

*An Excerpt From:*

*Hello!*

**And Every Little Thing  
That Matters**

IMPACTFUL IDEAS FOR  
TREATING YOUR CUSTOMERS RIGHT

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A Little Decency

#### *Obliging and Generous*

For a time when I was working at Per Se, I managed the events in the private dining room. Event planners would spend months planning every detail of a high level dinner for their valued guests at this 3 Michelin star restaurant. We, in turn, would spend hours and days preparing for each client; the food, wine, menus, flowers, seating arrangements, and staffing requirements all required precision and attention to detail in order to ensure a perfectly executed party.

But there is one event that stood out among the hundreds that I oversaw. It was an annual cocktail party with two bars and passed canapés for around 100 people. Guests were greeted with glasses of champagne and the canapés were miniature versions of some of the famous Thomas Keller dishes. The food at this restaurant was always impeccably served but on this miniature scale they were exquisite. Little jewels served on beautiful, curved forks, lovely little spoons and in tiny little glasses. Gorgeous and incredibly appetizing.

One of the waiters came to me after passing canapés to one guest. The guest shared with him that her jaw was wired shut so she couldn't eat any of the delights being passed around and was there any juice for her to drink? The server got her some juice and after speaking with this guest myself I discovered that she was desperate to taste the food and would love to try some even if it were pureed. Puréed? We didn't normally purée food in that manner but I figured I would see what I could work out with the private dining chef.

The chef was excited for a challenge and grabbed the Vitaprep blender. He tossed in a few canapés, blended them up and realized they tasted pretty good! With some tweaking and ingenuity he sent out a number of small puréed bites for this impaired guest to enjoy. Cold soups, hot soups and canapés pureed into shakes made this woman's night and it was so satisfying to observe her getting the chance to experience the Michelin star food alongside her colleagues. It inspired the chef to be innovative and creative and throw caution (purée the canapés?) to the wind, all for the dining experience of this one-in-a-hundred customer.

The source of everyone's behavior that night was decency. A regular person, enduring an untenable situation, was able to ask for help and in turn she was able to turn something uncomfortable into something enjoyable. She asked us to feed her and rather than saying "we couldn't possible do that, our food is not meant to be consumed that way" we did the decent thing and we were able to have this guest participate in the event, rather than look in from the outside. And it felt great; we all felt successful and satisfied in doing this simple act.

When I worked at Balthazar Keith McNally implored us to “just treat people decently” and we tried to show that decency to everyone who walked in. So many places strive to be “incredible”, “world class” or “amazing” but this is hard to embody and hard to comprehend, These states of incredulity are very hard to make actionable. Just what is “incredible” anyway? What I’ve discovered is that it is hard for your staff to understand how to “be incredible to your guests” all the time but it is quite easy to show simple human decency toward them. In the battle of “incredible” versus “decent” I advocate for the latter every time.

We must better understand what true “decency” is. We have come to equate “decent” with “average”, “standard” or “okay”. But it actually represents much more. As defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary, “decent” has a few meanings that are key to the customer service equation:

decent | 'dēsənt|

adjective

**1** conforming with generally accepted standards of respectable or moral behavior: *the good name of such a decent and innocent person.*

- appropriate; fitting: *they would meet again after a decent interval.*
- not likely to shock or embarrass others: *a decent high-necked dress.*

**2** [ attrib. ] of an acceptable standard; satisfactory: *find me a decent cup of coffee | people need decent homes.*

- good: *the deer are small: a 14-inch spread is a pretty decent buck.*
- kind, obliging, or generous: *that was pretty awfully decent of him.*

This is hardly average behavior. In fact, this definition is the perfect sidekick to good service as it is “appropriate”, “not likely to embarrass others”, “good” and “kind, obliging or generous”. Indeed, these are the hallmarks of amazing service. We see this all the time: the server running after a customer who has left behind his credit card, a

doorman helping a pregnant woman get her shopping bags in her car, airline personnel calling for a wheelchair for an older passenger. All acts of decency that read as “incredible service”.

The key to showing decency is that it is authentic and true to that moment. Not every older person would require a wheelchair at the airport and not every pregnant woman is a damsel in distress. In “*The Manager’s Book of Decencies*” author Steve Harrison speaks about how decent behavior can help you build a strong company culture. One of the key aspects of a decent act is that it is unexpected; I believe that the unexpectedness of a decent gesture is what makes it truly incredible. He also says that one of the keys to showing decency in customer service is to remember a small detail about the person you are working with. We all know this to be true; when the person helping you remembers your name, the waiter remembers your drink preference and when the drycleaner asks after your child’s health. These little thoughtful gestures add up in customer acknowledgement and go a long way in the customer service experience.

### ***No Bartering Allowed***

Sophia knows that the small things matter. When calling T-Mobile to upgrade her cell phone to the latest model, she had discovered that her preferred color was out of stock. The associate apologized and said the phone should be back in stock in about a week. A week later Sophia rang back and unknowingly got the same associate on the line. When Sophia said she was following up to see if a particular phone was in stock the associate immediately recognized Sophia and said, “you were looking for the gold model, right?” She was and was able to get the model she wanted later that day. Once at the store,

Sophia ended up speaking with the manager about how positive her experience with the associate had been. The starting point was the moment of decency: this associate remembered Sophia and in doing so made her feel special and remembered in addition to being satisfied by getting what she wanted: a new phone in the perfect color. And the associate got acknowledgement from her customer and her manager for a job well done. Win-win.

What is crucial to being decent, Harrison writes, is that the decent gesture is offered without any expectation of reward. This was true in the above example: the associate didn't expect Sophia to go to her boss to compliment her work; she just authentically remembered what was true. Once a reward is expected then the decency becomes a barter...and this is no longer decent per se, it is commerce. When I was a maitre d' people would often "thank me" for their table when they left the restaurant with a handshake whereby they gave me a tip. This was a clear decent gesture that represented "thank you for the table, we enjoyed ourselves" and I appreciated the extra monetary thanks. However, some people would arrive, money in hand, and ask for, or flat out demand, a "nice table when you can" while forking over 20, 30 or 50 dollars. There was no decency in this gesture, it was clearly a barter that represented "I'm paying you for a table, make it nice and snappy". I would always hand the money back and say "if you are happy with your experience you may thank me later". Sometimes they would, sometimes they would not. But once you expect a reward or a particular outcome then that normally decent gesture has been erased.

The question that you must ask yourself is do you want your brand and staff to be swayed by monetary incentives? If, as maître d', I had a "side business" of taking tips to

give people tables ahead of others I would have been bartering on my own behalf rather than act on the behalf of the other customers. This makes the sales person or manager an agent acting on his own behalf, not a fair representative of the business. We all know that money talks but we're talking about decency and service. What is the service experience you want to deliver? When you consider the decent reception of your guests you will include a lot more people who are there to be engaged by your service rather than trying to strong arm it.

### *Aiming Too High*

Most managers and owners tell us to strive for excellence, greatness and incredible results. There is nothing wrong with that, but when aiming so high it is very easy to miss the basics. Small but essentially decent gestures are the ones that speak volumes about your business. Looking someone in the eye, greeting them by name, showing concern for their distress and going out of your way to fix their problem are all ways to be decent to strangers and say something about your business in a way no incredible product feature can. By showing decency you are demonstrating great consideration for your guest, and this, in itself, is truly incredible.

I am frequently retained to create and develop the mission and core values for my clients' businesses. When I'm in the process of doing so I create a list of "concepts and words" based on interviews I conduct with the owners and managers. I compile a list of the words I hear people using to describe the business and what it stands for. The most common words that people use to describe their business and what it represents are "outstanding", "incredible", "flawless", "amazing". These are all great in theory but it is

impossible to ask someone to “be amazing”. There is no textbook example of “amazing” human behavior and I have found that people don’t know what to do when posed with this directive. Consider substitute words that are actionable versions of each original word. So “outstanding” becomes “special”, “amazing” becomes “unexpected” and “incredible” becomes “believable”. Then we create the mission and core values using these words and concepts; which makes it easier for the team to embody.

If we look at “special”, “unexpected” and “believable” we have just referred to the definition of decency. And when your mission and core values embody decency your team will be more able to authentically connect to your customers and, in turn, your customers connect to your brand. I always call the mission of a business “the North Star.” A well-crafted mission can help you when you make decisions as it keeps you on course by defining what you do every day. The Core Values of a business are the code that the staff uses to define their actions as employees. Many times the core values include concepts like “team player”, “respect” or “kindness”. These are all concepts that your team can embody and live out in their daily work life. So focus on making the core values concepts that are not too lofty, steer away from “be amazing” and go toward “be decent to people”. It will be easier for your team to embody and live up to.

“Being amazing” does exist. It happens when we see everyday heroes in the news. People who stop what they’re doing to help another person, to call 911, to offer assistance, to jump in with action, to offer a shoulder to cry on. These are the actions of regular people that we perceive as amazing, incredible or outstanding. These actions are all offered without thought of reward and are offered naturally and with a sense of urgency. In an emergency time is of the essence but the motivation that leads people to



do great things is the same: empathy for the other person, consideration for the person in front of you, commiseration for your fellow man or woman. And this leads to acts of decency that offer so much.

Decency is what people want after all, not only when in a tough situation. Decency is what people talk about when talking about the best service they have received. When people comment on their positive service experiences they offer similar responses:

“I felt so comfortable.”

“They understood my needs.”

“I felt heard.”

“They offered a swift solution.”

“They were thoughtful of my time.”

These are all situations where the customer felt good because of what the salesperson did. What he or she did was follow through, listen, respond on time, was friendly and offered help.

Unfortunately, the opposite is often true and judgment is just what some customers expect. Many businesses strive to be “non-judgmental” but there are common situations that lead many staff members to judge the people in front of them based on many things. The way people dress, do their hair, use body language, and demonstrate culture or knowledge all give people clues about who this stranger is. Very often we are quick to sum a stranger up in order to make decisions about them as a potential customer. Sometimes this natural human reaction is fair but sometimes it is not. Some of the most highly regarded and high net-worth people don’t demonstrate their status through their

clothing or appearance. Oprah was famously denied entrance to a shop in Paris ostensibly because no one recognized her as being “Oprah” or a person who might shop in the store. So imagine if you are not Oprah and want to go shopping in a high-end shop, you may feel insecure about being taken seriously and treated as a legitimate customer.

I regularly hear stories of people who feel insecure about shopping at certain stores, eating at certain restaurants and going to certain gyms. They are insecure about fitting in or being treated with respect as they look or appear different. This is where decency is lacking. Think about your business. Does it feel exclusive? Is your staff trained to approach certain types of customers based on their appearance, clothing or language? If your team is tuned in to one way of discovering a customer then you must open their minds to the most decent way of discovering customers: by being open to everyone who comes in. This way you will avoid the pitfalls of judgment and just may invite a person who didn't consider herself a customer at first into becoming a valued and loyal guest.

Comfort is a physical thing that is manifested in the actual environment of the business. A business makes the guest comfortable and puts them “at ease” by being communicative, helpful, timely, friendly and non-judgmental. “At ease” is defined as being “free from worry, awkwardness, or problems” (New Oxford American Dictionary). This is what we want all of our guests to feel in our business; a worried guest who is expecting an awkward or problematic experience will be harder to woo. However many guests arrive at our doorstep worried and stressed.

My second-most memorable guest at Per Se was the classical cellist Yo Yo Ma. He and his wife were incredibly warm, gracious and humble and presented themselves

immaculately. They fit the picture of a guest of the restaurant: internationally poised, comfortable in the luxury environment and finely attired. My *most* memorable guests, however, did not fit the usual mold...

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*To find out more about my most memorable guests and read all of my customer service insights, pick up your copy of Hello! at Amazon and other retailers.*



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