

Service Essentials

The Amplification Effect

How “petty little things” multiply to create
angry customers

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Las Vegas, July 2010. I took a cab from the McCarran Airport to my hotel, located about 30 minutes from the Las Vegas strip. The annual TMI World Congress was being held at this hotel. I was looking forward to seeing my TMI colleagues from around the world and to bring new consulting and training methodologies back to Malaysia. The cab pulled up to the hotel. First impressions were good. The hotel wasn't your usual over-the-top Las Vegas glitz, but rather, gave the impression of muted tones with a touch of class. I paid the cab driver and he drove off. There was no one from the hotel to greet me as I got out of the cab. This registered in my brain for a nanosecond, but it was just a little thing. I walked past a hotel employee who seemed to be slouching at his desk outside of the hotel. This sloppiness registered for a nanosecond, but it was just a little thing. Little did I know that, by the time I had left the hotel, the series of little things that weren't quite right had become so huge that they reverberated like big gongs banging inside of my head...

Check-in went smoothly. I took the elevator to my room. I always have a feeling of expectation as I put the key card in the door and am about to inspect my “home” for the next few days. I swung the door open. The room was dark. I fumbled around, looking for the light switch. The lights didn’t come on. I looked for a place to put the key card. There wasn’t one. For some reason, my stress levels went up. I used my suitcase to prop the door open to let some light in, fiddled with the two-way switch and it finally came on. I figured that this must be a “George issue”, and recorded it somewhere at the back of my brain.

The room looked great. I had a pool view! Bonus! I needed a drink of water. There were no drinking glasses in the room. I went to the bathroom. No drinking glasses there either. Eventually, I found 2 plastic cups. “This is unusual,” I thought to myself. By now, the little things were starting to amplify in my brain. I didn’t realise it, but my RAS – the Reticular Activation System in my brain – was starting to get stimulated.

**Your Reticular
Activation
System can
make you
acutely aware
of “what is
wrong” with
this business**

Your Reticular Activation System is the part of your brain that controls how acutely aware you are to what is happening around you. If you are a bird watcher, when you are outdoors, your RAS will heighten your senses to the birds around you. If you are in the market for a new car, say a BMW, then your RAS will attune your senses to notice the BMWs on the roads. I could feel that a “*What’s wrong with this hotel?*” reticular activation was starting to kick in. Without me realizing it, my brain was now scanning my experience to find out what was going wrong! I found that the series of little things that were going wrong were being amplified in my mind.

One of the professional development sessions that I attended at the TMI World Congress was on customer service design. We decided to use the hotel as the case study. Little did I know what was about to erupt. One person from Poland complained that she was so distressed to arrive at night to a room that was pitch black – and she couldn’t switch on the lights. A number of people – including me – had the same experience! Another person from the UK said that the hotel did not supply power adaptors for those with non-US electric appliances. A number of people – including me – had the same experience! A young consultant from Nigeria said that the check-in person was unhelpful.

The stories kept coming. One participant from Australia said that there were no mirrors in the elevators – and a number of women chorused her complaint! The size of the problem kept amplifying. It got bigger and bigger. The “unhappy customer” gong in my head was hitting harder and harder. One of the women in the room got so angry that she left the session and tried to check out of the hotel! I found that the things that had first mildly annoyed me were now amplified many times over. And my mind was now “looking” for more little things that would go wrong! I have coined this term – where a number of little things that “go wrong” combine to create major customer dis-satisfaction – as The Amplification Effect.

Let’s step back and take an objective look at what happened. First, millions and millions of dollars had been spent on this business. It looked good, had comfortable facilities and a choice of food outlets, and more. The business spent on a lot of time and money to get the “big things” right. But the hotel lost sight of the “little things”. And it was a *combination* of “little things” going wrong that led to their impact being amplified more and more in the mind of the customer.

**Little things
that go wrong
amplify to
create
unhappy
customers**

Taken in isolation, the little things may seem insignificant. Most times, the customer won’t bother complaining about them. Many people would consider themselves to be “petty” to be making a big deal about them. After all, it was just a drinking glass! But when the customer experiences a series of little things that go wrong and the Amplification Effect sets in – then we have recipe for a very unhappy customer.

When the Amplification Effect sets in, 1 little issue + 1 little issue + 1 little issue no longer add to 3 little issues. Rather, they amplify to major customer irritation. And when the customer gets irritated, any additional “little things” get amplified louder and stronger.

So here is the message for your business: you spend an enormous amount of money on getting the “big things” right. Be equally vigilant to make sure that you look after the little things. Focus on the little details of your customer experience so that there is no chance of a series of seemingly minor issues amplifying to a customer never wanting to deal with your business ever again. Until next month!

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