



By Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

**Value-added** has been the service solution for many service exemplars. Take what the customer expects and add a little more.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a Baker's dozen approach. But value-added has gotten a lot more expensive. That free snack on a flight now costs eight dollars, and service charges are standard fare on most bills. Besides, what do employees think when told to "wow" customers in the morning and informed of staff cutbacks and expense reductions in the afternoon?

Tough economic times call for value-unique, not value-added—service with imagination, not just generosity. Ask customers what actions would be value added and they will focus on taking the expected experience to a higher-level: “They gave me *more* than I anticipated.” But imaginative service is not about addition. It’s about creation.

When service people are asked to give more, they think to themselves: “I am already doing the best I can.” But if asked to pleasantly surprise more customers, they feel less like worker bees and more like fireflies. When employees get to create, not just perform, they feel prized. Just ask a Southwest, Disney, Zappos.com or Lexus dealership employee what she thinks about her job and you will get a smiling “It’s awesome!”—not a shrugging “It’s alright.”

Imaginative service is sourced in joy and fun. It comes from the same part of the soul that plans a prank, organizes a party or does a favor for a friend. When that part is used regularly, it raises self-esteem, increases resilience and improves morale. Take a look at *Fortune Magazine’s* annual “Best Companies in America to Work For”—Nordstrom, Container Store, Marriott, eBay and FedEx—and you see the Great Service-High Morale link. These companies boast the lowest turnover (a cost saver), the best recruits (an investment), the highest productivity (another positive hit to the balance sheet) and the greatest profits.

Great service may make customers smile but imaginative service makes them swoon. When service takes their breath away, customers feel valued—not just served. The insurance agent who sends an important client a birthday card may generate a smile, but the one who has his little girl sing “happy birthday” to the client gets a completely different response.

There are many paths to Take Their Breath Away™ service. Customers always enjoy random acts of inventive service. But the winners are the organizations that implement a deliberate and consistent approach. The three approaches outlined below can elevate service from “pretty good” to stunning.

### Decoration

Atlanta-based Savor Specialty Foods and Tabletop is to food what Starbucks is to coffee. Walk into the store and you immediately smell a blend of sweet balsamic drizzle with arugula and mango chutney. Strains of Italian baroque music play in the background. Rare cooking utensils and gourmet paraphernalia adorn the walls, beckoning patrons to “window shop” while waiting for a gourmet sandwich—perhaps

an apple-wood smoked turkey with creamy Gouda and apple nut chutney on pumpernickel. In this store, your sensory antennae are in ecstasy.

“We are passionate about fine foods, a unique and interesting product mix and customer education,” says co-owner January Hodgson. “At Savor, we don’t sell anything unless we taste it first. This allows us to explain product application as well as flavor profiles to our customers. We encourage our guests to ask questions and sample before they purchase.”

The rich combination of sensory pleasures at Savor is the epitome of Sense. Sight-sound-smell-taste-touch come together to communicate an unmistakable, and distinctive, focus on the world and worth of the food connoisseur. Cookbooks venture into palates’ unbeaten paths. Cooking tools include rarities not often seen in brick and mortar—a salt cellar or, that rarer than rare accessory, a chinois (just Google it!). Yet there is no clutter, no conflict and no confusion. The store knows its role and does not allow anything into the mix that fails to harmonize with the sights and sounds of a cookery menagerie.

The lessons from the Savor store are simple and ex-acting. In your own business, consider the emotion and sensations (real or imagined) that your customers will value. But also pay close attention to the sense triggers that clash with your desired response. Does that picture on the wall add value? Are the restrooms compatible with the rest of your strategy? When was the last time you examined your parking lot or waiting area with a focus on sensory signals? What should customers see first, second...last? How are key service transitions managed? What should your business smell like?

### Animation

When a colleague’s face lights up from announcing “Let me get David for you,” you can tell you are about to meet “Animation.” The coworker’s enthusiastic look compels you to anticipate something between “you are in for a treat” and “you ain’t gonna believe this!” Then it happens. You come face to face with a person who has fallen hopelessly in love with his role!

We were staying at the Marriott Oak Brook near Chicago. Having finished an afternoon hotel meeting with one client, we were now en route to a nearby restaurant to meet another client for dinner. The restaurant was beyond walking distance but was still an insultingly short haul for a taxi driver. Yet the hotel van was available, and bell stand attendant David Harris was to be our driver.



In meeting David, the first thing you notice is his glowing Steinway smile—as if he just unexpectedly encountered two long-lost boyhood friends. The second thing you notice is his gait—a man extremely eager to connect and raring to serve.

“Is it true I get the grand pleasure of being the chauffer for you gentlemen tonight?” he asks incredulously. His greeting makes us feel like members of an exclusive club boarding a chariot of joy.

Animation, like David’s, raises the emotional temperature of the organization. And it does not come through a pep rally or “Attitude” posters. Animation comes through a deliberately chosen attitude. Consider the characters at Disney theme parks. How can Mickey stay Mickey no matter what the circumstances? There is no “Mickey shot” to inoculate the character against surly guests or a costume without air conditioning. Mickey selects the Mickey attitude to exhibit without regard to whether or not it is the day after late-night TV.

Animation can sometimes come from leaders who make work as fun as possible and model the attitude the customer enjoys. An unbridled spirit has a magnetic power on customers. Being in the presence of a David causes customers to feel good about themselves. It’s difficult staying cranky in their company. Few among us want to drag storm clouds into the perpetually sunny skies of such vivacious lives.

## Reinvention

What do Bill Marriott and the less famous Al Hopkins have in common? They both are (or were) innovators in ways to better serve customers. They saw the way a given service was being delivered and found a way to turn it completely on its ear. And in their heyday, they took their customers’ breath away!

In 1937, J. Willard (Bill, Sr.) Marriott started the first catering service to airlines for meals on board after he noticed people at Hoover Field were going by his Hot Shoppes restaurant and buying take-out food before boarding. It was an intuitive leap that linked a customer need with an available resource via a novel path. He graduated from Hot Shoppes and in-flight catering to doing hotels. The rest is history.

And Al Hopkins? When he was a young boy, he watched the other 10-year-olds wait for customers to stop by their sidewalk lemonade stands in the hot summer sun. So Al abandoned the “stand” concept and took his lemonade business door-to-door. He made enough money in one summer to buy a new Schwinn® Flyer bicycle with a headlight *and* a siren!

Service reinventions seldom occur from examining the best practices employed by others in the same industry. Insights come through looking at service



exemplars outside your industry. A major hospital completely revamped patient admission after studying how a five-star hotel handled check-in. Cabela’s did not get the idea for its sensory-overload stores by studying Bubba’s Bait shop. It looked to Disney theme parks.

So how do you reinvent your service? Start by making a list of great service providers and brainstorm ways that these service greats might reinvent some of your service areas or processes. What if a Lexus dealership service department ran *your* service department for a week? What would customers notice if the Geek Squad at Best Buy ran your IT department? What would be different in human resources if it emulated the style of a Ritz-Carlton hotel? How would it look to put Disney in charge of the cafeteria, or UPS in charge of the mail room?

All organizations are challenged by the economics of extras. Take Their Breath Away™ is the perfect substitute for value-added when “adds” cannot be funded. Our mothers, Avis Bell and Liz Patterson, are children of the Great Depression. Their stories of living through the worst economic times of the last century are peppered with joyful memories of special Christmases when there was no money to buy gifts. Hand-made original surprises replaced store-bought. The restriction forced the giver to think about the uniqueness of the recipient.

Imaginative service is a hand-made original surprise tailored to the receiver. Its originality telegraphs an innate commitment to excellence. Its “hand-made” distinction signals an unmistakable spotlight on the customer. And, like a perfect rainbow, it leaves us astonished, affirmed... and, served. **CRM**



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