

Forbes

What Casinos Can Teach Us About Innovative Customer Experience



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by Chip Bell

Most of the revenue in a casino comes from slot machines. The power of variable ratio reinforcement attracts and retains gamblers in a way blackjack, roulette, or craps do not. It is an attraction phenomenon that made the pigeons of Harvard professor B.F. Skinner chose pecking the silver disk that randomly dispensed food far more times than the pigeons in other cages that dispensed food with each peck, or every third peck. The more unpredictable, the greater the allure.

The slot machines also teach us a lot about the power sensory engagement. The squeals that accompany lights, bells, and coins falling in a noisy metal tray make casinos animated with excitement. And everyone around the surprised winner vicariously becomes a participant, not just a spectator. It reminds us to never forget to stimulate as many senses as possible when delivering a delight-filled customer experience.

Avoiding the Myths

There are many myths about slot machine behavior. Here are a few inaccurate beliefs. If there is a long time without a win, it signals a slot machine is cold or is “due” a win. The machines on the end of the row pay off more than those in the middle. All slot machines have the same odds regardless of their decorative, “game show like” features. Pulling the lever gives better odds than pushing the spin button. Time of day impacts your odds. All are false beliefs!

Slot machines only respond to a computer program and the odds of a win are set by the machine’s caretaker, period. There are also myths about how to manage customer experiences designed to thrill customers. Below are a few and ways to avoid them.

Myth #1 Consistency is Important to a Remarkable Customer Experience



This is partially true but not a universal truth. Let’s take a common experience—an airline flight. We want the airline flight to consistently be safe and always land on time with our luggage quickly arriving at baggage claim. But if the flight attendant focuses on making our experience on board mechanically consistent, it feels hollow, contrived, and insincere. We tire of robotic “How may I help you’s,” and “Have a nice day.” Part of the appeal of some Southwest Airlines flights is the flight attendant’s embellishment of the required safety speech. The solution is to use consistency only where it is valued by customers.

Myth #2 Always Deliver a Value-Added Customer Experience

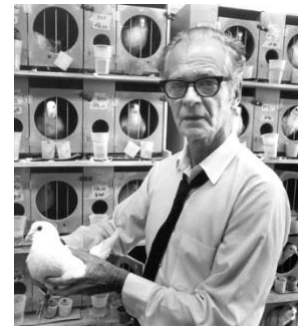
Who can argue with the power of generosity, taking what customers expect and adding more. However, it tends to also elevate the expectations of customers. If each encounter requires the front line to one-up the last experience at some point you

exhaust the capacity to do more. The solution is value-unique, a reliance on ingenuity and innovation, not just on generosity. There is no limit to imaginative ways to surprise customers. For example, instead of the usual chocolate on the pillow at hotel turndown, some Hotel Monaco properties make it a complete surprise—a flower, foreign coin, a lottery ticket or who knows what!

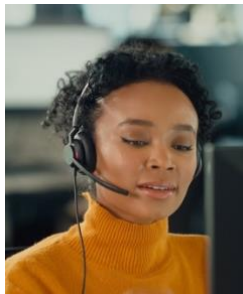
Myth #3: Delivering a surprise to customers with each encounter is clearly worth it.

The truth is perpetual surprise can be exhausting. Dr. Skinner's pigeons proved that. Value-unique should itself be a surprise. Surprise is not really a surprise if it is completely predictable. Besides, it is impractical for frontline employees to devise innovative ways to surprise each customer with each encounter. Follow the powerful principles of random (or variable ratio) reinforcement. If surprise only happens occasionally, it ramps up the value, and its attraction power.

Let surprise be a surprise, not standard fare. My local adult beverage store once sent me a birthday card with a discount on my favorite brew! After all, they check my ID with most every purchase! They don't need to do that every year!



Myth #4: Predictability and consistency are the way to a customer's heart.



Predictability and consistency might heighten productivity and efficiency, but they can be the enemies of innovation and novelty. Just as uniformity is a virtue of a product, so uniqueness is a virtue of a service. So, what happens when you apply production thinking and variance elimination to the delivery of service experiences? The most obvious example are phone scripts. Rather than relying on a consistent pattern—always warmly greet, put a smile in your voice, thank the customer—organizations too often require a precise, predictable script. The memory made on customers is so colorless it is no memory at all.

Myth #5: Remarkable customer service comes from strict adherence to standards and procedures.

Discipline is important in all business operations. However, for innovation to occur at the point of customer contact requires associates who are not only highly trained and effectively resourced to perform their roles, but they must also be trusted to deviate from the routine and sometimes circumvent procedures. Leaders of innovation rely more on core values than on strict rules for their leadership guidance. They focus more on affirmation and coaching than on quality controlling precise behaviors. Bottom line, associates are supported and encouraged rather than micromanaged.

Wise leaders create cultures that arm employees with the capacity, authority, and encouragement to deliver customer experiences with a surprise. Such leaders understand the difference between predictable value-added and random value unique. Harder to manage? Of course. Does it make leading in a numbers-judging culture more challenging? You bet. But it leads to the ultimate jackpot—a compelling story customers are eager to share with all who will listen.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2025 ranked him for the eleventh year in a row in the top dozen keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also senior advisor with On3, Inc., a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs, as well as an instructor with Fuel (myfuel.oi). He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.