

**Guest Service / Customer Experience Mgmt****The Door of Opportunity Opens With a Smile**

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38,600,000. That is the number of results Google returns in .39 seconds on the search, "how many studies on smiling are there?" Scientists have explored every aspect of smiling. Apparently, it even was used in predicting the life span of baseball players in 1952 – extending the life of those with "beaming smiles" seven years. Wow.

Research studies prove every which way that our brain, our emotions, our body, our children's development, our stress level, blood pressure - you name it - just about everything is benefited by the all-powerful SMILE. You can slice and dice the data in a million ways to conclusively say we should all be doing this more. Something else that everyone seems to agree on, confirmed by You Tube and Facebook likes, is that children and pets readily bring smiles to our faces. So perhaps pet-friendly and family-centric hotels have greater guest satisfaction? (Maybe that is Disney's secret!)



Did you know? Smiling is not just a universal means of communicating, it's also a frequent one. More than 30% of us smile more than 20 times a day and less than 14% of us smile less than 5 times a day. In fact, those with the greatest superpowers are actually children, who smile as many as 400 times per day

Recently, results show the connection and impact that smiling actually has on guest satisfaction. According to a recent survey by J.D. Power & Associates, travelers are more satisfied than ever with their hotels. Overall guest service satisfaction reached a score of 804, up 20 points from last year. It was the first time satisfaction has surpassed the 800-point mark (on a 1000-point scale). At the same time, there was a 20% reduction in the number of guests who reported a problem during their stay, which was the lowest number reported since 2006. How does this news pertain to customer experience management? Because the survey also found that employee demeanor has a significant impact on guest satisfaction. The average number of problems experienced when a staff member greeted guests with a smile "all the time" dropped 50% compared to when they were smiled at only "sometimes." The study also showed that guests are more loyal when they walk away from their stay feeling "delighted." Among those who were delighted, 80% said they "definitely will" recommend the hotel to a friend, relative, or colleague, and 66% said they would stay again.

These are colossal numbers which indisputably prove how crucial hotel employees are in achieving guest satisfaction. It is imperative that management be absolutely committed to recruiting the best talent, and then offering a wide-array of training and development procedures to facilitate superior and consistent guest service performance. Let's dig into the pivotal categories of guest satisfaction surveys which relate to Problems Experienced and Satisfaction with resolution and explore just how powerful a smile is in these essential categories.

**The Smile is the Key Which Unlocks the Door of Opportunity.**

In a moment, we will take a detailed look at opening the door to guest opportunities. However, first, let's consider how to unlock that door. Referencing two, of the aforementioned studies on smiling, note some of the fascinating details discovered.

In a Psychology Today article by Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D., *There's Magic In Your Smile*, Dr. Riggio explains what happens to our brains, bodies, and the people around us when we smile. Here are some excerpts of his findings and comments:

"Each time you smile you throw a little feel-good party in your brain. The act of smiling activates neural messaging that benefits your health and happiness."

"You're actually better looking when you smile – and I'm not just trying to butter you up. When you smile, people treat you differently. You're viewed as attractive, reliable, relaxed, and sincere. A study published in the journal *Neuropsychologia* reported that seeing an attractive smiling face activates your orbitofrontal cortex, the region in your brain that processes sensory rewards. This suggests that when you view a person smiling, you actually feel rewarded."

"The part of your brain that is responsible for your facial expression of smiling when happy or mimicking another's smile resides in the cingulate cortex, an unconscious automatic response area. In a Swedish study, subjects were shown pictures of several emotions: joy, anger, fear, and surprise. When the picture of someone smiling was presented, the researchers asked the subjects to frown. Instead, they found that the facial expressions went directly to imitation of what subjects saw. It took conscious effort to turn that smile upside down. So if you're smiling at someone, it's likely they can't help but smile back. If they don't, they're making a conscious effort not to."

"Looking at the bigger picture, each time you smile at a person, their brain coaxes them to return the favor. You are creating a symbiotic relationship that allows both of you to release feel good chemicals in your brain, activate reward centers, make you both more attractive and increase the chances of you both living longer, healthier lives." (1)

This means that as a hospitality employee – whether a Housekeeping Attendant, a Front Desk Agent, or a Server, for example, by initiating a beaming smile to each guest within our radius, we have taken the crucial first step in establishing the tone for each interaction. This includes those who are approaching the team member regarding an issue or complaint. Take a look at your SOP's and service assessments. Where do you find smiling? Is it right at the top? Is smiling a core in your culture?

Here is something to consider: Does it sadden you, as it does me, when team members are heard expressing that VPs and senior management do not greet them or smile at them when walking in the heart of the house? This begs the question, "Can a leadership team who does not eagerly greet and brightly smile at all team members they encounter during their day truly be successful in driving high satisfaction ratings?"

A second article, comes from Forbes, entitled *The Untapped Power of Smiling*, by Eric Savitz, and reinforces just how powerful smiling actually is:

"Two studies from 2002 and 2011 at Uppsala University in Sweden confirmed that other people's smiles actually suppress the control we usually have over our facial muscles, compelling us to smile. They also showed that it's very difficult to frown when looking at someone who smiles. ...This occurs even among strangers when we have no intention to connect or affiliate with the other person."

Eric's next point is really cool:

"Smiling stimulates our brain's reward mechanisms in a way that even chocolate, a well-regarded pleasure-inducer, cannot match. In a study conducted in the UK (using an electromagnetic brain scan machine and heart-rate monitor to create 'mood-boosting values' for various stimuli), British researchers found that one smile can provide the same level of brain stimulation as up to 2,000 chocolate bars; they also found that smiling can be as stimulating as receiving up to 16,000 Pounds Sterling in cash. That's 25 grand a smile... it's not bad...at 400 daily smiles quite a few children out there feel like Mark Zuckerberg every day.(2)

Certainly, we are all now thoroughly convinced of the endless benefits of smiling! Let's circle back to how this relates to problem resolution and the advancement of loyalty and net promoter scores.



- Think of the smile as the key – a literal key to opening a door. Just as literal as the keys given to guests every day to open their guest room door.
- Your guest is the door – on the other side of that door is your guest satisfaction rating. What will it be?

Without a smile, a guest will never 'open up' to the point of giving a hotel an excellent net promoter or loyalty rating. The smile is first and foremost. Then, and only then, once the door is “unlocked”, the door can now be “opened wide”.

The language that the team member chooses next is vital. It must be professional, genuine, compassionate, and confident. The team member must communicate that they are confident in their ability to care for the guest and that they are eager to be the one who has the opportunity to assist them.

The team member begins with a professional, hospitable introduction to the interaction. Their first words lay the foundation for the guest's experience moving forward.

Team Member: “Mr. Smith, my name is Naomi. I really appreciate that you have come to me with this situation.”

The door has started to swing open. The guest realizes they are interacting with someone who cares. We've gained their listening.

Let's open that door a bit more with the all-important Apology. Not, an “I'm sorry”, as that often solicits a negative response (“Well you should be!”). Rather, an Apology – the accepting of responsibility on behalf of the company for the situation opens the door of opportunity wide enough to walk through with resolution and satisfaction.

The most common response to an apology is a positive one, such as: “Thank you.” Note the shift in their tone as they start to feel that they are in good hands.

This interaction must be strong. This interaction must make up ground for the glitch that occurred in the first place. This interaction must begin to turn their experience around.

What opened the door to this interaction? The smile. The smile created “a symbiotic relationship that allows both of you (the guest and the team member) to release feel-good chemicals in your brain, activate reward centers, make you both more attractive...”

Now that this all important door is unlocked and swung wide open, the situation can be corrected. Amends can be made for the inconvenience. The relationship with this customer can be repaired and their loyalty can be won back. It all began with a bright, beaming smile.

With the door open now, there are some important “Do's & Don'ts” that will determine the ultimate success of the interaction. The team member must maintain personal ownership of this guest's experience. This means, they DO NOT say, “You have to call (Maintenance) for that.” They maintain ownership and make that call for the guest.

The team member next takes the corrective action immediately and communicates effectively with the guest: “Mr. Smith, I have spoken with (Maintenance) and this will be done for you by (state a specific and accurate time frame).” The team member does not leave the guest guessing how long they will have to wait.

The team member does personally follow up with the guest, making sure the matter has been corrected to their satisfaction. The team member does not follow up with the guest to ask if the matter has been corrected, this they will have already verified with their co-worker prior to following up with the guest.

The team member does identify an appropriate gesture of kindness to address the way the guest felt as a result of the inconvenience. In hospitality, we can't simply fix what went wrong, we must also address the way the guest felt during this time, if we truly want to succeed in winning a loyal customer. This shouldn't necessarily require a 'comp'. It could simply be the offer of a hot cup of coffee to warm them while the heater is being fixed. A simple, appropriate, gesture proves to the guest that this team member is interested in them, individually.

Here are some important Do Not reminders for team members:

- Do Not give the guest the reason or justification of why there was a breakdown. They don't care! They care about their time, their comfort, their money.
- Do Not get defensive if you learn that a Guest Opportunity was in some way caused by you. Rather, be receptive and remember, at some point, everyone drops the ball. What shows strong character and demonstrates being a good team player, is to admit it when wrong and accept responsibility for mistakes. Success comes by learning from these mistakes and preventing the 'ball from dropping' again.
- Do Not pass the buck, not even to a supervisor unless absolutely necessary.
- Do Not remain anonymous! Please, never rely on your name tag to introduce yourself. Take the initiative to connect with your guest by giving them your name and using their name. This goes a long way in making the guest feel a positive connection with you.
- By all means, please, do not give your guest to your competition by failing to 'unlock', 'open', and go through the beautiful door of guest opportunities.

Team members need to be encouraged to keep themselves informed about other Guest Opportunities that have occurred across the property. After all, they will likely also have contact with the very same guest. This knowledge will give them the upper hand in providing custom care for each guest throughout the remainder of their stay. Further, learning how other team members have handled various Guest Opportunities increases team member skills and preparedness for the next time they are faced with a guest opportunity.

In the end, we have succeeded when we:

- A) Unlock the door with a smile.
- B) Swing the door wide open with professional hospitality language.
- C) Win a loyal customer when they leave, remembering how we made them feel, not what went wrong.

For those of you who know me, you know I can't write an article on guest service without at least once mentioning the Formula 10 Principle of Reflection:

- If A=B: Guest Satisfaction ratings are the reflection of the guest's interactions with team members they encounter during their stay.
- And B=C: Team member interactions with guests are a reflection of their interactions with management.
- Therefore A=C: Guest satisfaction ratings are a reflection of management's interactions with team members.

It's quite simple really, if we expect our team members to smile at our guest we must first equip them with a smile by giving them smiles throughout their shift. We must ask, are the direct supervisors of my team members greeting them with a beaming smile? Are all senior level managers in the practice of readily smiling at and greeting team members? If not, we simply cannot expect team members to smile at our guests, readily and naturally.

#### References

- (1) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201206/there-s-magic-in-your-smile>
- (2) <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericsavitz/2011/03/22/the-untapped-power-of-smiling/#5457ae4220d8>

*Stark Service Solutions, LLC was founded in 2001, by Naomi Stark, current Chair of the AH&LA Technology & E-Business Committee, an expert in guest satisfaction and loyalty and employee development. Stark Service Solutions, LLC is known for developing smart training and software platforms such as the Touch System. The Touch System is the only software tool of its kind, bridging HR, Training and Operations to sustain a culture of highly personalized guest experiences. This program brings a unique approach to customer satisfaction management, which consistently assists clients in all sectors of the industry. Ms. Stark can be contacted at 480.614.1009 or [nstark@starkservicesolutions.com](mailto:nstark@starkservicesolutions.com)*



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