

 by Cristina DRĂGAN

NORMALIZE

Great Service

THE 5-WEEK PLAN

A detailed, practical guide, inspired by 5* hospitality best practices, for entrepreneurs and small-business owners to better serve their employees and customers.



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The Opening Note

While inspirational posters will tell you to THINK BIG, for this self-implementing guide, I am going to make it my mission to THINK SMALL, focusing on simplification, addressing specific and manageable challenges, fixating on details, and step-by-step improvements!

Why genuine care and attentive service do not happen naturally?

The intriguing yet paradoxical reality about exceptional service is that although based on such basic, free, and natural tools (smile, eye contact, being present, saying welcome and thank you, sincerely caring about someone who wants to do business with you) we fail consistently at using these tools.

Each time I feel unseen, rushed, dismissed, or rejected during a service interaction, I complain in my mind, sometimes yelling out in frustration: "I want to give You money, is it too much to expect from you not to have a disregarding expression on your face, even annoyed because I interrupted your process of arranging the new merchandise, after me being the (first and only) one saying hello when entering your shop?" And then I swear to never go back there, or in any of their branches, or buy their products! But then I remember, I love their products, so I may go back... and I never write online reviews or verbalize my unhappiness because I don't like creating conflicts or putting people on the spot, so... am I enabling this way of being treated? But is it me who needs to educate them?". Then I remember that it's not their fault, and this upsets me even more.

COULD BE that they (the service, customer-facing employees) don't know better! They have never been given clear instructions on how to behave when serving a customer, did not know there even is a certain way to behave, whoever selected them for the role did not consider their serving skills, did not clarify expectations when they started working, nor presented the customer interaction as a priority of the business! Or maybe they are demotivated and unenthusiastic because of low salaries, poor leadership, unclear directions, or lack of feedback, appreciation, and celebration.

COULD BE that the owners have trained them and clarified expectations, but the employees do not care and do not respect the instructions, they are not paid enough to put in that effort too, they think they are doing a good job already, and there is no need for improvement, after all, they have experience in the field! Well, I strongly believe that an owner who invests time in training his employees to create a pleasant customer experience also cares enough to verify the implementation, and the performance, read the reviews, do spot-checks, find out if the customer is happy, offer feedback and help his team member understand the importance and the benefits. In the end, the employees' behaviors and service skills represent the business, the product, the service, the reputation and all these should be associated with anything else but great service.

COULD BE that there is a cultural aspect of the service interactions, in some countries more than in others, a purposeful way of welcoming the customers with a smile, eye contact and hello is not considered natural or necessary. I did observe this in my own country, a conflicting mentality guiding

some service-based businesses: “The customer needs our product/service, it’s not us chasing the customer! If you don’t like it here, no one is forcing you to stay or come back”. And the sad reality is that some customers accept this as a norm, not being bothered anymore by the eye-rolling and the scolding of the service assistant in the pharmacy, because they asked a question twice, the total lack of acknowledgment when entering a clothing shop in a mall, the bored and impersonal checkout transaction when buying a book at the library, the very poor service in a restaurant and the entitlement of the server to expect and ask for 15% tips at the end.

COULD BE that there is no need for good service? Since business is doing well, why complicate the work of the service providers by having to pay attention to gestures and behaviors, it’s not like the clients are not coming, they are enough. After all, this is not a 5*luxury hotel to politely smile to everyone. (I did not even enjoy writing this last one but, it is an example of how I feel sometimes, seeing the little to no effort invested in shaping customer service in some parts of my community).

Summarizing these, it’s fair to say that the truth is always somewhere in the middle. It all starts with the initiative of a small/medium customer-facing business owner to believe in and appreciate the importance of great customer service. Everything else around this desire will flow naturally: training, reinforcement, monitoring, celebration, and growing together with the team. With the accessibility to travel, one can experience great service, in different cultures, get self-educated, then come home to their business and say “I want the same in my company, how do I do that?!”. I can help you with the second part, but the first one, it’s fully up to you!

How do you know you need this guide?

- Customers complain about the service or you are struggling to attract and retain customers.
- Your employee turnover rate is high or they lack motivation and enthusiasm.
- You're facing increasing competition in the industry and you are unsure about how to stand out.
- Your business is expanding, and you want to maintain a high level of service.
- Your online reviews are very few and consistently average or below.
- Your service interactions lack personalization, human connection, and acknowledgment.
- You're looking to increase revenue and/or build a great reputation.

How to use this guide?

This guide is about breaking down the complex service behaviors, acquired through a long exposure to a 5* luxury environment, into simple and built-in steps, and making them accessible to small

and medium business owners and entrepreneurs who value their employees and customers but do not know where to start from, nor have enough resources (knowledge, people, money, time) to improve visibly. With the purpose to stop contributing to a broken ecosystem of average and poor service, leading to unhappy employees and dissatisfied customers who, having given up on their expectations, accept this as the norm.

This guide is not about successful recipes, strict standards, and rigorous audits, it's a structured form of revitalizing the common sense to create meaningful connections. That is why it could be applied in numerous types and sizes of businesses, as long as they are based on a direct employee–customer interaction.

I am still proud and grateful, looking back at how my career evolved in one of the most amazing companies in the world, in three different countries, finding myself today, with my view of the world deeply impacted by these experiences, compelled and inspired to share what I learned. I never considered working in hospitality when I started thinking of a career, even university studies were a very uneducated choice, a “going with the flow” kind of movement, specific to the little town I grew up in and the limited access to information. But someone invested their trust in me, despite the lack of knowledge or experience in service and luxury (I guess they were charmed by my personality), so I plunged, head first, into this very layered new area that I enjoyed discovering in the years after.

My first lesson in hospitality was that the foundation of providing luxury experiences (or any quality experiences) is taking care of the employees, and this principle hasn't changed today, on the contrary, it's becoming more and more a priority, in all industries. Working in training and human resources I could explore all the small and big processes behind this beautiful concept, making sure it does not remain just a concept in the welcome booklet company description.

“If you take care of your associates (employees), they will take care of the customers, and the customers will keep coming back” by JW. “Bill” Marriott Jr., the former CEO of Marriott International.

This guide strives to continue this principle, making sure employees are cared for in the learning process, constantly recognized and incentivized, valued for their contribution, and empowered to be their best selves. If this basis is not respected, none of the principles listed below would have a return on your investment of time and effort. Words will remain words and old behaviors will continue to be considered acceptable

My favorite lesson is that, for companies to thrive, all employees, regardless of the department, share one unique goal, “serving the customer”. This is often misunderstood and confusingly cascaded by some leaders, having employees place all their efforts on meeting sales goals, budget forecasting accuracy, turnover, training hours, food cost reduction, standards audit goals, trapped in the support departments and working with the mentality that “I do not interact with the customers, I am processing invoices / I am recruiting employees / ***I am cooking, so how can the customer be my priority?***”.

Well because everything employees feel, do, or think, their speed and accuracy, their personality and role, they all impact, in the end, the customer's experience.

Let's make it clear, all departmental goals are essential to progress and performance but it's important to understand the difference between job-related goals and the company mission that I identify with and work for every day! And, since in the hierarchically structured companies the employees are a mirror of the leader, we easily go back on this line and say, as a recurrent remark that breaks under the burden of the reality, that culture starts from the top.

In 13 years in hospitality, I experienced the impact of 7 different general leaders on a team of an average of 300 employees and it's magical and scary to see how everything reflects the leadership: the hopes and dreams of employees, the fears and pressure points, the mood and the motivation, the priorities, the customer experience, the day-to-day connections.

Wow, so much power! And if the leader knows these lessons, that employees are the foundation and customer satisfaction is everyone's goal, everyone wins! Now how do we scale this down to small and medium business owners, or entrepreneurs with teams of 3 to 5 employees, with no time and resources to create a culture? Well, nothing much changes, the principles are absolutely the same. The 3 employees need to be taken care of and they will put passion in serving the customers. If anything, the closeness of a small team should make everything easier to implement, observe, and improve, but also the results of not doing so would be far more devastating, as negativity can rapidly grow in the tight knit of a small team.

Although contradictory to the focus of my career, even now I much prefer small, simple places where people engage naturally, than the luxury and the carefully crafted attention to physical and emotional details I experienced and helped create for others, for many years (also because the second environment is not something I can afford very often). But this is just another argument that authentic connections and genuine care are universal, not claimed only by the high-end and 5* industries. And when you shake down all the amenities, the impressive cooking displays, the eye-pleasing decorations, the sophisticated architecture, that the luxurious places offer, **ALL THAT REMAINS IS** the feeling you have, the emotion that connects you with the experience and these can only be created by the way the hosts take care of you.

Unfortunately, the decision to create this guide was the practical consequence of a big perspective and life change I went through when I relocated back to my country after almost 10 years abroad. The reason for moving was a positive one and it came with many emotional benefits, being so close to my family. I say unfortunately because I encountered so many service transactions below minimum expectations in the first year that...

...I asked myself if this is what I need to adapt to or if could I do anything to try to show that there are better versions of this.

I had to assess this correctly, because I was definitely biased at the beginning, coming from a country where the competition for high and very high-quality service was intense, for the benefit of all businesses and their beneficiaries, us, the customers. From the street market and neighborhood pharmacy to the famous 7-star hotel, someone would go the extra mile, welcome you with a smile and a hello, and try to upsell you something.

Was I still biased to expect only a hello and, if I am lucky, a smile when I enter a really expensive cosmetics shop or a world-famous bakery?

Fine, maybe it was my professional habit, seeing all service transactions through the lenses of luxury and judging too harshly, but is it though?

Oh, I know, maybe I am in general a difficult client, asking for too much, after all, it is just an exchange of money and product/service, so why do we have to complicate everything, you've got what you came here for!

If the plan is to **MAKE IT SIMPLE**, let's start with this:

- If you are a business owner, a successful entrepreneur, a service professional, or a hospitality enthusiast, think about what you need when YOU are the customer. *(And yes, we are all different and unique and our needs are diverse, but if we start with the basic and universal needs, this could already make a huge difference).*
- Do you need to be seen, acknowledged, offered attention while served, and maybe, depending on the place and the frequency of the visits, recognized and valued?
- If the answer is yes (and why wouldn't it be?) then we solved the puzzle, do the same for your employees and customers and there is no need to follow through with this guide. It's enough, everyone is happy and the business thrives.
- If you are looking to go beyond the basic needs, align with the rising trend of personalization, stand out in an abundant market, find a niche, build loyalty, or expand your business, you will find the practical steps outlined below necessary and easy to implement by yourself together with your team.

Who is this guide for?

If you are a passionate entrepreneur and you own a customer-facing small or medium business, then this guide is for you! Prioritizing authentic customer service does not happen by default and should not be just a choice but an obvious and strategic decision.

I have seen the effects firsthand and companies have studied it to molecular level. It's enough to see some statistics or take a deep dive into the reality of your business (online review sentiments, loyal customer basis, employees' performance and turnover, the business style of putting off fires or executing plans?), to see the importance of providing excellent service.

According to 123FormBuilder 2023 Customer Service Statistics [123FormBuilder. (February 27, 2024). Blog. Retrieved from <http://www.123formbuilder.com/blog/customer-service-statistics>]:

90% of customers are willing to spend more when companies provide personalized customer services.

70% of the buying experience is based on how the customer is treated.

61% of customers would leave for a competitor after just one negative experience.

64% of businesses say they can notice sales growth due to good customer service.

81% of people claim that receiving good customer service makes them more likely to make another purchase.

73% of business leaders report a direct link between a company's success and customer satisfaction

This guide wants to be versatile and beneficial for a long list of businesses across multiple sectors. It is, however, particularly well-suited for small and medium companies in service-based, customer-facing industries. Here are below some examples:

HORECA (HOfel-REstaurant-CAfé Industry)

- Small hotels, pensions, boutiques, retreats seeking service improvement and those in the pre-opening, opening, and conversion phases;
- Restaurants, bakeries, and coffee shop owners can brilliantly apply and self-implement this guide to enhance service quality;
- Travel and tourism, including tour operators and private transportation companies.
- Catering and event coordination businesses can benefit significantly from its principles, ensuring they deliver according to the needs of the customers.
- Outsourcing companies specialized in hospitality placement can use the guide to enhance training and performance of their staff making them more valuable on the market.

OTHER SECTORS:

- Fitness and wellness (fitness centers, wellness facilities, spas, all types of salons: beauty, nails, hair, cosmetic, etc.);
- Healthcare (private medical clinics, dental clinics, and pharmacies);
- Retail (from clothing and gift shops to electronics stores, including luxury brands) can also integrate these simple steps to personalize the service;
- Entertainment providers like museums, art galleries, waterparks, and playgrounds can enhance their visitors' experiences by implementing new behaviors;
- Private schools, nurseries, and kids' workshop organizers can enhance parents' and children's experiences by customizing their approach;
- Professional service providers, such as solopreneurs, consultants, freelancers, and independent experts, interacting directly and personally with their customers, can find value in incorporating the guide's principles to improve the authenticity of their relationships.

It will successfully work if...

 You are committed to being a role model and the strongest advocate of all outlined principles.

 You select only what is relevant for your unique business, as not all the concepts below apply to yours! (thus, reducing the amount of information, you have to handle)

 You not only ask the employees to change their mentality and acquire new standards but you start by changing the context for them to succeed (make sure they are cared for, appreciated, happy and engaged before launching any new initiative)

 You expect ALL employees (not only the customer-facing professionals) to adhere to the guidelines - you cannot return to your office and get back to old behaviors and responsibilities because you "have more important things to do than smile!"

 You plan to reinforce, verify, or audit the standards, consistently, without hunting for mistakes and extending employees' working time.

 You plan to celebrate success stories and recognize amazing service behaviors, EACH DAY, EVERYDAY!

If not respecting the above prerequisites, you can still read this guide, out of curiosity and personal interest, but, without action, it will not improve your business and the relationship with your employees and customers!

How much money is this change going to cost me?

This is not the best question to ask, it already blocks the positive vibe of the change you are considering doing, as it focuses on “how much am I going to lose?”! A more suitable one would be **“How much money is this change going to bring me?”**, or, a fair and business-related question of “How do I quantify the return, what is my return on investment?”. I am happy with the fact that you are not satisfied with the empty promise “benefits outweigh the costs, you will see!”, we will approach this later: how to plan so you can measure. Until then, for the implementation of the new service behaviors, let’s list potential sources of cost:

 The purchase of this guide is your first investment, thank you for the trust, by the way!

 Then, if you have a larger business, you may need to allocate some money to employ the services of a consultancy company to get you started on your business analysis – online reviews, local and extended reputation, mystery shopper audits, employee engagement survey and analytics, revenue trends, inventory, and suppliers. If your business is small and you practice keeping track of all these metrics regularly, then you can have this step done by yourself with the minimum guidance I provided below, so it’s only an investment of time and interest.

 You will see in the plan for self-implementation that I suggest a Kick-off Meeting or Event to announce the upcoming changes and to set the tone of the new context you are creating. This could represent a cost if you would need to rent a training space, order treats and gift bags for your team members, or even close your business for one day. Or you can ask an event organizing company to make it memorable for your employees based on your indications. The budget depends on each type and size of the company, and the extent of impression you want to achieve.

The rest of the actions do not cost money, they, however, require short but regular contributions of time, consistency, and genuine care for your employees and customers. Why do I have the feeling that while reading you will find this last element still the most expensive and difficult one...?

Participant WORKBOOK



welcome to personalized learning

your private collection of gestures, words, mimics, tones and
mindsets for authentic interactions. personalized

This workbook belongs to:



the con tent

CUSTOMER'S JOURNEY

Map the most important touchpoints along the way

SIMPLIFIED LUXURY BEHAVIORS

Understand, personalize, become an experience creator

THE REINFORCEMENT

Create your Action Plan

THE CELEBRATION

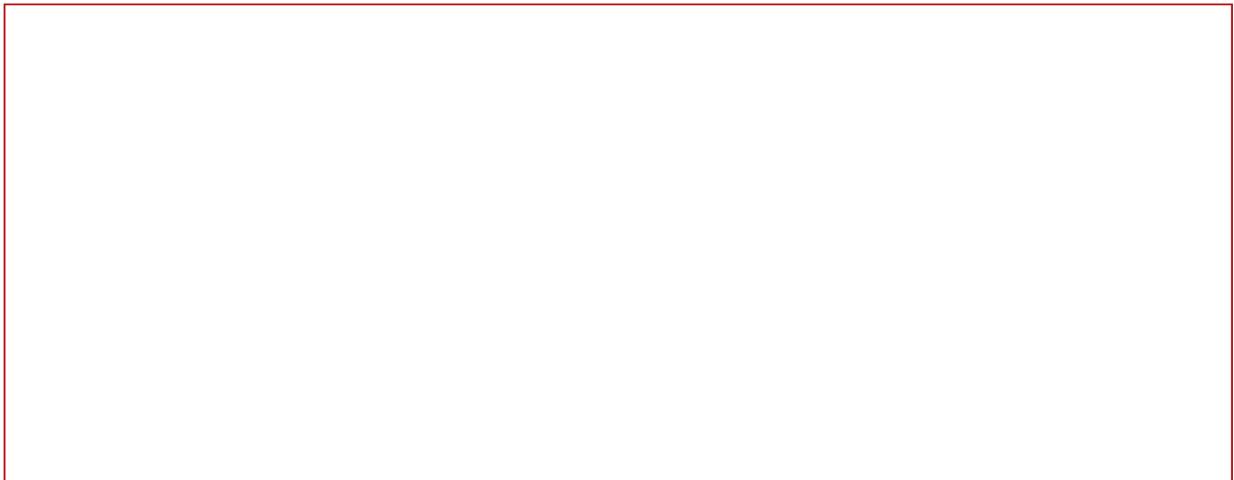
Plan your Activities Calendar

MY COMMITMENT

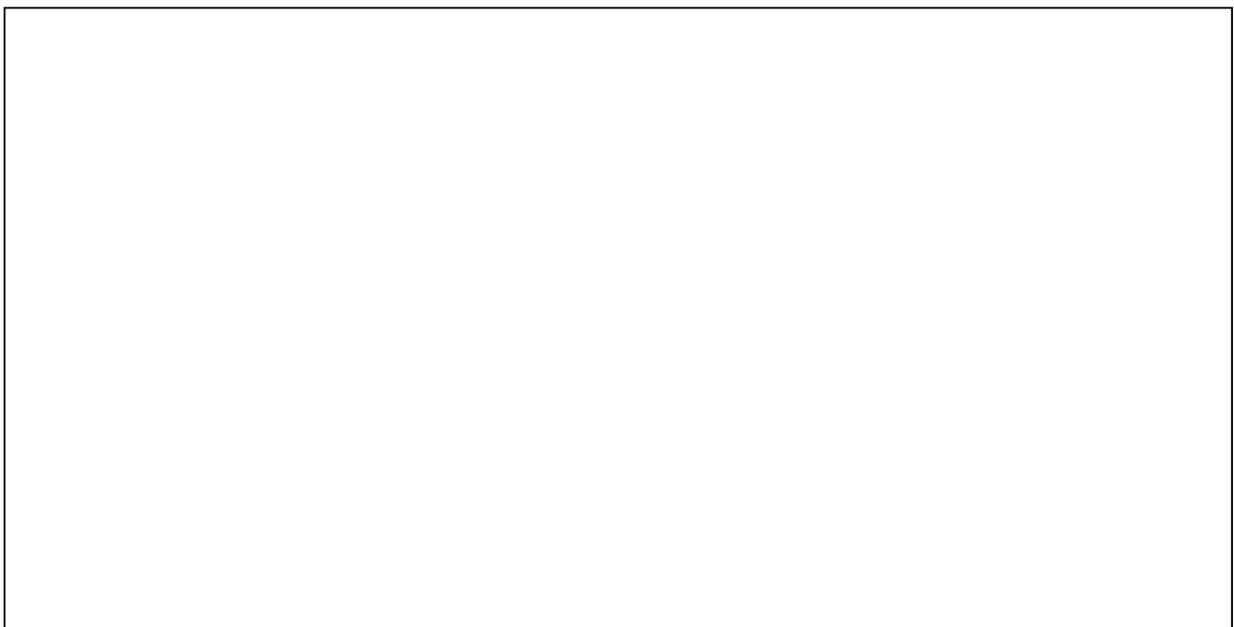
A MINUTE



From "NO PROBLEM!" to "MY PLEASURE!"



Be PROACTIVE!



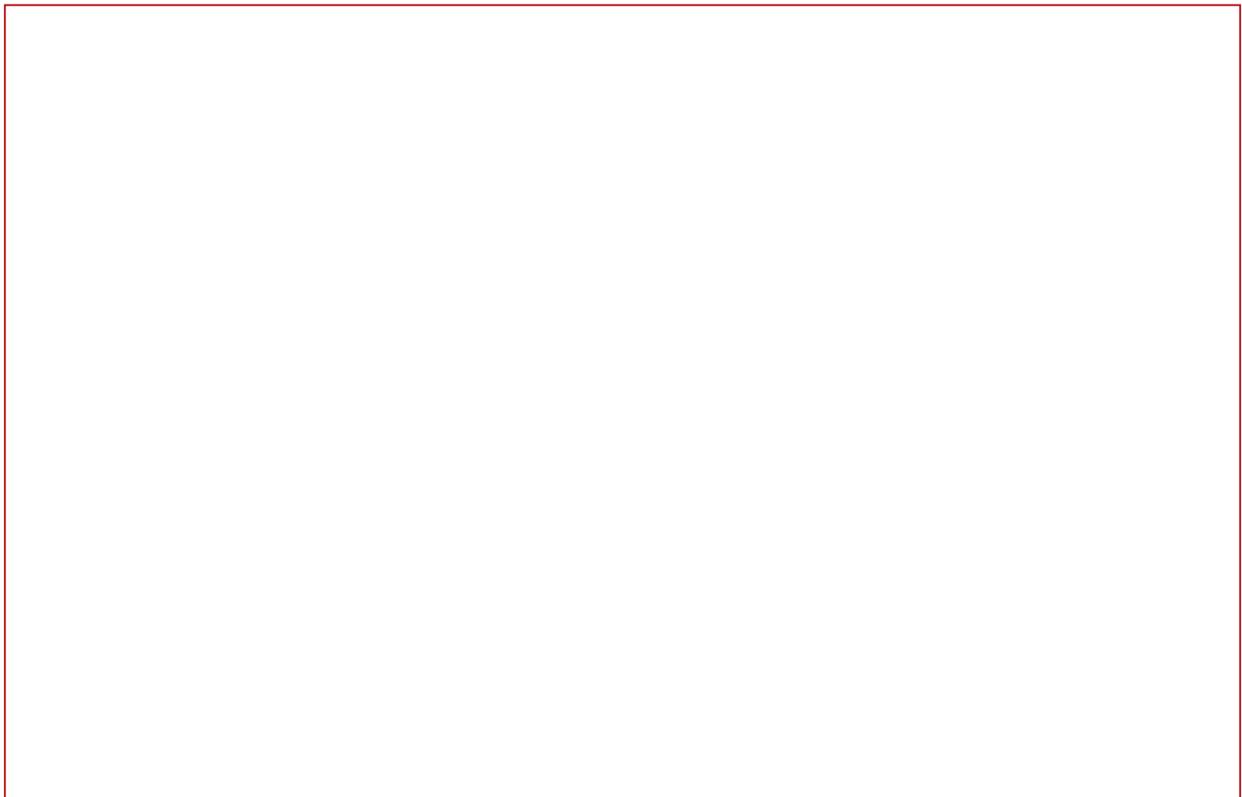
The CELEBRATION

In this section, capture celebration ideas that work best for you and your team! Then move to step 2, planning these actions and turn them into special recognition moments!

CURRENT ACTIONS



CELEBRATION IDEAS



MY COMMITMENT

Use this last page to define your commitment to this service transformation, skills enhancement, behaviors changing, and habits rewriting journey!

I,

.....

commit to support this project by doing the following
(tick what best applies to your personality so your commitment is genuine):

- Understand what are the expectations aligned with this change!
- Read, understand, and practice the new skills that would add value to the service I provide!
- Help my colleagues and my leader throughout the implementation!
- Always strive for excellence, by choosing the best version of my reaction!
- Give myself time to learn and space to make mistakes!
- Actively participate in recognition and celebration activities!
- Share success stories and best practices!

 Signature
& Date