

WINNING CONCEPTS FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES— USE THESE IDEAS TO RESOLVE CHALLENGES

by Jerry Gelsomino, FISP

Sometimes when we are stuck for ideas, looking outside our own world can yield surprising results. I for one am constantly in search of good ideas for process solutions, material selection, and marketing strategies. In many cases, reinterpreting an application from another area of the industry to use for our own projects and assignments can result in good ideas and new approaches.

Many concepts used today in fashion and apparel stores have come from the supermarket world—promotional endcaps, vertical merchandising, perimeter billboarding, and so forth. Hospitality is another great source of inspiration. It is within the hospitality area of the industry that I recently found a gem.

I currently am reading a very energizing motivational book that has nothing to do with designing, building, or fixturing stores—and yet has everything to do with how we go about our business of designing, building, and fixturing stores. The book is *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*, by Danny Meyer.

Meyer has an interesting background. In 1985, he opened what would become one of New York City's most revered restaurants, Union Square Cafe. From that start, in little more than 20 years, he has become CEO of one of the world's most dynamic restaurant organizations.

Anyone who can become known as "America's Most

Innovative Restaurateur" in New York City, and in such a short time, has lessons we can apply to our own industry, whether that's retail, or providing products and services for retail environments. What Meyer has to share with us in his book is his belief that treating customers and employees well is necessary in order to build a company brand that is positive, enticing, and sustaining. In his book, Meyer shares his passion for his business, successes he has achieved, and mistakes he's made along the way that have contributed significantly to his accomplishments.

Meyer writes, "Hospitality is present when something happens *for* you. It is absent when something happens *to* you. These two simple concepts—*for* and *to*—express it all." I think that comment speaks directly to retailers and those of us involved in the creation of stores. Are the stores we develop focused on doing something *for* the shopper, satisfying a need? Or is the current crop of retail strategies intent on giving *to* the customer only those products and services that satisfy operational or financial plans?

Meyer's book provides an example of how a front-desk attendant handled a situation in which a party arrived late for a reservation. Rather than scolding the customer, the host responded with empathy for the reason of the tardiness, and explained how the evening's difficult traffic movement was

affecting the restaurant's schedule as well. Are retail sales associates able to give those same quick-on-your-feet skills in treating impatient, dissatisfied, or indignant customers? I have experienced clerks and sales associates who scold customers because the customers have done something that makes more work for the store personnel, such as adding an item after the sale was rung up. Worse yet, I often have approached a checkout without receiving any acknowledgement that I exist. Have we treated our customers similarly?

SERVICE IS DIFFERENT FROM HOSPITALITY

Meyer explains his view of the distinction. "*Service* is a monologue; we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards of service. *Hospitality*, on the other hand, is a dialogue. To be on a guest's side requires listening to that person with every sense, and following up with a thoughtful, gracious, appropriate response."

I find it interesting that those predicting the future of retail suggest that less contact with the customer is the way to go. I worry about this vision of retail technology, reliant on dynamic media monitors, interactive kiosks, predictive scanning of the customer, and so forth, which is intended to greet, inform, and advise the customer regarding purchases. A fair question to ask of these visionaries: "Tell me again why you don't want to talk to (have a dialogue with) the customer?"

While Meyer shares numerous examples of innovative ways to build relationships with business customers, shoppers, and employees, I want to conclude

with a different thought that I gained from his book.

KNOW THYSELF

"Before you go to market, know what you are selling and to whom. It's very rare business that can (or should) be all things to all people. Be the best you can be within a reasonably tight product focus," Meyer writes. This advice goes along with the stories he tells about how critics have reviewed his restaurants as they first open the doors. While any restaurateur desires a positive critique, Meyer notes that it takes many years before this type of business reaches its stride. Learning to know what works and what doesn't, adjusting the menu, and listening to tastes of your customers can be a humbling experience, I'm sure, but an exercise that can reap long-term rewards.

Too often in business, marketers and company executives are expected to launch the newest store, product, or service with all the bugs already worked out. It is considered a weakness if a new introduction has any flaws, rather than a learning experience or maybe even an opportunity for the end-user to get involved in the final design. That's too bad. Who knows better how something should work or fill a need than the person who is ultimately going to buy it? ■

Jerry Gelsomino, FISP, is vice president of marketing and brand experience at Pratt Corp. in Indianapolis, a member of the National Retail Federation's Associate Member Advisory Committee, and the international vice president of the Institute of Store Planners.

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