



Embody Good Customer Service

When I was reading over our State of the Industry survey results last winter, I was surprised by the number of planners and vendors who commented on the negative customer service they receive on a regular basis. What's going on? It made me think back to one of my favorite interviews. Four years ago, I interviewed Jim Bradshaw, owner of Bradshaw Funeral Homes. I felt interviewing a funeral director was a relevant yet unique way to discuss hospitality; Bradshaw helps plan some very important events and his customer service can never be less than top-notch. I was moved by Bradshaw's commitment to his clients, his management of human emotions and the importance he puts on just listening.

Then this spring, I found myself planning a funeral. As I worked with the church to plan the service, met with a funeral director to write an obituary and made phone calls to entities like Social Security and Medicare, I experienced firsthand what Bradshaw had been talking about. I received excellent customer service across the board, which made a very hard time just a little easier. So, thinking back, I came up with 10 themes to keep in mind when helping someone plan an event, no matter what type of event it is.

EMPATHY: The economy has yet to bounce back and we're all increasingly finding more tasks on our plates. Remember, you're not the only one who can have a bad day, and extending assistance and understanding to those you work with can really go a long way in building lasting relationships, business or otherwise.

EFFICIENCY: Think about how much gets done in those few days before a funeral: programs get designed and printed, some 50 phone calls get made, food for 175 is ordered and prepared, flowers are bought and arranged. And this all happens while the church or funeral service has many other events going on as well. In short, if you don't waste time, things will get done as needed.

AMANDA FRETHEIM GATES
MANAGING EDITOR



KNOWLEDGE: Be helpful and decisive. You may be working with someone who's never done this before. They rely on your expertise and decision-making skills to get them through it. Whether its choosing entertainment or designing invitations, the know-how from a neutral third party can come as quite a relief.

LISTENING: You always want the client to leave satisfied. They won't if you don't take the time to really listen to them. In his interview, Bradshaw said, "That's one of the characteristics that's a requirement for anyone serving people. If we don't listen to the consumer first, we miss the mark as to what their needs are."

CREATIVITY: No matter what the event, your client wants it to be different than the others you've planned. This is where your creativity comes in and you, the miracle worker, can take any budget, any venue and make it work for the cause.

ATTENTIVENESS: Everyone has a million balls in the air. We all have baggage we carry around with us. But, your attention needs to be firmly on your client. There's no better feeling for a client than when she knows her planner is watching out for her best interest.

PATIENCE: It's easy to look at your long to-do list, then turn around and rush a client through the planning process. Some decisions, while easy for you, can be very difficult for customers to make. A lack of patience can lead to failure in some of the above categories. You're not truly listening and being attentive, and you're definitely not showing empathy.

POLITENESS: How many times have you experienced rude customer service over the phone? Many, I guess. When I sat down to make calls to the necessary government agencies, I was expecting the worst, or at least, the runaround. But, I only received kindness. Rudeness, whether via email, the phone or in person, can be felt a mile away.

WARMTH: Smiles, hugs, handshakes and calmness—they all go a very long way. Furrowed eyebrows, sighs and agitation—those don't. Greeting people with warmth and reassurance at every instance propels them to feel like all is well with their event.

LEAVING A LASTING IMPRESSION: Do all of the above and your customer will walk away remembering all you did for them and talk you up to their friends, family and colleagues. It's amazing how by embodying good customer service, you can, in turn, reap the rewards.

Always remember there's someone real behind that email, someone important on the other end of the phone and someone worth connecting with on the opposite side of the room. Together you could do something memorable. 

■ Amanda Fretheim Gates is *Meetings: Minnesota's Hospitality Journal's* managing editor. You can reach her at afretheim@greenspring.com