

RV EXECUTIVE TODAY

AUGUST 2014

2014 RV DEALERS INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION/EXPO • NOVEMBER 10-14

SPECIAL PREVIEW ISSUE

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Creating Service Superheroes with Popcorn Empowerment

By Doug Lipp

Doug Lipp, who headed the training team at Disney corporate headquarters, is this year's convention keynote speaker. An RV owner himself, Lipp will present "Even Monkeys Fall from Trees" during the opening general session on Nov. 11.

Are the people who pay for your goods and services "customers" or "guests?" Are the people working in your organization "associates," or "employees?"

The debate about how best to address customers and employees consumes valuable time, energy and money in many organizations, but merely changing the nouns won't ensure a culture dedicated to world-class customer service or create a motivated and engaged workforce. It's like

expecting a fresh coat of paint to bring a dilapidated, rundown building up to code.

Just as paint won't improve the structural integrity of a facility, training interventions and clever words for customers and employees won't necessarily improve a business – unless there's leadership support.

Assessing and clarifying organizational values is a precursor to future improvement. Let's start with the fundamental value of trust. Picture the following scenario in front of "It's a Small World" at Disneyland:

Timothy, a custodial cast member, is scurrying about sweeping up trash



when he hears a child crying. Making his way through the knot of guests surrounding the commotion, he spots the problem – a small boy in tears is staring at the ground and stomping his feet in anger. An empty popcorn box and scattered kernels tell the story. Making matters worse, the boy's father is

scolding him for his carelessness. This is definitely not "The Happiest Place on Earth" for the boy, his father, or the scores of guests watching.

Timothy kneels down next to the boy and says, "I'm sorry about your popcorn." Instantly, two things happen: Dad stops yelling, and the



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child nods his head and stops wailing. Timothy then says, "Mickey Mouse told me he saw you drop your popcorn and knows you're really sad right now." Pausing for a moment to let this message sink in, Timothy continues, "and Mickey Mouse wants to know if you'd like this big, fresh box of popcorn."

Timothy pulls out a box of popcorn from behind his back and offers it to the boy.

Imagine the impact this gesture has on the child, his father, and the many guests who've gathered. Timothy is equally buoyed by the interaction.

Unfortunately, some organizations seem determined to undermine employee trust, morale, creativity, and effectiveness with restrictive policies. Far too many organizations spend more time worrying about the cost of the popcorn than about creating a culture that promotes staff unity and morale.

Handing out free stuff is certainly not the answer to every problem. The organization that constantly rectifies problems by doling out free goods and services ("comping") is probably plagued by more fundamental issues. Yet, even companies with the best products and tightest service standards must prepare for the inevitable customer complaints and requests.

Unfortunately, too few are well prepared. "I'll have to ask my supervisor" is a refrain heard at companies with poor organizational health and disgruntled customers. These outfits have some things in common:

- **Potential problems aren't discussed.**
- **Resolution strategies aren't considered.**
- **Employees aren't trusted.**

The managers at Disney University and their counterparts who run operations at theme parks and resorts relentlessly consider potential problems and possible resolutions.

Asking themselves, "What do we do when operations don't go according to the script," managers and cast members constantly assess and role-play guest problems and solutions.

That box of popcorn cost Disney mere pennies, but the message it conveyed to guests and cast members was worth its weight in gold. It said, loudly and clearly, that Disney cares about the happiness of its guests and that it trusts its cast members to solve common problems.

Popcorn empowerment is my term for an organizational culture that's crafted carefully and methodically. Timothy's problem-solving strategy is just one example of a culture that's dedicated to trust and service excellence... and not focused on slapping a coat of paint on problems. ■

Excerpted from "Disney U: How Disney University Develops the World's Most Engaged, Loyal and Customer-Centric Employees"

20 hotel TVs sit unwatched while their guests are off having fun with spreadsheets.



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