

VAIL RESORTS: THE ULTIMATE CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Imagine you are having a rough day on the ski slopes. You're a new snowboarder or skier. Suddenly, a Vail Resorts employee glides along side of you. You wonder if she's going to ask you to get off the mountain so you don't endanger yourself or anyone else. But instead of making fun of you, she asks if you'd like to attend a group skiing lesson. Free. Normally, the class would cost \$160.

Wouldn't that make your day? Wouldn't you want to tell everyone you know about the experience? Wouldn't you want to come back to that same resort, year after year?

This isn't a fantasy. It happens every day, many times each day, at Vail Resorts, a company that knows how to manage every aspect of the customer experience.

And that's not all Vail Resorts does to earn the customer's trust, loyalty and dollars. It's the special, unexpected things they do to ensure their guests have an experience like no other.

If the chair lift shuts down for more than 15 minutes, people waiting on the chair lift or gondola get a free lift ticket. They receive two tickets if the wait is more than 30 minutes. Each ticket is worth up to \$129 according to the resort's peak window ticket pricing this season. In fact, customer service representatives at Vail Resorts are empowered to give away vouchers for free lift tickets, group lessons, food and non-alcoholic beverages, free ski and snowboard rentals and other services.

Vail Resorts' "Epic Service Solutions" program empowers employees to quickly resolve any guest service issue and live up to its brand slogan to provide an "Experience of a Lifetime™."

Customer service members are instructed to use the LAST formula when they give a voucher: Listen. Apologize. Solve & Thank. They are taught "the conversation is more important than the voucher."

This practice is paying off. Vail Resorts is both the most popular and most expensive company in the industry it dominates. It operates several resorts including Vail, Breckenridge, Beaver Creek, Keystone, and Heavenly as well as Northstar, Kirkwood, Afton Alps and Mr. Brighton. In the U.S. they have 5 of the 10 most visited ski resorts and 3 of the top 4. Vail also develops, owns and manages hotels, condos, restaurants, and retail stores.

Companies can learn a lot from Vail Resorts. It is the most customer focused company I've seen. Its customer base includes the richest people in the world. Everything they do is based on the customer experience. At Vail Resorts, they understand they are in the customer service business. They

focus on the customer experience.

"Your challenge is not just to improve. It is to break the service paradigm in your industry or market so that customers aren't just satisfied, they're so shocked that they tell strangers on the street how good you are," said Jack Welch, Author, Former Chairman and CEO of General Electric. But, it is surprising how few companies actually do this!

Very few organizations focus every part of their business around the customer experience. Very few businesses walk the talk. At Vail Resorts, everything from the lift equipment to the technology is based on the customer experience. They track all down time over 4 minutes and the lifts are down less than .5% of the time in terms of what the operators can control, or excluding weather. That includes keeping the gondolas in a heated area overnight so guest will find the seats toasty warm when they make their first runs on cold mornings without frost.

Most companies think "How can we charge as much as we can and deliver the least amount, while causing the customer the most problems." Most companies look at short term gain. They don't appreciate the lifetime value of the customer. It doesn't have to be that way.

It comes down to compensation when problems happen. Give the customer something of value. Every organization has something of value it can give to a customer who has experienced a problem. What does your organization manufacture, sell, or provide as a service that costs less than the value it has in the eyes of your customers?

Of course, customer service doesn't have to be just about solving problems. It can be about creating opportunities. While other vacation destinations charge for taking pictures, Vail Resorts shoots pictures for free. Then they make it easy for you to post the picture on Facebook – with the Vail Resorts logo on each photo. They understand marketing, social media and the customer experience and have built a brand around Vail Mountain ... "VAIL– Like nothing on earth™."

That's how you build customer loyalty and enhance the customer experience! **RO**

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