Cultivating a Culture—BrandCulture Hospitality
Within thirty seconds of pulling into the porte-cochere of a Four Seasons hotel anywhere in the world, a cheerful yet respectful valet will bid you, “Welcome to the Four Seasons.” After you check in, an equally welcoming bellman will bring your luggage to your room within seven minutes. If you pay close attention throughout your stay, you will note that when employees come within ten feet of any guest, they will acknowledge the guest’s presence with a polite wave or nod. Coming within seven feet, employees will greet guests, never with an overly-familiar “hi” or “hey,” but with “good morning” or “good afternoon,” frequently using the guest’s surname. Encounters within five and three feet will elicit an even more profound level of engagement.

These are but a few of the “Standards of Service” of one of the most storied and successful hoteliers in history. As complex and rigorous as the standards are, they all come down to a single, common purpose: to make guests feel an unparalleled experience of hospitality. But codifying all of the standards and rules in voluminous manuals can’t pull this off alone.

It is by creating a common culture dedicated to perfecting the science and art of hospitality that the Four Seasons has reached the top.
It Can’t Be Forced, But It Can Be Inspired

Cultivating culture is an ongoing, perennial investment. Fail to keep up with escalating expectations and it’s easy to fall behind. Take the Ritz Carlton. For many years they pioneered innovation after innovation, constantly raising the bar through allegiance to a common premise: “we are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.” When a guest alerted an employee to a problem, that employee – from the valet to the CEO – owned the problem until it was satisfactorily resolved. But somewhere along the way, this spirit of service was replaced by slavish adherence to dictated protocol. Instead of spontaneous, genuine hospitality, recitation of stock phrases was required. For a time, whenever a guest thanked a Ritz Carlton employee, the response was invariably, “it is my pleasure.” After the tenth or fifteenth employee echoes the exact same words, however, the guest cannot help but wonder whether the sentiment is bona fide, or merely contrived and compelled. Thankfully, the Ritz has returned to its roots as it makes its version of hospitality relevant to today’s travelers.
Although properties, staffing levels, amenities and guest expectations vary greatly among different categories of hotels, the Brand Culture of hospitality and feeling of welcome need not. Hampton Inn—a moderate chain of hotels franchised by Hilton—a good example of how hospitality can be delivered on more limited budgets. There is no valet at a Hampton Inn, and luggage will not be delivered within seven minutes because there is no bellman. But what you will find in walking into a Hampton Inn is someone who greets you with a smile and invites you to the manager’s reception that evening or to a complimentary hot breakfast buffet in the morning. As you walk to your room, you’ll pass a sign or two with a tasteful black and white photo of a bucolic scene and a caption that sums it up: “We’re glad you’re here!” And if they fail to deliver, they back it with the industry’s best guarantee: 100% guest satisfaction or you don’t pay one thin dime.

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The good news is that the hospitality marketplace is bouncing back. Strongly. And after many lean years, hotels and restaurants have recovered pricing power. The bad news? A proliferation of hotel options and brands has crowded the marketplace with a confusing array of seemingly indistinguishable choices. What is a luxury property? St. Regis? Waldorf Astoria? What defines the essence of these brands, if anything? Can W Hotels be hip yet still deliver on Starwood’s corporate standards?

Amid all this confusion, organizations like the Four Seasons relentlessly ratchet up guest expectations. In this increasingly competitive environment, a brand culture of hospitality is a critical component in grabbing market share from competitors when the tide of momentum stops lifting all boats.
A Brand Culture of hospitality represents a substantial asset in any market environment. But where does it begin? We believe the foundation is a willingness to welcome strangers not as outsiders, but as potential friends we’ve yet to meet. Successful restaurateur Danny Meyer has used a Brand Culture of hospitality to create an unrivaled empire. He notes in his book Setting the Table, “In low-key, family-run inns... the hug that came with the food made it taste even better! That realization would gradually evolve into my own well-defined business strategy—the core of which is hospitality, or being on the guests’ side.”

Making a promise is easy. Keeping a promise isn’t. The Hard Rock Cafe was founded to “Love All, Serve All.” A feel-good slogan that’s hard to argue with, but potentially nothing more than a truism on a menu cover. Hard Rock, however, was able to make it the foundation of a strong Brand Culture that has taken on internal and external dimensions. It’s what makes the restaurant’s locations around the world destinations of choice for singles, families, tourists, locals and everyone in between. It shows up in the interior design: dark wood, brass fixtures and red-checked tablecloths that seamlessly combine accessible luxury and down-home unpretentiousness. You can also see it in idiosyncratic and even iconoclastic employee standards: tattoos, facial hair (“Have a Plan” is the company policy) and the encouragement of self-expression foster a diverse workforce of motivated, empowered individuals. It results in tangible performance: the consistent creation of distinctive experiences that forge meaningful bonds between company and customer.
What Hard Rock does for all walks of life around the world, the restaurant Alinea does for a lucky few able to garner a coveted ticket to the restaurant performance of a lifetime. Barely a year after then 31-year old chef Grant Achatz opened his restaurant in Chicago, Gourmet pronounced it the best in the country. Alinea earned its extraordinary reputation through a relentless focus not just on the food, but on engaging guests emotionally through all five senses. To do so, no aspect of the guest experience is left to chance. The open kitchen is almost blinding with intense white light more commonly found in operating rooms. Despite twenty chefs and staff ranging from waiters to dishwashers to sommeliers, there is barely a sound to be heard. This is a remarkable dynamic for any organization, let alone the normally cacophonous chaos of top-tier restaurant kitchens. At Alinea, it arises not out of any required monastic vow, but through a collective Brand Culture dedicated to transforming fine dining into a singular experience of theater and art that guests can experience nowhere else ... and that they can’t stop talking about for years to come.

Empowering employees and rewarding their initiative not only rings true to guests, it helps a restaurant harness and channel the energy of its most visible resource: its people.
Every Business is in the Hospitality Business

Hospitality isn’t just about hotels. Restaurants, entertainment companies, resorts, cruise lines, cafés, catering operations and coffee shops alike now recognize how creating a Brand Culture of hospitality is essential to building loyal customers. But even businesses that are not directly connected to travel and leisure have something to learn from the hospitality industry.

Although in many cases hospitality today seems to be merely asserted, rather than delivered (domestic air travel, anyone?), organizations as diverse as automobile dealers, health clubs, dry cleaners, theme parks, pet stores, car washes and landscape architecture firms all have foundational elements of hospitality in providing their products and services to customers. In fact, it’s hard to think of a business today that isn’t impacted by customer expectations about how they wish to be treated, and their expectations of hospitality.
Customer satisfaction is paramount. Employees deliver customer satisfaction. Ergo, your employees need to understand and embrace your organization’s Brand Culture and feel engaged in order to deliver satisfaction to customers. One of our peers in the brand consulting industry feels so strongly that employees should experience a hospitable welcome that it has a unique “welcome wagon.” On day one of work, a chauffeured limousine picks up each employee. After formal introductions around the office, there’s time carved out for an informal tea reception where coworkers drop by to say hello. And then the limo takes the employee home. No all nighters on the first day, no pointing to a desk and saying, “get to work,” but instead a real welcome that signifies that each employee from the entry level worker to the CEO plays an essential role in the firm’s success.
Join Us at the Table

Whether your organization focuses on the formal, high-end or the more casual customer, the BrandCulture Company can help. How? We assist and enable organizations to strengthen and align their cultures with their brands, and to deliver their own unique hospitality at every customer interaction, communication and touchpoint. We deploy our expertise to help our clients create Brand Cultures of hospitality, or as Danny Meyer puts it, “being on the guests’ side.”

We welcome an opportunity to put our talent to work on your side as well.

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