 23, and a prayer. But something else was distracting the guests. *What’s that noise outside the window?* everyone wondered. They figured out it was the *rrrrr* of a riding lawnmower. The irritating sound went on for at least twenty minutes. Did someone really need to be cutting the grass at that particular time? Couldn’t the job have waited until the funeral had ended? *Defect no. 2.*

Later in the service, the program called for playing a beloved recording of the man’s deceased wife, who had a wonderful soprano voice, singing the Andraé Crouch song “To God Be the Glory.” This was designed to bring back wonderful memories of the man for all the mourners. And the song was to be accompanied by a slide show of family pictures from over the decades—the happy couple, Christmas gatherings with the grandkids, memorable vacations, and the like. One of the sons had spent hours gathering these photos, sequencing them, and uploading them to the funeral home website. The audio track ran fine, but for some unknown reason, the pictures wouldn’t show on the big screen. The software kept crashing. *Defect no. 3.*

After the service, burial was slated for the family plot outside a small town some ninety miles away in East Texas, where the man had grown up. Given the distance, there would be no formal procession; instead, all attendees were given clear directions for driving there on their own. The route wasn’t complicated: just go east on Interstate 20 to a certain exit, turn right, and then travel on a state highway for ten miles until reaching the cemetery.

The various family members all arrived around 12:30. The cemetery staff had done their job. The square tent was erected; the folding chairs were in place; and three workers stood respectfully at a distance, leaning on their shovels.

But no hearse. Fifteen minutes went by, then twenty. Eyes kept scanning the horizon. The one son who had made the arrangements pulled out his cell phone to call the funeral home, only to be told, “He’s on his way.”

A full half hour passed, then forty minutes. Little great-grandchildren grew restless, wanting to play in the dirt. A baby had to have a diaper change in one of the vans. The son called again. This time the report was even worse: “We can’t seem to get in touch with the driver. We’re not sure where he is.”

When almost an hour of waiting had passed, the exasperated son said, “Well, everyone, listen up. Let’s all just go to the restaurant where I’ve made reservations for our family meal. We can come back later for the graveside ceremony.”

The hungry, hot, tired group started walking toward their vehicles, thoroughly frustrated, when the hearse bearing the casket rolled slowly into the cemetery. The driver’s only explanation: “I got lost.” *Defect no. 4*—the biggest of all, and on a day when people’s emotions were already raw.

An alert business stays one step ahead to prevent this kind of thing. Or if something goes awry once, they immediately call a staff meeting to make sure it never happens again.

Second, the people we serve want *timeliness*. They don’t want to have to stand or sit around waiting for you. If they’re eating in a restaurant and their meal comes out absolutely perfect and tasty (no defects), but it took forty-five minutes to be served, they’re going to be unhappy, regardless of how delicious the meal is. If someone calls your customer service line and is put on hold for ten minutes, it won’t matter if the agent is totally smart and competent to solve their issue. The customer is going to be so ticked off that they will hardly notice.

Finally, they want the person with whom they're dealing to be nice to them. They want to sense a caring attitude. In fact, this third desire is greater than the first two combined. It can atone for other shortfalls. I have actually heard restaurant customers say, "I had a problem with the food—but the waiter did such a great job, and the chef even came out to my table and apologized. So it all turned out fine."

I was in Chicago once to speak to the executive team of a certain bank. The afternoon before, I decided to check out their operation. I walked into this massive institution in the downtown Loop area and gazed at the impressive marble pillars. The whole ambience exuded wealth. Twenty-four tellers were at their stations serving customers.

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I took my place in line and waited to be called. When I finally got to the head of the line, what did I hear?

"Next!" a young woman's voice rang out.

I approached her station and said, "I'd like to change this fifty-dollar bill."

Without a smile or any word, she took my money and did what I asked. In rapid fire, she counted out my change aloud: "Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, forty-five, fifty. *NEXT!*" I took my handful of bills and scooted away.

Had the bank teller delivered a product with *no defects*? Yes. She gave me the correct amount of money. And all the bills were genuine; none were counterfeit.

Had she done this in a timely manner? Yes. Our whole exchange took less than sixty seconds.

Had she shown any hint of relating to me as a human being or caring about me? *No.*

I told this story to the bank executives the next morning. Then I asked, “What industry are you in? Surely the service industry! You don’t manufacture any money; the US Mint does that part. All you do is handle other people’s money, right?” They begrudgingly nodded their heads.

I made some more remarks and then said, “When I entered your bank yesterday, I assure you I did not feel like I was being served.”

Let’s say you’re in the medical field. When people come to a doctor’s office, they, of course, want to get rid of their pain. But that is not the whole picture by any means. Healing resides in more than just the pill bottles on the shelf. Patients want *to be heard* by the doctor, the nurse, even the check-in assistant at the front desk. They want someone to listen to them with a caring heart. Yes, their recitation of symptoms may be lengthy, as well as confusing—but it’s their reality. If the medical professionals don’t engage with their humanity, the healing process can be inhibited.

When you walk into a church, you naturally expect the preaching to be biblical (no defects). You expect the service to start and end at the stated hours (timeliness). But along the way, does anyone notice you—anyone, that is, besides the official “greeters” who have been told to do so? Does a pastor or elder look you in the eye and smile or shake your hand? Are you made to feel that you matter in some small way to this large and busy institution?

Granted, not everyone wants to be affirmed in the same way. Some people go for enthusiastic hugs, while others feel encroached upon by physical contact. But at least a smile and a warm “good morning” would let you know you’re valued.

Worshippers come to connect with God, of course. But they’d also like to connect with a fellow human being or two. As the wise and beloved nineteenth-century British preacher Joseph Parker is reported to have once said, “There is a broken heart in every pew.”

And Furthermore . . .

I've noted that two more customer desires have arisen in recent years. No matter what your standard product may be, people these days seem to be more and more interested in individualization and personalization.

Individualization. People want to be able to tweak a product to their own likes—which makes it challenging for any of us who aspire to serve large numbers of people. But customers don't think about that. They just know they don't want to be locked into a fixed menu. The Subway sandwich chain has risen to the top of its market by letting folks decide how much lettuce, black olives, grated cheese, and jalapeños go on their particular sandwich, and they're allowed to watch the assembly process every step of the way. The car industry has known for a long time that the more options and gadgets it offers, the more new cars it sells.

At the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel in Dana Point, California, I started noticing complaints at the facility about our noon checkout time—especially on Sundays. People had come to enjoy a long weekend of sleeping late and then going to the beach, and they felt pressured by the clock.

We moved our checkout time to 3 p.m., and the complaints disappeared. Of course, this meant we had to adjust our staffing, bringing in more housekeepers for the later afternoon hours to turn over the rooms more quickly. But that was a small price to pay to create a positive experience for our guests.

Later on, we asked ourselves, “Do we really have to make people obey rigid checkout deadlines at all?” We studied our clientele and realized that the majority of guests voluntarily clear out early enough in the morning to allow us to clean their rooms for the next guest. Why apply and enforce an unnecessary rule? Consequently, we did away with checkout requirements altogether.

In another hotel, one of our housekeepers noticed while emptying the wastebasket in a certain room that the guest had picked out the nuts from the chocolate chip cookies he had gotten from the club lounge tray. What did she do? Just ignore this information? No, she mentioned to the chef that this guest apparently didn't like nuts. The next evening when the guest returned to his room, he found waiting for him on the bedside table a tray of chocolate chip cookies without nuts.

She had taken individualization to a whole new level.

In certain situations, focusing on the individual can make a huge difference. Southwest Airlines got major accolades in 2015 for the way it handled a situation involving a customer named Peggy Uhle. Peggy was sitting in her seat ready to take off from Chicago's Midway Airport and head for Columbus, Ohio, when all of a sudden, a flight attendant approached her and said, "I'm sorry, but you need to leave this flight. Come with me, please."

Peggy thought she might have boarded the wrong plane. But then the gate agent directed her to a nearby service desk, where she was told to call her husband right away. There she learned that their son, who was in Denver, had suffered a severe injury to his head and was in a coma!

Obviously, Peggy no longer wanted to fly east; she wanted to get to her son as soon as possible. The Southwest Airlines team had already figured this out and rebooked her on the next flight to Denver. They retrieved her luggage from the Columbus-bound plane, retagged it, offered her a private waiting area, and even packed her a lunch for the Denver flight—which they allowed her to board ahead of everyone else.

"The care that I was shown was second to none," the distraught mother said later. "We've always liked Southwest Airlines, and now we can't say enough good things about them."

She was at her son's hospital bedside within hours, thanks to a caring airline. Her son's condition has gradually improved since then.¹

Personalization. No sound on earth is as sweet to a person's ears as their own name. They don't want to be "Account Number W49836Q7." They want to be called by name; it's a recognition of their worth. In the hotel business, we train doormen to check the luggage tags on the suitcases they're unloading from the taxi so that as soon as the guest finishes paying the driver and steps out, the doorman can say, "Welcome, Mr. Johnson!"

Of course, if the name is too hard to pronounce, it's better not to try and then end up getting it wrong. If you're sending a birthday card to a customer who was born in July, make sure your systems are in order so that you don't mail it in October. That will do more harm than good.

Shifting Sands

Even when you think you've mastered what the customer wants, beware of changing tastes. When I started in the hotel business, our studies showed that at the busiest check-in time (early evening), guests were willing to wait in line for the next front-desk agent for up to four minutes. We took steps to have staff people reach out to them after just two minutes, offering perhaps a soft drink.

But people today are less patient. They get annoyed after just twenty seconds! We've had to ramp up our service personnel as a result.

It is quite possible to lag behind the ever-shifting culture or even to get too far ahead of it. I learned this the hard way in the first Ritz-Carlton hotel when we implemented the VingCard electronic lock system to open room doors. We were proud to be on the cutting edge of technology at that time. But guests said, "What is this—some silly little piece of plastic? You're

supposed to be a luxury hotel—you can't afford to give me a real room key?" We quickly changed the locks back to metal keys.

Three years later, the plastic alternative had become accepted. People were used to them, and they now viewed traditional keys as downright dangerous. "What if I lose this key and somebody finds it? They'll come barging into my room at two in the morning!" We had to change the lock system *again*.

The same thing happened when we first introduced voice mail. I thought this was the way to go. But people said, "You don't want to deliver a handwritten message to my room anymore? What kind of a cheap joint is this, anyway?" So we did both methods for a while—paper messages plus the electronic system. It didn't take long, of course, before voice mail became widespread in offices and homes, solving the problem and simplifying our system.

All of this illustrates that customers' preferences keep changing. If you think you know them well today, you will still need to keep learning next year and the next and the next. Organizations and their leaders have to keep adjusting.

Double or Triple Audiences

In more than a few situations, the leader is in the tough position of having to understand and please multiple populations. For example, the Red Cross has to serve the people who've just been flooded out as well as the donors who are footing the bill. The school principal has to please not only the parents of students but also the educational bigwigs in the state capital and in Washington, DC. The plant manager has to get along not only with the wholesalers (who will merchandise the finished products) but also with the labor unions. Every publicly held retailer

has to not only please the customer in the mall but also make Wall Street happy. Hopefully the contented customer buys more, which makes the investors happy too. But not always.

Leaders often find themselves attempting a juggling act. They cannot afford to ignore their core constituents, obviously, or there will be no tomorrow for anyone. They must find ways to prove to the external players that this is good business all around. We'll talk more about this dynamic in the coming chapters.

But for now, let the main point be clear: understanding what means most to the public we serve is essential, even if it is not always easy.

¹ Michael Geheren, "Airline Goes 'Above and Beyond' to Help Mother Whose Son Went into Coma," *WGN*, May 27, 2015, <http://wgntv.com/2015/05/27/airline-goes-above-and-beyond-to-help-mother-whose-son-went-into-coma>.