

Forbes

Give Your Customers “Crayons” To Decorate Their Experiences



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The historic hotel, The Madison, overlooking the Mississippi River in Memphis, was rebranded into a modern hotel. It was, in some ways, a sad event. Memphis is the birthplace of the blues, and The Madison was my introduction to the powerful music of helping customers co-create their own experiences. My first Madison guest room sported an electric guitar with instructions on how to play it. With the headphones provided, you could be Elvis, Johnny, or B.B. all night long!

Today's customers are less than thrilled with service experiences that are merely good. They want experiences that are happenings—enchanting subject material for a cool story. They want immersion experiences which they help create, not just receive. They want occurrences laced with entertaining diversity, partner-like equity, and active inclusion. You capture your customers' devotion when you help them color their own experiences. And the more magic you can foster

through the "experience artifacts" you provide, the more intense their advocacy. Here are three principles for giving customers "crayons" to help decorate their experiences.

Experience Diversity Trumps Outcome Consistency



Cirque du Soleil's performances touch you with their astonishment with a whimsical flair. They make you want to eat the icing and skip the cake. Spectator's memory banks are filled with the features of their experience long after they have forgotten the function of the outcome they sought. While customers prefer the service outcome to be consistent and predictable, they want most experiences to be laced with pleasant surprises and unexpected allure.

Every one of the 19 Cirque du Soleil performances currently active, from *Mystere* in Las Vegas to *Mad Apple* in New York, is laced with jaw-dropping acrobatics, artistic dance, and over-the-top music. It is a sensory menagerie. Over 30 shows have been retired, reflecting their desire to stay fresh. There is little predictability about any performance. You leave the theatre more awed than wowed...and you tell as many people as will listen.

When the only First Bank & Trust ATM in the rural Tahoka, Texas went down, customers used the only other ATM in the area at a convenience store. And when it took several weeks to get the ATM operative, customers became accustomed to going to the convenience store for their cash. First Bank & Trust found a way to lure customers back to the bank's ATM. They ran a full-page ad in the local paper that informed customers not to think it was a mechanical glitch if they received a fifty-dollar bill instead of a twenty-dollar bill when they used the bank's ATM. Word spread as customers told neighbors when they hit the ATM jackpot! A small bank investment with the surprise of a hot slot machine brought customers back in droves.

Equity Grows Customer Advocacy

On a Southwest Airlines flight, the flight attendant asked a noticeably confident young passenger to help with the announcements on the loudspeaker. Later in the flight, attendants asked for assistance from two teenage boys who were obviously enjoying their flight with their baseball caps turned backward. The boys got to pass the peanuts out to all the passengers. With their clowning around with this simple task, every passenger vicariously enjoyed their fun. The flight landed with boisterous applause from passengers. Customer equity can produce an entertaining show, not just a positive experience.



Remember junior high school dances? Shy guys were just fine in a sideline chair listening to the music. But the teachers wanted the event to be as fun as the punch was tasty and guilted them into getting on the dance floor. All the songs after that went forever. Attempts at customer equity without the customer's permission can feel like a junior high dance for a shy guy. This means customer inclusion must reflect an egalitarian philosophy with a strong recognition that all customers are different. Some customers just want to be served. However, remember that

experiences without actual customer "coloring," like the Southwest helpers, can positively impact others who just witness them.

My granddaughters still recall a special trip to a cookie store. It was not the tasty cookie they recall. The mall's quaint store featured half-baked cookies that enabled children to add their own sprinkles and then watch "their cookie" finish baking in glass-front ovens with the image projected on a large store screen. Today's customers not only want service experiences with a cherry on top, but they also prefer the opportunity and authority to add the cherry!

Inclusion Makes the Experience Magical



On a holiday trip through Western Virginia, my wife and I stayed at the Craddock Terry Hotel in Lynchburg. The hotel building had been the Craddock Terry Shoe Company, at one time the fifth-largest shoe company in the world. The great-grandson of the shoe company owner, Hal Craddock, elected to renovate the 1905 structure into a hotel laced with shoe metaphors. "As hoteliers," Hal told me in an email, "we are storytellers."

The hotel's charm lies in its deliberate efforts to give "crayons" to guests and let them create an experiential masterpiece. There was a lighted Christmas tree on the large desk when we were guests over the Christmas holidays. In front of the tree was a shoebox of shoe-themed ornaments with instructions to "decorate your own tree." The dog concierge, Penny Loafer, periodically needed walking; guests were encouraged to sign up to walk Penny through the nearby historic district. So, what's at play in this delightful invitation to color? The recognition that people will care more when they share more.

When Hurricane Hugo hit Charlotte, NC, 200 miles inland after making landfall in Charleston, it fueled an unexpectedly large crowd at Myers Park Hardware seeking supplies. The store owner needed more help since her staff had been unable to get to work. She turned to three of her frequent customers. "Guys, have you ever thought about what it would be like to single-handedly save a store? If you have time, I need you to run checkout." When the three donned store aprons, started bagging merchandise, and ringing up sales, all the frustrated waiting customers applauded.

The alliance of service provider-with-customers attracts because it is a clear and present reminder that providing a service outcome always carries a co-created experience. Treating customers like "consumers" not partners disrespects the other half of the relationship while dishonoring the very essence of an implied covenant to fairly exchange value for value.

Smart organizations find ways to involve customers in every aspect of service—from creation to pricing to delivery to assessment—thus forging long-term emotional connections. Alliance means union or joining. Its root word is "ally" from the French word meaning "to bind." And the tie that binds in the world of customer service is an invitation to be a full member in invention and delivery of a service experience.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award-winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2024 ranked him for the tenth year in a row in the top ten keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also the founder of the Chip Bell Academy, an alliance partner with On3.ai that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs with high level transfer of learning and retention. He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.