

Unexpected Lessons from Disney

by Randall Munson, CSP

Having spent the last four days at Disney World, I've been thinking about the lessons I've learned from the experience. Everyone knows about the cleanliness, friendliness, and imagination that Disney exemplifies but I want to share with you some less conspicuous lessons.

1. Good Enough is Good Enough

Over the years I have been puzzled about the Jungle Cruise. It is one of the first major attractions at the park and, compared to the newest attractions, is primitive. Given Disney's reputation for excellence, I would expect them to refurbish and upgrade the technology of this ride from the 60s. However, it has been left virtually unchanged (except for the addition of some more Audio Animatronic animals a few decades ago).

Instead of continuously improving the Jungle Cruise, Disney has plunged resources into new attractions: Space Mountain, Hall of Presidents, Haunted Mansion, Pirates of the Caribbean, and the Tower of Terror. Why? Because good enough is good enough.

Although it is technologically inferior, the Jungle Cruise remains one of the most popular rides at the Disney parks. They have introduced humor into the attraction; now the boat skipper narrations are filled with jokes. (To read the full collection of Jungle Cruise jokes see the following web site http://www.creativelyspeaking.com/humor_jungle_cruise.html)

Rather than continuously polishing the old, Disney invests in creating the new. In this day of Macomb Baldrige, ISO 9000, and continuous quality improvement remember this:

Quality is not only making things better; it is also making better things.

2. It Is Easier To Keep It Clean If You Keep It Clean

I've been to the Disneyland and Disney World so many times I've lost count. I've been in every men's room at Disney. (One miserable day I visited a Disney men's room every 20 minutes – but you don't want to hear about that!) I've observed a restroom phenomenon, which I later confirmed with multiple restroom attendants (many of whom become close personal friends that one day you didn't want to hear about).

If the attendant picks up every paper towel and then returns 20 minutes later, the floor will still be free of paper towels. However, if the attendant leaves a couple paper towels on the floor and then returns 20 minutes later the result is different. Not only are the two paper towels still there, there they have been joined by scores of additional paper towels strewn across the floor. If cleanliness is established, others will automatically, subconsciously maintain it. On the other hand, if sloppiness is detected, others will subconsciously accept it as the norm and slop right along.

Once you establish a standard, others will naturally behave to maintain it.

3. Be Nice

No matter what the organization, there are times you need to tell someone something they don't want to hear. At Disney I've heard people told, among other things, that they can't get into a show they were waiting for, that they can't park where they want to, that they can't stand on a bench to take a picture, and that they can't be on the road during the parade. Every time the Disney person told someone they couldn't do what they wanted, they were so nice that the offending party apologized and said "thank you" for the correction.

You'll have fewer arguments and more compliance if you do this: **When you have to correct someone, be nice about it.**

4. Labels Count

Not only have I visited the Disney theme parks countless times, and performed at Disney World, I've been privileged to go on numerous excursions behind stage. In the process, I've picked up some of the terminology. Everything in the park is designed to make the customer happy. They deliberately call it "The Happiest Place on Earth." Customers are called "guests," employees are called "cast members." "On stage" refers to any place where the cast interacts with the guests; employee-only areas are called "back stage."

The use of these terms makes a difference. Labels count. Going on stage means you will be observed in everything you do - so act the way you want to be seen. A "guest" is someone you've invited into your home where you want to be a good host and make them comfortable and happy.

Labels like "customer," "paid attendee," or even "visitor," don't convey the same warmth. What you call those who work for you, and those whom you depend upon for revenue, makes an unconscious, subtle difference in how you treat them.

Labels count. Use them wisely.

5. Details Matter

One of the most significant difference I've seen between a Disney theme park and virtually any other theme park is this: attention to details. For example, wherever you are in a Disney park there is music. The ubiquitous music floats through you without being pushy. It's just there. Other theme parks have music, too, but it is the attention to detail that differs. At most theme parks, music comes from black rectangular speaker boxes you see along the paths and in the trees.

At Disney the music seems to come from nowhere. Obviously, it comes from speakers but the speakers are not obvious. The speaker may be discreetly built into a treasure chest, or canoe or a boulder. As a result of this attention to detail, there is a subconscious feeling that the music is just a natural part of the magical place. (One of my fondest memories is strolling with my family through Epcot Center at dusk and watching my young daughter blissfully dancing and twirling to the ubiquitous music.)

The details of the music itself are also different. It isn't just general-purpose pleasant music piped throughout the entire park; the music has a style and texture that fits the feel of each location within the park. It helps create the feeling that you are really in a frontier town or in a jungle or in a German village. Ninety percent of the investment and technology is the same: amplifiers, wires, and speakers. It is the subtle details of that extra ten percent, the attention to details, which makes it twice as effective.

A small investment in details can yield a huge return.

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