

## We're Here for You

Look for hidden opportunities to build loyalty.

**T**he Blizzard of the Decade ... or so you would have believed based on the television and radio news hype. I was living in downtown Milwaukee, Wisc., at the time and the blizzard was just getting itself going. I sat on the couch watching the weatherman analyze the radar and share his total snowfall predictions for the first big storm of the season. Living just blocks from Lake Michigan, we were being blessed with what is commonly referred to as 'Lake Effect Snow,' a phenomenon that occurs when cold air moves across a warm body of water, picking up vapor, gaining energy and then dumping huge amounts of snow on the leeward side of the lake. According to the weather reports my neighborhood was at ground zero. School and business closings were predicted and residents were urged to stay at home and avoid all non-essential travel. So my wife and I did what any rational couple would do: we went out to dinner.

Given our downtown residence, we had myriad options and we settled on an Italian restaurant that had only been open for a short time, and which we had never visited. Bundled up in our ski clothes we braced ourselves against the wind and sleet and trudged the five blocks that separated us from the restaurant through the several inches of snow

that had already fallen. Cold and with our eyelids freezing shut, we could barely make out on the restaurant's neon sign through the blizzard as we made our way to the walk leading to the front door.

"We made it!" we celebrated in unison. I looked up to the front door of the restaurant and noticed a figure on the inside of the door, maybe a half a step closer to the door than we were. He had yet to see me though, and I noticed his hand making its way to the door lock on the inside of the door. Our spirits were dashed as we realized that we had battled the "Blizzard of the Decade" only to have our dinner plans thwarted by a restaurant closing early due to the weather.

Just as he had turned the lock he noticed us. As he reversed his motion to unlock the door a flash of guilt nudged me. His employees had to battle the same elements we just had on their way home. Didn't they deserve to leave early? If business was slow, staying open just to accommodate a party of two probably wasn't fair to the restaurant. We could eat elsewhere.

With a smile the restaurant manager opened the door. "Were you closing?" I asked. "We can find another spot."

(Lest my analogy miss its mark, for the restaurant this moment was the finishing industry equivalent of a customer's last minute expedite, urgent request for infor-

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mation at the end of a long day, quality complaint that's a trite too picky, etc.)

"Are you kidding?" the manager responded. He then added a line that has stuck with me forever. A line I have shamelessly plagiarized with my customers ever since. As he swung the door wide open and warmly and enthusiastically motioned us to step inside he said, "*We're here for YOU!*"

He wouldn't hear of us going elsewhere, and so the three of us went on to share one of the most memorable dining experiences of my life. We were literally the only customers in the restaurant. He sat us down at the bar for a glass of wine and began telling us about the menu. That led to a behind the scenes tour of the entire kitchen and introductions to his staff. "Oh, and you have to see how creatively we've decorated the women's restroom,"



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he exclaimed. I looked at him a bit quizzically. "C'mon," he said, "there's nobody here." So the three of us toured the women's room.

I could go on but the point is this: this guy got it! Did he want to stay late while the snow piled up outside? Probably not. Did he take some heat from his staff who had to stay back to serve two customers? Likely. Did he win two loyal customers for life? Absolutely.

That evening occurred 15 years ago, but I think about it all the time. In four little words the restaurant manager summed up perfectly the relationship between a restaurant and a patron, a seller and a buyer ... a finishing supplier and a client. We exist to serve our customers. *We're here for THEM.* How many of us and of our people believe that? More important, how many of us live it? ■

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