

six no-fail strategies for raising the bar in customer relations

by RUBY NEWELL-LEGNER, CSP

Ruby Newell-Legner, Certified Speaking Professional, is President of RubySpeaks Training Corp., Denver, CO. For more than two decades Ruby has been helping organizations make exceptional customer service a way of life. She has provided more than two dozen training programs for stadium and arena staff throughout North America. In this article, Newell-Legner discusses proven strategies for improving customer relations that you can implement today.

How would you and your staff react to the following situations?

- Executive management has approved a new position for Premium Suite Customer Relations—now it's up to you to hire the perfect person.
- Thirty minutes into a concert, two guests complain to a Guest Relations Usher that other people are occupying their seats—what does the staff member say to the guests?
- After city management decided to build a new stadium, fans and guests were apprehensive about the prospects of a new home for their professional football team—how do you prepare your staff for opening day?
- Two enthusiastic fans strip to their boxers while cheering on the home team. How does the guest relations staff member quickly and quietly handle the situation?
- Management has challenged the guest relations staff to play an active role in maintaining or increasing the renewals for season tickets holders—what can you do to meet this goal?

If these situations sound familiar, read on for ideas on how to make your customer relations activities achieve the next level in service and excellence.

1 Hire the right staff—it takes a special person to work in guest relations

In 1996, the Pittsburgh Penguins hired a full-time person to serve premium-seat customers in Mellon Arena. In 2003, they also added six new concierge staff to "raise the bar" in their service to these customers.

But, instead of hiring "a friend or a friend of a friend," the Penguins advertised the positions and hand-selected people who demonstrated an understanding of the concept of "extreme customer service and exceeding expectations." The standard? Individuals who demonstrated an ability to anticipate and act to meet customer needs before fans knew what they needed.

And Penguins management made sure employees knew they were considered the best of the best. The rigorous screening made employees feel important, and when employees feel important, they make fans feel important. According to Terri Smith, Director of Premium Seating for the Penguins, adding these "all stars" have produced an increase in the professionalism and level of service fans receive. "We recently received a letter from a group that wasn't renewing their suite contract. They wanted to be sure we knew that the non-renewal was due to business reasons—not the customer service."

One way Mellon Arena guest-relations staff cares for their premium-suite customers is to acknowledge birthdays. It's up to staff members to find out when it's someone's birthday and when they do, a big surprise awaits. Iceburgh, the team mascot, arrives with gift bags filled with memorabilia and the birthday person's name appears on the JumboTron. Recently, a 16-year old fan was surprised when Iceburgh showed up with a bag filled with a t-shirt, bobble head of team favorite Mario Lemieux, pom-poms and a media guide. Younger fans receive backpacks filled with goodies.



2 Give guest relations staff the tools—and the information—to excel in their jobs.

Even the most well intentioned staff member can make a situation worse when he or she doesn't know how to answer a guest's question. Take the situation faced by one of RubySpeaks' clients. Thirty minutes into a sold-out stadium concert, two fans approached an usher to report someone was sitting in their seats. The usher replied, "Well, if you aren't in your seats when the concert starts, the box office reserves the right to resell the seats!"

The situation escalated all the way to the general manager before it was resolved. To avoid this type of situation in the future, the staff at RubySpeaks helped management design and implement a training program that emphasized understanding policies and procedures and how following those policies and procedures can prevent future confrontations. This is the kind of situation that can easily be avoided when guest-relations staff have the information they need to do their jobs. Sometimes customer service representatives will make up answers just so they don't have to say "I don't know" and this is where a little information can go a long way.

In this case, the usher didn't understand that the stadium's policy of checking the tickets of everyone who enters a section was designed to prevent this kind of situation. The new training program helped the staff understand why the policy was in place. Then we taught the staff to approach guests by firmly saying, "May I assist you with finding your seats?" instead of simply taking tickets away from the guests as they enter the section.

Once your staff understands the policies you've set, here are some "customer friendly" phrases they can use. Just by changing a few key words, your staff will sound more professional and instill confidence in guests:

Instead of "I'll try," say, "I will."

Instead of "Our policies," say, "Our guidelines."

Instead of "I don't know," say, "Let me find out for you."

Instead of "... your problem," say, "... the situation."

Another way to raise the bar in suites is to provide information to your staff about the company who owns or is renting each suite. You can search for information on the Internet using Hoovers.com, then provide information about what the company does and the names of key company leaders to your guest relations staff.

3 Invest in well-planned training for staff—and make it fun—to ensure guests and staff are comfortable

When INVESCO Field at Mile High was built for the Denver Broncos, staff and fans were a bit leery of the new building. With all the traditions and ceremony surrounding the old stadium, management knew the staff at INVESCO Field would be a key component in helping fans make the transition to the Broncos' new home.

One of management's top concerns was how to up the ante in guest services to match the cost of premium seating and give fans the highest value for their dollar.

The Broncos established a guest relations training program the first year INVESCO Field was opened. According to Andy Gorchov, Director of Event Operations, returning staff members were designated as role models and were paired with new staff. "Returning staff members were invited to arrive early so we could emphasize their role in being a positive force behind the transition to our new home," says Gorchov. "When the new staff arrived, we formed a receiving line just like they do on game day, and had them run into the training room, with Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" playing in the background. Our staff still remembers that powerful, lasting first impression!"

Over the three years the new stadium has been opened, the training program has been building and improving through staff feedback. "Each year," Gorchov says, "we listen to what the staff wants and use their ideas to design our training program. An employee focus group provided insight on what was working and what needed improvement, from the staff's point of view."

Through staff feedback, management changed the requirement for all staff to attend new employee orientation each year. Now, like the pros in training camp, veteran staff members come into orientation a few days after the new staff and participate in actual event day scenarios. "It gives new staff a chance to learn from the experiences of the returning staff, and our veterans get a chance to shine," says Gorchov.

Law Thyne, Event Manager for INVESCO Field, attributes the emphasis on staff training to the increased number of returning staff – an 85% improvement over years past.

Oh, and the boxer-clad fans? The savvy guest relations staff member assessed the situation and got creative with his approach. Instead of calling security and making a scene, the staff member approached the two men and whispered, "I don't know if you know this, but the section you're sitting in is mostly families and here you have to wear your clothes." The guests put their clothes back on and left in a great mood ... especially after a Broncos win!

4 Reinforce great service. If you want to improve it, measure it and reward improvement.

When management challenged the guest-relations team to play an active role in maintaining customers and staff, the Buffalo Bills guest-relations teams were up to the task. In 2003 the team experienced their highest rate of return for both season ticket holders and staff members.

How did they achieve outstanding results? Jan Eberle, Director of Guest Services and Event Management for the Bills, created a Game Day Service Card to aid all internal and external staff on game days. This laminated card includes maps of the stadium, parking lots and the surrounding areas, stadium policies and procedures, the team schedule and important phone numbers. This compliments the Event Information Sheet, also distributed to staff members before each game. This sheet highlights important points relative to a particular game, including tailgate party locations, giveaway item information and reminders on areas for improvement. According to Eberle, "With more than 2500 game day employees at Ralph Wilson Stadium, these communication tools help to eliminate the 'I don't know' factor and increases both staff and customer satisfaction."

The Bills have also stepped up service for special needs guests, such as wheelchair assistance inside the stadium, fielding numerous calls about policy

concerns, and paying attention to details. For example, recognizing individuals needing special attention and encouraging staff to be proactive (i.e., clearing paths to the restrooms for a guest with a disability or pairing a guest with a known medical condition with an usher who is a nurse). These changes have prompted some guests to write letters to Bills owner, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr., in gratitude.

5 Clarify your customer service standards for each staff member's role.

Exceptional premium suite attendants are those who do their jobs without interfering with the guest. It's important for staff members to remember that they are assisting the suite holder to entertain his or her guests and that means more than understanding policies and procedures and greeting each guest with a smile.

Encourage your staff to get to know the people in the suite and learn their routines. Greet regulars with a personalized greeting. If children accompany the suite holder, have your staff get to know their names and keep a box of goodies on hand to entertain kids in case they are not interested in the game. A box of crayons and a coloring book goes a long way toward keeping a child entertained so parents can enjoy the game.

The Broncos Law Thyne shares this letter from satisfied guests, "My husband and I have great seats that come at a high price. Michael and Kevin, two of your guest relations staff, make it worthwhile to sit in this section. Thanks for providing excellent service through first class people like Michael and Kevin! They are truly assets to your company. By the way, the Broncos were undefeated while Kevin was assigned to our section and they lost when he was not. Coincidence? I think not!"

6 Acknowledge and reinforce good behavior – you'll keep good staff around.

The Buffalo Bills' Jan Eberle has placed a bigger emphasis on not only making guests feel important, but remembering to do the same for staff.

Eberle stated, "Our training and communication has increased our retention rate, in addition to listening to our staff suggestions, acknowledging them as part of our 'team' and rewarding them for the work they do."

Eberle organized an Employee Appreciation Day where staff members may bring their families out to enjoy a day following the season at the "Buffalo Bills Experience" where food, interactive games, face painters, and autographs from select players are all on site.

"We like to reward our entire staff from ticket takers to EMTs to maintenance to show that they help us make game day happen. Positive reinforcement has gone a long way, especially for some staff that have worked here for more than 20 years," said Eberle.

Eberle and her managers also distribute a "Bonus Card" when she sees exceptional customer service. "Managers are encouraged to walk around during an event, and stop and talk to as many staff members as they can," says Eberle. "During this time, we get suggestions for improvement from our staff. We always respond to the suggestion and explain how the idea was or was not used and why."

The Denver Broncos were looking for a way to increase staff attendance at games. "One of our most challenging issues was ensuring guest relations staff showed up for their assigned games," explained Thyne. So management set a standard of 100% attendance and offered an "End of the Season Banquet" to all staff and honored staff who met the standard.

These six tips can help you "raise the bar" in your stadium. We'd like to hear from you.

If you have a tip you'd like to share for "Raising the Bar in Guest Relations" contact the staff at RubySpeaks, Inc. Or if you'd like to receive more tips or to schedule customized training for your organization, visit www.RubySpeaks.com or call 303-933-9291. ■