



**“SATISFIED MEANS YOU DID WHAT THEY EXPECTED, BUT
WHAT WE NEED NOW IS LOYALTY,”** CHRIS BRYANT service expert / Rapport Strategies

RESTAURANT OPERATORS ROILED BY THE WHIM of the market’s ups and downs and customers’ reluctance to loosen their purse strings have no choice but to feel helpless. Taking charge of the aspects of business that can be controlled, including customer service, might mean the difference between life and death for a business.

“For a lot of folks, this is as bad as it’s been,” service expert Chris Bryant said. “A lot of companies become fixated on the bottom line so much that they lose sight of what drives the bottom line: customers.”

Bryant consults companies in customer experience management and business etiquette. He recently launched a new program to help companies maintain service during tough economic times.

“Service excellence has always been important, but now it’s a matter of survival,” Bryant said. “It’s a game-changer now. As consumers become more selective with their spending, it’s crucial to make yourself the provider of choice. You cannot afford a bad experience, and if you were moderately good before, you must be great now.”

Restaurants, by their nature, provide a very basic human need, because everyone needs to eat, Bryant said.

“But for a family to justify going out and spending money on a meal out at a higher-end restaurant, it has to be an amazing experience,” he said. “It’s all about how it feels to be in the restaurant.”

This factor is key, and quite controllable, Bryant said.

“You can’t control the economy, interest rates or the bailout, but you can control how it feels when you walk into your restaurant.”

It’s crucial that managers work with their staff to ensure the team is motivated to provide the highest quality experience possible for every customer.

“There is a big difference between a salesperson being cordial versus engaging,” Bryant said. “Cordial is not memorable. They’re not adding to the experience. Too many leaders allow staff to be cordial. You may get away with that in a boom economy, but in a recession, you’ve got to be engaging to get people to come back in.”

By creating an experience for customers, Bryant said, you’ll be more likely to cultivate loyal patrons who come back again and again, versus simply a satisfied customer.

“Satisfied means you did what they expected, but what we need now is loyalty,” Bryant said. “That emotional bond is the ultimate because consumers make their decision based on emotion. They have a lot of options to where to eat, but they’re going to come here. The goal is beyond satisfaction.”

Chris Bryant is the creator of “The Art of Rapport” and “Creating an Upside When Downsizing: Six Ways to Motivate Survivors of a Layoff.” He can be reached at www.rapportstrategies.com or chris@rapportstrategies.com.

“THAT FIRST MOMENT WITH A CUSTOMER IS THE MOMENT OF TRUTH, IT SETS THE TONE FOR THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE.”

CHRIS BRYANT service expert / Rapport Strategies

➤ **SERVICE EXPERT CHRIS BRYANT RECENTLY** researched and developed a new training program, “The Customer Service Stimulus Plan: Eight Strategies to Drive Sales During a Recession.” In it, he discusses eight approaches business leadership should take, with both staff and customers:

1) CREATE AND COMMUNICATE a clear service-related vision with the staff. You must have a galvanizing message for who you are, Bryant said. An effective statement will capture the essence of the business and what it commits to be. “Employees should be able to know it, own it and energize it daily,” Bryant said.

2) EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO ACT. Studies show that customers want to see a problem resolved in 1.25 contacts, Bryant said. Employees need to be allowed to respond to and deal with issues as they arise. It will provide staff members with a sense of authority and ownership in the business.

3) INSPIRE A TEAM APPROACH. Simply instructing the staff to work together isn’t enough, Bryant said. It’s imperative to show transparency and empathy with staff, especially if the business is struggling and changes are being made. “There’s got to be a level of wisdom displayed and transparency is very important,” Bryant said. “Where there’s a lack of information, the rumor devil will move in.” Rumors will fill the staff with anxiety and fear, which will trickle down to the customer experience affecting business.

4) REWARD AND RECOGNIZE EXCELLENCE. This is especially important for businesses that have had layoffs, creating an anxious staff. Bryant recommends finding ways of acknowledging good work in a way that will resonate with the individual. Handwritten notes and recognizing a staff member in front of the team are effective methods and cost a company nothing.

5) PROVIDE A HIGH-IMPACT WELCOME every time. “That first moment with a customer is the moment of

truth,” Bryant said. “It sets the tone for the whole experience.” When a customer interaction starts off rocky, it’s hard to make up for the negative impression. For many restaurants, this happens at the hostess stand.

6) ENGAGE CUSTOMERS in a personalized way. Servers shouldn’t hesitate to be conversational. Ask diners if they’re celebrating a special occasion and find their names and use them. The goal is to create an emotional bond, not just make a sale.

7) ANTICIPATE NEEDS and exceed expectations. Try to do something diners aren’t expecting, perhaps having the chef come out with samples of a dessert or something off the menu. “Giving a little something away is really nothing, but the gesture will exceed expectations,” Bryant said.

8) DELIVER AND CONFIRM total satisfaction. Don’t let diners walk out making sure they were totally satisfied. “In a recession you can’t afford to let them leave without knowing that they’re poised to come back,” Bryant said. **TRS**