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Good customer service isn't just a fairytale

Ex-Disney guru shares advice with UAE firms

In the sometimes bewildering ways of British English, to suggest something is 'a bit Mickey Mouse' can be to imply it is (take it away Wikipedia...) of "a lower standard, importance or significance". But for an American customer service expert who addressed an audience of executives in Dubai yesterday, the famous cartoon character is synonymous with a culture of excellence. Doug Lipp is the former head of training at Disney University, the name given to the institution that trains the employees - or 'cast members' - that work in the entertainment giant's famous theme parks. A published author and regular on the lecture circuit, Lipp is on a tour of the Gulf this week, addressing executives on the theme of "leadership and service magic".



It's perhaps not surprising that his services are seemingly in demand in a region that could be said to have more than its fair share of gripes about customer service.

When 7DAYS tells him that there are a lot of frustrated Middle East consumers, he replies: "I have heard some of the same things."

But do methods to keep customers happy in the House of Mouse really have relevance for executives in banking, retail or healthcare?

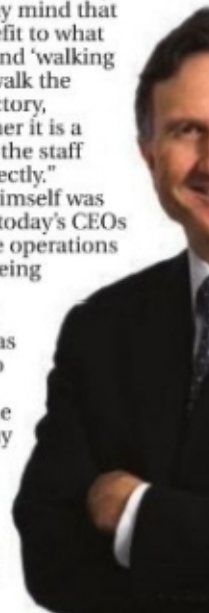
Lipp (below, right) says they do, and his number one lesson comes from Disney's founder himself - the late Walt Disney.

"There is no question in my mind that there is a measurable benefit to what we used to call at Disneyland 'walking the park' - to get out and walk the property whether it is a factory, whether it is a store, whether it is a hospital and connect with the staff directly and customers directly."

That's something Disney himself was famous for, says Lipp, but today's CEOs sometimes see some of the operations of their own firms as not being worthy of their time.

"All too often I see leaders with many, many excuses as to why they are too busy to do that and I say to them 'Walt Disney could walk the park and pick up trash, why can't you get out of your office or your cubicle and go talk to your staff?'"

Lipp says his seminars prove that "the values that I learned at Disney can be utilised by any



organisation". His well-practiced stage anecdotes include the example of Disney staff being empowered to give free replacements to children who dropped their popcorn. That particular snack may not be a fixture in many boardrooms - even if perhaps the tantrums are - but Lipp says the lesson holds true.

"At Disney we realised we could trust our employees to make the right decisions and that frees supervisors and managers from getting involved in the minutiae of those kinds of things," he explains.

But why, if customers value such examples of enterprise and empathy from human employees, do we increasingly find ourselves having our queries and complaints fielded by automated phone systems or unresponsive online forms?

Lipp is no luddite, but he believes adopting such measures to the exclusion of more traditional methods causes problems.

"I am not against technology, I would just argue that we have to make it as user-friendly as possible," he says.

"Compare an old mobile phone to the iPhones of today - the iPhones are still technology, but they are really much easier to use."

If firms can get the balance of well-trained employees and technology right, the Disney approach may mean a few more employees find they can whistle while they work ...



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