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Is 'Wow' Customer Service Worth The Effort And Expense?



Micah Solomon Former Contributor ⓘ

Small Business Strategy

I'm a customer experience consultant and customer service trainer.

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I define wow customer service as “service that goes beyond fulfilling basic customer expectations, and does so in a creative, unexpected way.” The thing about wow customer service is this: In spite of the peppy palindrome name, you don’t do wow as a stunt. You do it because it’s in your heart to do so, and because you believe that, in the long run, your wow efforts are going to work out for everyone: your customer and your business.

But does creating these wow customer service moments really benefit a business? Or is it more a feel-good waste of time?

It's question worth asking because, inescapably, there are costs involved in delivering wow: at a minimum, an investment of employee hours and attention, and, quite likely, the outlay of financial resources as well. Read this example of wow service, from The Inn at Little Washington, and you’ll see what I mean. (This is one of five such “wow” stories I highlight in a recent article, which you can find [here](#). The voice in the passage is that of Inn alumnus Jay Coldren.)

I watched a couple arrived at The Inn from Pittsburgh, several hours away, to celebrate their anniversary with a three-night stay. As the staff unloaded the luggage, our female guest said to her husband, “Don’t forget my hanging bag.” Her

husband looked into the trunk and came up with a horrified expression on his face. Apparently, she had left her bag beside the car in their garage assuming he would pack it, but he never saw it.

At this point, she pretty much fell apart: This poor woman was checking into one of the most expensive places on the planet with nothing but the clothes on her back! As the doormen and I tried to figure out what to do to make this couple happy, one of the staff who had been there a lot longer than me drove up to the front of the inn in the company car. I looked at him oddly and he just smiled and said, "Get me their keys and the address; I'll be back before dinner."

I was floored. No one asked him to do this, and there wasn't a moment's hesitation on his part. He was so much a part of the service culture that he just knew the exact right thing to do. He was halfway to Pittsburgh before the lady actually believed that we were really going to get her luggage at her house. He drove eight hours straight and made it back before their dinner reservations at nine.



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After reading through an anecdote like this one, it's hard not to concede that it's cheaper to run a "Take your order, Miss?" type of business than one that's always on the hunt for opportunities to go the extra mile. But it's also undeniable that a business like the Inn at Little Washington, which has [thrived for forty years](#), has found benefits from delivering wow.

So, what, specifically, does wow add to the bottom line?

Here's my take: I work with businesses at various positions on what you could call the transactional-to-experiential continuum, as a [customer service consultant](#). For those businesses that have thrived with a wow approach, always striving to deliver more than what is expected, the most direct-to-the-bottom line benefit is this: Humans think anecdotally, and use narrative as the basis for our decisions and behaviors; we think in terms of stories that we tell ourselves, and are heavily influenced by narratives we hear from others as well, in spite of classic economic theory, in which humans are expected to act efficiently and rationally. So, although basic, reliable, transactional customer service—being on time, charging what's expected, delivering what's been contracted for—is essential to the survival of any business and its relationship with its customers, that kind of service is often not enough to spark customers to feel that you're "their" business, inspiring them to return time and again and to refer their friends as well. Rather, that kind of power comes most directly and immediately from individual, emotionally-laden, memory-spawning wow customer service moments. (These are also the kinds of stories that get shouted from the online rooftops, providing a powerful marketing force for a business of almost any size.)

The second (less obvious) benefit is that the act of creating wow experiences has power to inspire the employees who get to apply their creativity and judgment to the effort. This is an employee development and retention tool par excellence, because it fits with one of the most important principles of talent management: let employees take part in the design of their own work. Even beyond that, it lets them give of themselves with the full support of the company. Which is a powerful experience for all concerned.

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Micah Solomon

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