

Imaginative



Is it possible to provide better service even as resources diminish? Only if you use your imagination, say the authors of a new book on the subject.

Delight your customer! Provide value-added service! These have been mantras of customer service gurus. How do utilities avoid sending a mixed message by telling the front line to “wow” their customers in the morning and announcing staff cutbacks and expense reductions in the afternoon? How do you add value when there are diminishing resources to fund the addition? In a phrase—imaginative service.

Imaginative service is different than exceeding customer expectations. Ask customers what actions would be value-added, and they will focus on taking the expected experience to a higher level: they gave me more than I anticipated.

Imaginative service is not about addition; it’s about creation. When service people are asked to give more, they think, “I’m already doing the best I can.” But if asked to pleasantly surprise more customers, they feel less like worker bees and

more like fireflies. Here are five ways to deliver imaginative service.

Look at your service through new eyes

Make a list of great service providers outside your industry, then pick one of your service offerings. Brainstorm ways that service great might reinvent your service offering or process.

What if a Lexus dealership was in charge of your line crews for a week? If the Geek Squad at Best Buy ran your IT department, what would change? What would the call center be like if it embraced the ladies-and-gentlemen-serving-ladies-and-gentlemen philosophy of a Ritz-Carlton Hotel? How about putting UPS in charge of the mail room?

Go the extra mile

Energy is a vital part of customers’ lives. They can live without telephone or cable; they cannot function without power and heat. Although utilities are largely ignored until there is a



problem, customer vulnerability makes going the extra mile have even more impact.

When the meter reader compliments a customer's roses, it makes his or her backyard invasion seem more like a visit from a neighbor. When a line crew has a lollipop for the child watching a transformer repair, it humanizes a mysterious restoration. When a trouble man goes to the customer's front door, removes his hat and safety goggles, and lets the customer know exactly what he plans to do at their location, sending a message of compassion rather than indifference.

Take an empathy walk through your customer's experience

Leaders and those on the front line can learn a lot about the customer experience simply by being more observant. A utility elected to consolidate all its walk-in customer-care centers into a single center located at the corporate

headquarters. The unintended consequence of the decision was that the care center had to be positioned on the other side of a security guard (not exactly a welcoming experience), and a customer traveling by city bus had to hike almost a mile uphill from the nearest bus stop.

One hotel chain instituted a follow-me program that had front desk clerks ask repeat guests if they would, for a discounted rate, allow the bellman to unobtrusively hang around and watch them unpack and settle in. The program proved a major source of learning about the irritating workarounds hotel customers faced, things like having to place the suitcase of a traveling companion on the floor because the hotel only provided one luggage rack and having to unplug and find a place for hotel-provided hair dryers when they brought their own. By "listening with their eyes," hotel employees found ways to enhance the customer experience that guests would probably never have suggested on comment cards.

Include your customers

Duke Energy borrowed from the playbook of small town mayors to create a Boards of Customers program in the regions it serves. These customers volunteered their time each to act as sounding boards for new products and services and became a key neighborhood conduit for feedback and ideas on improvement.

Before implementing what could be an unpopular policy or controversial decision, the Boards of Customers helped soften the impact or offered suggestions on timing and tone. Not only did the admiration of the chosen members of the boards climb with experience, they had unique opportunities to become advocates for the Charlotte, NC-based utility.

Be worthy of customer trust

Trusting actions can be as small as a cup of pennies next to the cash register with a sign that reads “Got a penny, give a penny; need a penny, take a penny” or a poster on the dry cleaner’s wall that says, “We DO take personal checks.”

Examine the signs around your utility that say “Don’t” or other negatives. Do bill stuffers read like warm invitations or more like a summons? Can the same message be communicated in a more trusting way?

In the back room, out of sight from the customer, put reminders for employees to think through the customer’s eyes. Would you like you for a service provider if you were the customer? What signals do your actions send your customers?

What is the biggest obstacle to imaginative service? Fear. It is hard for employees to be inventive when they feel anxious. It

is challenging to be original when taking a risk is done under the critical eye of snooervisor. It requires being open to diverse thinking, responding to failure with mentoring and support rather than rebuke, and celebrating excellence that misses the mark, not just excellence the works.

It means helping employees separate those venues where imagination is a boon and those where safety or consistency dictate following a prescription. It takes leaders who talk about the vision more than they complain about the budget. It takes leaders who show humility, openness, and optimism. Finally, it requires leaders who express sincere gratitude for valued contribution.

Imaginative service can ramp up customer loyalty. Loyal customers are more patient and become strong advocates—the kind that can raise the favorability score from the utility commission. Devoted customers cost less to serve because they know your operation and they defend you, even if they know you sometimes come up short.

Help your employees stop making your customers say “wow” and start saying “whoa!” Value-added delight can be an expense, but imaginative service is always an investment with a high return. ☀

Chip Bell is the founder and senior partner with the Chip Bell Group, headquartered near Dallas. John Patterson is president of the Atlanta-based Progressive Insights, Inc., a CBG alliance company. They consult with several major utilities and have been keynote speakers at AGA, EEI, and CS conferences. Their newest book is Take Their Breath Away. They can be reached at www.taketheirbreathaway.com.

