



Customer Service As Branding

by Jen Leavitt, Education Manager

Recently a theatre patron wrote a generally mild yet complimentary mini-review of her local theater company's production on her personal blog. The Artistic Director of the production read the blog and took the review as a backhanded compliment. He responded by calling the patron snooty and further said he didn't want her measly \$19 anymore. As a result, this patron rallied many in her community to stop patronizing the theater. By the end of that day, the news about this Artistic Director's rude response was not just headline news in his own community, but arts lovers all over the world were weighing in on the debacle.

This is a quick and painful story that illustrates that customer service comes from every person. From the ticket sellers to the Executive Director, anyone who interacts with your patrons is part of the overall customer service you provide. In this era where word of mouth spreads instantaneously via Facebook, Yelp, and Twitter (and is archived for all the world to see), excellent service at the very least can mean the difference between a 1 star review and a 5 star review.

Does this mean that every staff member needs to speak from a script and regurgitate the same description of an event that's listed on the website or brochure? Not necessarily. Providing staff with the knowledge to describe upcoming events in their own terms builds credibility with patrons, who want opinions, not reviews, from real people before they spend their hard earned dollars on a performance.

This becomes even more important for lesser known performers and events. The explosion of jukebox musicals and musicals based on movies on Broadway illustrates this perfectly. Patrons want to know they will like what they see and hear, but what do you do when a performance isn't already a Broadway hit? Providing context to an unknown commodity helps customers understand and make informed decisions about

what they want to see. If a customer knows that they enjoyed recent Broadway hit, *Spring Awakening*, they may be interested to know that new show, *Fela!* features the same choreographer.

Personalized, charismatic, hip, community-oriented: what words would you use to describe the customer service your patrons receive? Are those the same words you'd use to characterize your overall brand? Excellent customer service is all part of the product arts organizations are selling. The product is not the performance; the product is the experience.

The experience of attending a play or concert begins long before a patron takes their seat. From the very first contact you have with a patron, that customer service should reflect your organization's brand identity. Perhaps the best example of customer service as branding is Ed Debevic's, a 1950's themed diner in Chicago, famous for its rude waiters and waitresses (in jest, of course).

And customer service becomes even more important in those potentially disastrous situations: the power goes out and cancels the performance, a patron was mailed the wrong tickets, a patron arrives late to a strict no late seating performance. How we react in these situations reflects upon the customer service and brand too. Addressing problems with integrity can turn a bad customer service situation into a great one, all while building a stronger brand identity.

Intuitively, nonprofits have always understood the importance of customer service even in those less than sparkling situations because without the support of the patrons it serves, a nonprofit would have little reason to exist. We've all heard the saying, "the customer is always right," and yet we've all witnessed a situation where that is simply not true. The customer is not always right, but the customer must always win. When the customer wins, the organization wins too.