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“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”

‘The five star experience’, ‘a five star resort’, ‘five star service levels’ what do all of these phrases really mean, or has the term ‘five star’ finally become so overused for its meaning to have lost any real value altogether?

I have been fortunate to travel ‘5 star’ at almost every level over the past 20 years or so from 1st class air travel and limousine transfers, to suites on cruises and stays in some of the World’s most iconic hotels and resorts.

In my experience the one key differentiator between the ‘great’ hotels such as the Splendido, Villa d’Este, the Intercontinental in Cannes, The One & Only in Dubai, Chateau de La Chevre D’Or, the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, our own Mount Nelson in South Africa and the Royal Palm in Mauritius is not so much the size of the suite, or the variety of amenities, but the service levels and in this I exclude the private butler service offered by some top hotels.

But surely it doesn’t take more than a little common sense and some training to get this basic staffing element right – or does it?

My feeling is that when service levels disappoint, the failure is most often the result of the management processes which are flawed and or not guest-centric. The problem becomes compounded when the staff dealing with the guest do not have any practical grasp of what the expectations actually are for a ‘5 star’ traveller or guest.

And why should they, when the person dealing with a guest is unlikely to have had more personal experience than several nights in a 3 or 4 star hotel (generally courtesy of an in house training programme) to use as a scope of reference?

In trying to bridge this gulf between ‘guest’ and the reception desk, the staff will of course

have the hotel’s ‘manual’ with which to defer in terms of all things service related.

In practical terms this will often mean that the recommended time in reception for any guest will 3.5 minutes going through the check-in procedures, followed by 5 minutes arranging luggage to be delivered to the guests’ room or suite and then 2.5 minutes for a Q&A with the guest about the room’s functions and hotel’s facilities.

If you think I’m joking try to get a copy of the staff procedures manual for the ‘really important hotels in the universe group’ or similar and you’ll see what I mean.

All of this slavish adherence to the best management, procedural, accounting and HR processes means that the customer often gets completely lost, ergo ‘forgetting’ to ask me at reception, after an 8 hour journey to get to the hotel, if I would like a drink.

On the up side at least now, having been through some hotel groups’ idea of what constitutes and how to deliver a 5 star experience, I know exactly what a sausage feels like on its way to being shrink-wrapped, labelled and packaged up ready for the supermarket shelves!

The manual that many hotels seem to use must have been written by the same people who wrote a report some years ago which concluded that the average family had a house, a car and 2.4 children. All I can hope is that the .4th child of the ‘person’ who penned this ‘rubbish’ has nothing but trouble from that child for the rest of its unnatural life.

So the question is can we really apply these expectations to golf, even when the term 5 Star is often bandied about as it often is?

When I go to a golf course and I am going to

pay R 1 000.00 plus for game of golf (and no this is not just a quantitative ‘thing’) I expect to have my bags put on a golf cart and ‘yes’ a bottle of water would be nice and a wet cool towel and a scorecard in the cart, etc.

PS - I **EXPECT** these things; this is not ‘5 star’, this is my right as a customer with this level of facility!

If a golf course or development wants accolades it is going to have to go a lot further down the pipe than a valet service for my clubs and golf shoes, to get it!

Naturally when I tee off down at the ‘local course’ my expectations are more muted and although I don’t expect to have my bag carried to my cart, I do want to be made to feel really welcome.

As a service focus and or pay off line and other than my own perennial favourite – ‘good service is not a privilege it is a customer’s right’, I think that all Clubs would be well served to adopt ‘there is no such thing a visitor – every guest is a member for the day’ as their staff’s mantra.

On page 15 we feature a discussion about the key area of service levels with Eddie Bullock who runs his own management consultancy business and who is a past Captain of the PGA of Great Britain and Ireland.

Eddie has had extensive experience at senior management level including being the CEO of Woburn Golf Club and as a Director of Goodwood. Both Woburn and Goodwood are magnificent venues, but is this enough to warrant the ‘5 star’ rating and what does it take to get the service levels to match the quality of the facility itself? ■



“On our theme of ‘First Impressions this month’s discussion, is with Eddie Bullock immediate past PGA Captain of GB & Ireland and former CEO at the iconic Woburn Golf Club in England. Eddie is an accomplished business leader and a sought after business speaker within the golf industry. He now has his own management consultancy specialising in golf facility management and a broad range of golf related disciplines including strategic management, structured organisational changes, marketing and customer service.

The celebrity and actor Will Rogers once said; “You never get a second chance to make a good first impression”.

In a similar vein I remember some years ago hearing about an enlightened advertising agency in Cape Town which paid its head receptionist almost as much as the GM. It was felt that her impact at this key point in customer / client contact and on the phone was absolutely critical to the agency’s projection of a professional and businesslike image.

One of my personal pet hates is seeing the top of someone’s head at a reception as I walk in. Why is it that management often fail to realise that reception is the ‘face’ of the business and potentially a key ‘moment’ in the relationship with any customer.

It is indeed a mystery and applies equally if not more so to a golf club where the club’s essential ‘essence’ can be felt and needs to be established upon arrival.

Golf clubs potentially have many points of access and therefore many ‘faces’. If you are entering a golf estate

for example the contact process will start with the security / reception staff at the entry gates.

The contact process then continues at the front entrance to the clubhouse, in the locker room, at the bag drop, in the golf shop, or upon entering the foyer/ reception area. All of these contact points should provide an immediate and defining sense of the quality and the culture of the club.

Last year at a golf club on the Costa del Sol in Spain I was enjoying a delicious very well priced lunch, with excellent service, in a very nice (but not overstated) dining facility. The glass in the windows was crystal clear and the carpets obviously regularly cleaned, there were no dead heads in the flower arrangements, etc. Looking out of the window the paved pathway between the flower beds was full of weeds. Why do so many ‘facilities’ miss the obvious?

This is sadly typical and a classic example of departments working with different service goals, or not having defined collective goals. It is essential for every department to buy into the process and be trained and up-skilled accordingly in order to deliver the targeted service levels effectively and consistently across the entire operation.

A sense of ‘quality’ is not based on one element, but is composed of a blend of the quality of the facilities, the overall ambience and the degree of professionalism and ‘warmth’ offered in the opening personal interactions with the staff.

The quality of the interaction with staff needs to be seamless as first impressions (both negative and positive) are often made in an instant and the extent to which a visitor or guest feels welcome and is comfortable and at ease can define their perception of the club’s overall quality.

With obvious ‘negatives’ like overfull ashtrays, un-cleared tables, etc. I am generally quick to blame management, at whose door these problems ultimately lie, but I often wonder how fair this is?

This type of slack housekeeping is really inexcusable and an initial negative impression can be very difficult to overcome, but positive impressions

don’t just ‘happen’: it takes serious commitment at many levels, including facilities, amenities, management, staff and service. Members want to experience the ‘special moments’ all the time, which requires the type of staff who will deliver a top level of service consistently.

The question that a club needs to ask itself is whether it has the team or is making the necessary investment in staff training to achieve and deliver at these levels.

The game is now truly global and the expectations and standards have also become much more uniform. Service standards are more important now than at any other period in UK club life and I am sure that this no different in South Africa. This makes team motivation and training more important than ever, but too many operations still have amateurs at the helm; hence many clubs are not taking the matter of developing their staff as seriously as they should.

Building a winning service culture and the team to deliver it is an essential part of delivering the club’s ethos. For the many club businesses in an economic quandary about future spending and development here are some key some considerations:

- ✓ *Club boards, committees, trustees, owners, etc. must recognise that strong personnel are needed to take a club forward.*
- ✓ *Clubs need a clear vision of where they want to go.*
- ✓ *Transparency needs to exist within all departments and accurate information and knowledge needs to be constantly shared.*
- ✓ *Staff need continual motivation and support to excel and deliver their best performance.*
- ✓ *Establish guiding principles to show a clearly defined pathway towards elite levels of service.*

Remember...

members, prospective members and guests have a choice as to which club they wish to use or join.