All the world’s a stage
What good customer service borrows from theatre

by Brita Harrison Brooke

Picture yourself walking into an Italian restaurant. The checkered tablecloths, candlelit tables, accordion music, framed pictures of Italian scenery and the smartly dressed staff, all tell a story about the type of experience you will be having. These elements of storytelling and theatrics are what Dr. Steve Tax, champion of Gustavson’s service management specialization, emphasizes in his research. Many scholars have described customer service as an experience with the frontline service staff (actors), processes (script) and physical environment (set) resembling a live theatrical performance.

“The idea of customer service as a performance is not new, but my question was, if service is a performance, where can we observe best practice?” says Tax. He chose to study the theatre because of the industry’s long history of mastering a system delivering performance efficiently and effectively. He turned his interest to the renowned Belfry Theatre in Victoria, BC to learn how performances are designed.

“The process in most theatres is the same but the culture at the Belfry makes it particularly compelling to study,” explains Tax. The Belfry Theatre is a professional theatre company producing contemporary plays, with an emphasis on Canadian theatre. The Belfry spends three months of every year rehearsing and performing two mainstage productions, adorning the walls.

Engagement refers to the level of audience participation in the performance, which creates a connection and ensures a memorable experience. The Belfry welcomes customer members to the audience experience the moment they walk in, and everything from the programs to the stools set the stage for the performance. The Belfry spends considerable time assessing the performance from the point of view of the audience and continually makes adjustments to ensure audience engagement.

How can managers apply the lessons from the theatre in their careers? They can start by seeing themselves as the director of the customer service performance.

“You can’t design the experience the customer has, but you can design and support the performance to achieve the impact you want,” says Tax, adding, “Outstanding service derives from a great service culture focused on telling a compelling story that resonates with customers. Every element of the performance should be carefully designed to tell that story.”

It is also vital the experience be empathetic, designed for the customers themselves. “Empathetic design is based on a deep understanding of what touches the customers,” says Tax.

Tax has learned that the elements necessary for a good theatre performance also make for a good customer experience. These include authenticity, engagement and empathy. Authenticity enhances customer experiences, allowing them to be more immersed in the performance without distraction. This includes a careful attention to detail. In the Italian restaurant, a distracting element could be something incongruous, such as opera music playing over the speakers or pictures of Greece adorning the walls.

Finally, Tax observed the passion people in the theatre have for their work, which contributes to authenticity and customer engagement. “You can sense the emotion when employees are passionate for the roles they play,” says Tax.

To Tax, the theatre provides an opportunity for his students to experience the key elements of a highly professional and effective performance. It helps them understand that all the world is truly a stage when it comes to the service experience.

Start-up accelerator helps energy tech company shift to high gear

Entrepreneurs: ever wondered what it’s like to take part in a start-up accelerator? Stuart Kinnear, BMus ’09, MBA ’11, traveled to Oslo, Norway last fall to participate in Techstars’ energy-industry start-up accelerator. Over three months, he and team members from his Calgary-based company Interface Fluidics had the chance to network, find mentors, pitch, iterate, fail, pivot and ultimately leave with new inspiration—and investors.

Interface Fluidics, which Kinnear co-founded in 2016, offers chemical analysis of oil reservoirs to make extraction via hydraulic fracturing more efficient, and in the process, aims to minimize the fresh water needed to extract resources.

Business class: What was the outcome of your experience in Oslo? Stuart Kinnear: Techstars’ model is “give first.” I think it really is a great mentality for every entrepreneur to have. When it comes to what we are useful for as entrepreneurs, it is our willingness to work hard, our great ideas and our network. And that network is built by helping others, by building that social capital that we all trade in.

BC: Did Techstars change how you do business at all? SK: I have a lot more confidence now. The specific brand of confidence is that I know I’m doing something important. I want to help other entrepreneurs and I don’t have time to wait: “We are doing something important, let’s do it together!” I don’t worry so much about being super polite.

BC: What do you think you brought to Techstars that others needed or didn’t have? SK: I come from a background of working at gigantic companies. I was at Canadian Natural Resources Limited for five years doing contracts. I’m not a lawyer but I have an ability to look at a commercial agreement and understand where the risks and benefits are and how to write one that is acceptable for both parties. Interface Fluidics now has this superpower: the ability to sell to corporates with very little friction. Most of Interface’s customers recently are billion dollar companies. At Techstars, I saw myself as a bit of a mentor for people who had never sold to a big company before. If you’ve never sold to gigantic companies before and you don’t know what’s on the receiving end of what you are trying to pitch, then it’s really impenetrable and difficult to work with.

BC: Any other takeaways from Oslo that fellow entrepreneurs might be interested in? SK: The importance of reporting to stakeholders on outcomes. While you are in Techstars, you send a weekly update to every stakeholder. Weekly updates might be overwhelming for most people, but founders often don’t keep their stakeholders informed enough. And it’s not about putting on the rose-coloured shades and saying “these are all the good things and it’s great over here,” it’s saying “it’s good, but this and this and this are really bad.” It’s a real problem and how can we solve it?” Learning to ask for help transparently will get you so much further than only showing the traction you’ve had.

BC: How do you know if you’re listening to the right people? SK: It takes a certain amount of crazy to quit your job and start a company. You have to believe in your ability to think critically. When I’m seeking advice, I ask for very specific feedback on one problem and I’ll probably get 10 completely conflicting pieces of advice. But then I can use my own thought to say, “I think this person was onto something here, and this person there,” and then I can synthesize it into my own solution for the problem. Nobody has perfect advice. You have to be confident in yourself and your ability to process that advice and take it forward.

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