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OPINION ARTICLE

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When Guests Complain, Be All EARS!

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Considering all of the many components of a positive guest experience during even just a 24 hour stay, and how many

hotelier that at some point during a shift every colleague is likely to encounter complaints. Surely we can and should do all that is possible to prevent shortcomings, but it is also essential to train everyone how to respond in such a way as to not only fix what is broken, but also to show compassion for the guests' inconveniences.



To their credit, most hotel operators seem to be working hard to improve the overall quality of the "physical product" such as cleanliness, amenities, F&B offerings, and comfort of the guest room itself. Perhaps this is due to sincere concern for guests, but I suspect it is also out of an awareness of the impact of online guest reviews and social media postings.

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That being said, as a frequent traveler I still experience inconveniences just about every time I stay in a different hotel, which for me is usually about 6 different times per month. If it is a minor issue I often don't even bother to mention it, but sometimes reporting it unavoidable.

When I do report a shortcoming, I find that the issue is nearly always resolved immediately, but what's sorely

One frequently recurring example is when my electronic key cards mysteriously de-activate, and NO, I DON'T put them next to my mobile phone! It happens to me with traditional credit-card style key cards with magnetic strips and even with the newer models that you wave in front of the lock. I don't ever know if the problem is with the card itself, or more likely with a front desk colleague who punched in the wrong departure date in their system, but it seems to occur at least 1-2 times per month.

This always seems to happen to me in the most inconvenient circumstances, such as when my room is the last one located at the end of a very long hallway, when I am making a quick pit-stop to use the bathroom between meetings, or when I'm rushing back for a scheduled conference call.

After trudging back to the desk, waiting in line, and reporting my frustrating experience, what I most often hear the colleague say is "Okay sir here you go!" or even worse, "No problem, I'll get you a new one." (It may be "no problem to YOU, but it is a big problem for ME!) Rare is the occasion when I actually have someone apologize for my inconvenience and – rarer still – empathize with how frustrating it is when this happens.

Similarly, when I report other common inconveniences at the front desk, in the restaurant, in the meeting rooms and elsewhere, I most often hear the colleague moving right to the solution without taking ownership for what went wrong. Examples:

- "The Internet code you gave me stopped working...."
"Okay, I'll reset it."
- "My room service order is very late..." "We'll check on it."

- "The bottom of the iron is dirty..." "We'll send you a clean one."

Yes, it is important to "fix" the guest complaint, but to win guests' loyalty and regain their confidence, what's as important - if not more - is to show compassion for the complainer.

During the hospitality training workshops which I conduct worldwide for frontline colleagues, I share a model using the acronym "EARS." The idea is that when guest complain, we hoteliers want to be "all EARS." The acronym itself is a good reminder that when guests are upset the first thing to remember is to let them fully vent their frustration; be an attentive listener. Then once they are done sharing all of the personal details of how this shortcoming created unique inconveniences, only then is it time for us to do some talking.

Empathize. Demonstrate understanding and make a personal connection with statements such as "I can imagine how you must feel" and / or "If I was in that situation I would certainly not be satisfied either." This shows that you truly care and provides something that us humans REALLY need very badly, which is "validation."

Apologize. Providing a sincere apology is a wonderful way to defuse the situation and calm down an emotionally charged individual. By apologizing, we are not necessarily admitting fault but simply showing that our intentions were good.

Resolve. Ideally, we of course want to give the guest what want. However, in the real world it is not always possible to do so. Therefore, collaborate with them on the solution and offer a choice of options. For example, the guest wants a room with a king size bed on a high floor near the elevator but you do not have it. Offer them a room with a king on a

Satisfied? Especially when the guest is visibly upset, follow-up after the solution was delivered to ensure that they were satisfied. This shows an extra effort, professionalism and conveys good intentions.

By training your staff to be all EARS, you'll ensure that guest complaints will be resolved while they are still in-house. Even better, you might also find that some guests end up even more impressed at how professionally their complaint was handled than they would have otherwise been had nothing gone wrong in the first place!

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