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It Takes

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Science



BY DOUG LIPP

“To try to keep an operation like Disneyland going you have to pour it (money) in there. It’s not just new attractions, but keeping it staffed properly, you know ... never letting your personnel get sloppy. Never let them be unfriendly.”

— Walt Disney

More than ever before, associations must answer to a more sophisticated and demanding membership. The economic malaise of the past four years might be behind us, yet consumers are more vigilant about where they spend money and what they expect in return. Consider the following story when examining the strengths—and improvement areas—of your association.

Walt Disney got off the Jungle Cruise boat and wasn’t happy. In fact, something was terribly wrong. The problem was with the skipper of the boat Walt had observed. The skipper hadn’t done his job properly, and it simply wasn’t acceptable to Walt. Yes, the skipper ran the boat safely, so that wasn’t the problem. Yes, he had recited his script, line-for-line, so that wasn’t the problem. It was something else. It was in his delivery; he hadn’t acted out his part with as much enthusiasm as Walt wanted. He lacked energy and showmanship.

A now retired executive vice president of Walt Disney Attractions was the supervisor of the area where the Jungle Cruise is located and he recalls, “Walt told us, ‘I want the skippers to act as if every trip on the Jungle Cruise is their first trip. I want them to act surprised when the hippos suddenly rise out of the water. The skippers need to be as surprised as the guests.’”

Balancing Art and Science

Walt Disney and his Dean of the Disney University, Van France, knew the importance of achieving and maintaining a balance

of *art* and *science*. Building and maintaining Disneyland—the attractions, restaurants, shops and arcades—is just the starting point, the *science*. Maintaining the *feel* of Disneyland and employee morale is the *art*. Combined, they create a powerful differentiator from the competition; the stores, restaurants, resorts and amusement parks vying for the same customers and employees. Van, Walt’s equal at being a taskmaster, incessantly promoted the *art of friendliness*. Walt and Van, the cheerleaders of *balance*, wouldn’t tolerate Disneyland falling into the trap plaguing so many of its competitors:

- Keep the Park Clean - The competition isn’t as focused on cleanliness. The rides are dirty and the grounds are full of litter. The employees’ uniforms are wrinkled or stained.
- Keep the Park Well-Maintained - The competition might have faster rides, but they aren’t well maintained and frequently break down.
- Keep the Park Friendly - The competition might have plenty of employees, but they aren’t well trained; they don’t know the answers to customers’ questions. Plus they aren’t as friendly.

Walt’s ride on the Jungle Cruise, and his scathing comment, is a clear example of his focus on the upkeep of the park and maintaining both the *art* and *science* of the show; never let the rides suffer from a lack of proper care, keep the property clean, keep it friendly and keep the property and show “fresh.”

Keep the Park Fresh

Fresh encompasses Walt’s strategy for keeping Disneyland relevant and competitive; the never-ending pursuit of perfection. Walt’s philosophy of keeping the park clean, fresh and friendly extends to every cast member and every attraction. Timely upkeep of attractions keeps them fresh.

Continuous development of cast members keeps them fresh, engaged and enthusiastic.

"We Want to Meet Snow White"

One of the first lessons learned by all cast members is, "Disneyland itself is the star; everything else is in the supporting role." In other words, no divas allowed! At Disney properties all cast members know that regardless of their role, they can make or break the guests' experience.

No one knows who originally came up with the following story—a powerful and fictional story—that Disney University trainers relate during orientation, but it has Van's fingerprints all over it. The image it creates in the mind of every cast member is potent, unambiguous and everlasting.

"Pretend, just for a moment, that a family of five has just passed through the main entrance at Disneyland or Walt Disney World. They have been traveling for hours, either by car, bus or airplane, and mom and dad are exhausted ... the three kids are beyond excited. In fact, the kids have been amped up for the last three months, ever since learning of their Disney vacation. They have been talking, non-stop, saying, 'We can't wait to meet Snow White to get her autograph and photograph.'"

Fast forward 30 minutes when everyone is finally in the park.

"Mom and dad are having their first cup of coffee, and the kids are scrambling around, looking for Snow White. Then they see her! She looks as beautiful as they had imagined! The kids rush toward Snow White for her autograph ... they will get it! Surrounding Snow White, the kids are all pulling on her cape and screaming 'we want your autograph,' 'we want your autograph!'"

Let's take it to the next step.

"Pretend Snow White is fed up with their noise and she is having a bad day. She had a tough commute this morning and the Seven Dwarfs are late to work. Snow White is in a foul, foul mood. In a fit of rage, she spins around, glares at the kids and barks, 'Leave me alone, can't you see that I don't want to be bothered?' To make things even worse, let's say Snow White has a cigarette dangling out of her mouth. Her wig is pushed way back on her head and her dress is wrinkled and dirty."

At this point, what is the effect on the kids? Are they still thrilled to be at Disneyland? Do you think mom and dad, watching this whole scene from a distance are saying to each other, "Gee, isn't it great that Disney keeps this place so clean? I love this place." Is this what they are saying to each other?

At first, it sounds like a ridiculous scenario. Could anyone ever imagine Snow White being so rude or looking like such a slob? Yet, many of us come into contact with the equivalent of "mean Snow Whites" every day. A frown or caustic tone can ruin a customer or member's day.

Know the Job and Do It With a Smile

Even the most recent graduates of Disney University training know the importance of art and science. Friendliness and technical competence are a formidable combination. For the cast member playing Snow White, this means two things:

- The **Art** of Being Snow White – She receives extensive training about how to handle the reality of performing while surrounded by the audience. Snow White knows she will have to interact with guests of all ages and be friendly. Her *interpersonal expertise* ensures she won't view these interactions with guests as bothersome interruptions.
- The **Science** of Being Snow White – She has to *become* Snow White. She has to know every movement portrayed by Snow

Far too many organizations have difficulty attaining this balance of friendliness and technical competence.

White in the classic movie. Her *technical expertise* helps transform her into the character.

Far too many organizations have difficulty attaining this balance of friendliness and technical competence. The process of developing employees who know the job, *and* can do it with a smile, escapes too many training departments. Organizations that tolerate technically-competent-but-rude-employees (or indifferent employees) will suffer. On the other hand, smiling employees can't make up for an outdated product, service or flawed technology.

Putting all of one's eggs in either the *science* or *art* basket will eventually drive away the people who really matter—good employees and valued members.

Walt's message to the Jungle Cruise crew was clear: The lifelike hippos, the compelling soundtrack, and tropical plants are just part of the puzzle. The boat, expertly painted to make it appear old and rusty, is another piece. So, too, the clean, safari-themed costume provided to the skipper. Finally, the skipper's enthusiastic delivery of the scripted spiel completes the picture. All of these interlocking pieces, when combined, deliver an enchanting experience to the guest. This adventure can be undermined instantly by an unenthusiastic cast member. Amazing things happen when *art* and *science* are given equal billing; attractions operate consistently and Snow White enjoys only good days.

Association leadership would do well to consider the following questions.

Balance Art and Science:

Is there an equivalent to a "cranky Snow White," "an unenthusiastic Jungle Cruise skipper," or a broken down Jungle Cruise boat in your association?

- If so, why is this tolerated?
- What needs to be done to change this environment?
- What are the barriers?
- Who in your organization can lead the way?

Keep the Park Fresh:

- How do you upgrade your product, service and staff to keep everything fresh?
- Where could you make improvements?
- What will it cost to do so?
- What will it cost by not doing so?

Excerpt from **Disney U: How Disney University Develops the World's Most Engaged, Loyal and Customer-Centric Employees** Published by McGraw-Hill Professional, March 2013

Doug Lipp, www.douglipp.com, is an internationally acclaimed expert on customer service, leadership, change management and global competitiveness. He helped create the first international version of the Disney University at Tokyo Disneyland, and then lead the Disney University training team at Disney's corporate headquarters, The Walt Disney Studios.