



# Hospitality by design

Having been responsible for customer experience at The Walt Disney Company, Malcolm Ross and Chris Humphrey know that aligning every inch of a hotel to a customer excellence strategy is paramount

**For decades we've seen that the highest-performing hospitality brands understand that exceptional service will never come from mass improvisation but that a service ethos has to be intentionally and painstakingly instilled into the business.**

The question, however, is how to create an ethos that enables and empowers employees to do the right thing for customers, but avoids the inclination to micromanage the service. In many five-star hotels, this may demand that a chambermaid cleans the room, which is then checked scrupulously by the Duty Manager, followed unquestionably by the General Manager for all VIP guests.

Customer experience needs structure, you cannot have a free-for-all, but in diverse and fragmented organisations, it makes no sense to micromanage. We achieve the balance through a loose-tight framework that clearly defines the desired behaviours, but does not micromanage the outcomes. Too many hospitality companies are very prescriptive when it comes to telling

people what to do and how to do it, but very loose when it comes to 'what we stand for' and 'what experience customers want'. Our experience at The Walt Disney Company has taught us to reverse the two, so we are very tight on what customers want, but loose on how to achieve it.

## **Purpose is the invisible manager**

When it comes to empowering, enabling and aligning a workforce with the confidence to deliver memorable customer experiences, numerous experts and surveys have concluded that Disney consistently leads the way, across a highly complex global business, including theme parks, shops, restaurants, cruise ships and over 45,000 hotel rooms in the value, moderate and luxury categories.

The anecdote of a young girl and her mother coming to a fenced-off building site on a visit to a Disney theme park illustrates Disney's highly intentional approach to customer excellence. The little girl threw Belle – her favourite Disney doll – over the

fence, much to her mother's dismay, and by the time staff were able to retrieve the doll, it was spattered with mud, the dress was torn, and her hair was a complete mess. Staff tried to find a replacement but their efforts were futile, as a newer model had replaced Belle. So, the bedraggled doll was first taken to a make-up artist, who styled her hair, then to the wardrobe department, which made her a new dress, and finally to a 'party' with other Disney princesses, accompanied by a photographer. Later that evening back at their hotel, Belle was returned to her owner as good as new, together with a photo album showing what a great time she'd had during her 'makeover'. In a thank you letter, the girl's mother described the moment of Belle's return as "pure magic".

This sort of employee engagement is not unusual and is anything but random. On the contrary, the coordination of multiple teams, who didn't have a checklist or consult a manager, happens every day because the company intentionally sustains a culture,





and creates an environment where going the extra mile is entirely natural. Aligning employees behind a single organisational purpose is central to Disney's methodology, and at Smith+Co, we helped Premier Inn design a service framework on the essential foundation of a new brand purpose. Premier Inn now has a succinct explanation of what customers want from the experience at an emotional level, brought to life at hallmark touch points, and through the intersection of process, place and people. Making guests "feel brilliant through a great night's sleep" gives Premier Inn the confidence to excel in areas that customers value, such as Hypnos beds, good quality showers and a hearty breakfast, rather than gyms and fine dining.

The 2015 Havas Media study *Meaningful Brands* found that purposeful brands outperform the stock market by 133%, gain 46% more share of wallet and achieve marketing results that are double those of lower rated brands. This business approach is being actively adopted by hotel brands, including Premier Inn and CitizenM. They overtly prioritise creating value for both customers and employees, and this value comes from giving the entire workforce a clear, consistent and sustained sense of purpose that is not an 'airy-fairy' aspiration, but one firmly rooted in the reality of both customers and the business.

#### **A purpose is not enough**

Many companies, however, fall into the trap of thinking that it is enough simply to create

a brand purpose, whereas indispensable to Disney's success is operationalising the purpose through an established loose-tight framework. This includes prioritised, observable and measurable standards, which in turn are defined by behaviours that each and every employee irrespective of job title or seniority is expected to know, understand and actively demonstrate.

#### **Integrating HR is indispensable**

We know from practical experience that every hospitality company can achieve consistent, differentiated, and sustained customer excellence, because every

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hospitality company has all the tools at its disposal. They just need to be much more intentional about building a loose-tight framework and use the entire HR process – not just training – to permeate the right behaviours, not just across the frontline, but throughout the entire organisation.

From consulting with leading customer experience brands, we know that a frequent starting point is 'how do we attract people who can relate to the customer and the product simultaneously?' This question is a vital starting point because a workforce with this balance can become powerful advocates. Michael Levie, COO of CitizenM

Hotels, commented in Shaun Smith and Andy Milligan's 2005 book *On Purpose*: "Having a strong purpose or being innovative is not enough; it's also about the people around you. So we have a very strict casting and immersion programme. You can build a hotel but no matter how pretty or nice it is, if it hasn't got a pumping heart it isn't going to live. We have found through our initial casting and immersion program how to make the hotel come to life and then, by having the right manager, make sure we sustain it."

Hoteliers across all categories should know it is possible to create a workforce that consistently delivers customer excellence, by hiring the right people, training those people correctly, communicating effectively with them, caring for them and recognising them in a way that makes it easier for them to care for guests.

#### **Intentionality is a no-brainer**

Customer experience is the sum of every fleeting interaction your guests have with your brand, not just the service they receive from the frontline staff, so delivering an experience that is consistent, distinctive and 'on-brand' is increasingly a source of sustained competitive advantage. In a world where technology is increasingly creating multiple touch-points, being highly intentional across the entire organisation about the guest's end-to-end experience matters more than ever. 