

1

Introduction to Customer Service

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Walt Disney – a legacy of customer service



A Disney employee invites children to dance during the parade at Hongkong Disneyland Park. Photo courtesy of Allison Zhang

What is Disney's edge? It stems in part from Walt Disney's precept that money is not the most important factor in business. Instead he focused on identifying the customers' needs and giving them what they wanted. His business philosophy stemmed from his strong family values, morals, religious beliefs, creative goals and innate psychographic awareness. As he said back in the 1960s: "Disneyland is a work of love. We didn't go into Disneyland just with the idea of making money."

During an NBC interview in 1966 Walt stressed that excellence of products and service are more crucial than profits at his theme parks: "... my young group of executives are convinced that Walt is right, that quality will win out, and so I think

they will stay with this policy because it's proven it's a good business policy. Give the public everything you can give them, keep the place as clean as you can keep it, keep it friendly – I think they're convinced and I think they'll hang on after – as you say, 'after Disney'".

He laid the framework for the future with his focus on animated films and the invention and development of the quintessential theme park. Today's Walt Disney Company has diversified further to incorporate cruise lines, TV channels and film studios, and an international professional business training institute. So, how has the company managed to maintain high standards since the pioneering founder's demise?

Although he died back in 1966, the company still holds true to his basic beliefs. One of Walt's well-known maxims was that nothing is ever finished, there is always room to grow and improve: "Just do your best work — then try to trump it." This is borne out in Disney's quest to expand, renovate and diversify as well as surprising customers by both meeting and then exceeding their expectations in regard to product and service.

Having invented the modern day concept of the theme park back in 1955, the company does not rest on its laurels; it is always going a step further. Disney doesn't just cater for kids, but also considers adults, bundling (and unbundling) services and attractions to enable customized packages to suit all age groups both during the day and evening at its parks and cruises. Films are made with an overt attraction for kids and an underlying message to adults.

At its theme parks, attractions are not designed with purely the bottom line in mind. Disney designers look at the audience, evaluating the time needed for a full experience, including the ride, interaction with other customers, and immersion in the imaginary environment. It is this painstaking focus on customer satisfaction that Disney execs have dubbed 'imagineering' – a concept fully explored in *The Imagineering Workout*. In this book there are tips for travel agents, for example, to stimulate their imaginations in attracting more customers. These include sharing personal experiences with prospective clients and using 'what ifs' to paint pictures – and as a positive alternative to saying 'no' - to even seemingly impossible requests. Imagineering also counsels research to enhance credibility and confidence and breaking routines to stimulate creative thinking.

Customer service naturally depends partly on staff/customer interaction. Walt Disney introduced a novel way of training his employees by providing a new internal language based on Hollywood terminology. Staff are cast members, customers are guests, shifts are performances, a job description is a script, the HR department is casting, and being on duty is being on stage. This analogy with show business helps immerse both staff and guests in the imaginary world of Disney, putting everyone in the spotlight.

Disney also believed that the front-line is the bottom-line, with a company judged by its face-to-face staff. Staff trainers (presumably 'directors') encourage the cast