

# The Art of Legendary Customer Service

## How to Create a Culture of Connection Within Your Marketplace



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Customer service in a laundromat may not qualify as an “art form,” per se. However, over the years, I’ve encountered some fantastic store owners and attendants who let me know that I definitely was in

the right place as soon as I walked through their front door.

Some others... not so much.

We should never lose sight of the connections and contributions we can make within the communities we serve. In many neighborhoods in many markets across the U.S., a laundromat is an absolute necessity. Most likely, that’s why those owners choose to open up in those locations in the first place.

After spending so much time and money building your new, well-equipped vended laundry, you’ll certainly want to try your best to staff it with the friendliest people you can find. After all, in many cases, these employees will be the deciding factor as to whether or not new customers – who’ve left other laundromats to try out your new business – will continue to bring their clothes to your store.

You can have the best equipment in the area, but if you don’t have the right people with the right personalities

working in your store, customers will return to where they came from in a hurry.

You can teach your attendants everything about the official duties and responsibilities of running your laundromat. But these workers also must exhibit authenticity, positivity, enthusiasm and friendliness, which are traits you simply can’t teach.

Some of the simplest acts are the most vital – such as going outside with a laundry cart to help a customer in with her bags of dirty clothes, or holding a baby who just woke up while his mother transfers laundry from a washer to a dryer, or recognizing a brand new customer and asking, “How can I help you?”

I strongly recommend preparing operations guidelines or an attendant handbook that will outline customer interactions and handling questions and complaints. Along with opening and closing procedures, this manual should feature a complete section on wash-dry-fold protocol from drop off to pickup,



if applicable. It also should cover the proper use of your business' payment systems and all of the features your machines possess. This will go a long way toward eliminating any new technology intimidation. It's important that your attendants are able to show new customers how quick and easy it is to do their laundry in your store.

I wish I could say that your attendants will always treat your customers the way you want them to be treated, but I can't. In some cases, it will probably already be too late once you get a customer complaint about a specific incident or a particular attendant (if you even hear about it at all). Unfortunately, many customers don't complain – they simply say nothing and just never return.

The laundromat owner must be the one to set the example and to create a positive culture in and around the business. Quality employees will pick up on this vibe and follow the owner's lead. At the end of the day, it's all about

you and how you relate to and treat your customers.

Interior signage can be a fairly strong indicator as to the type of attitude a customer is likely to encounter while doing laundry in a particular store. Even today, I'll walk into laundries with some incredibly negative signs:

- "If you don't wash here, you can't dry here!"
- "Use washers and dryers at your own risk!"
- "Do not take laundry carts out of the store!"
- "Not responsible for clothes left in machines!"
- "Restroom for laundry customers only!"
- "No loitering!"

No, no, no!

Signs in your new laundromat must be informative, directional and address some liability issues, yet they also can be colorful, bright and cheery while still

getting your message across. For example:

- "Look inside machines before placing clothes in."
- "Hot water may shrink clothes and fade colors."
- "For a better wash, use less soap."
- "Please return laundry carts after loading your vehicle."

Given that many people typically don't read signs anyway, why not have your interior signage add to the positive ambiance of your laundromat, rather than creating a negative atmosphere.

Also, get to know your customers personally and treat them like a special guest every time they come through your door. You and your staff must always be keenly aware of the fact that a laundromat in a neighborhood is much more than just a retail location. In many ways, it is an extension of people's homes. They are bringing all of their family's clothes and linens to wash in



your store. It doesn't get much more personal than that.

Of course, keep your store and your machines looking and smelling clean. Research has shown over and over that people equate pleasant smells with being clean; therefore, they believe that good-smelling clothes are cleaner clothes. It stands to reason that, if your laundromat smells clean, your customers will believe their clothes will come out cleaner at your store.

### Success Leaves Clues

While operating multiple stores for a number of years, I was always aware of the customer service I experienced while patronizing other successful

businesses – from large department stores and restaurants to hardware stores and package delivery companies.

Sometimes this awareness would be unconscious in the moment, and then it would pop into my mind later, when I was looking at my own stores' customer service. I discovered that success leaves clues, and you can "steal" a lot of great ideas and protocols from other types of businesses and incorporate them into your own operation.

There's a great story from years ago about a Japanese manufacturer just starting to compete with American companies in the U.S. This upstart firm had received a complaint from a customer who noted that the new

toaster-oven she had just purchased from the company was missing a control button.

As the story goes, the very next day a young Japanese man appeared at her door with a brand new toaster-oven and a huge bouquet of flowers with a personal note of apology from the president of the company. Of course, the woman was so surprised and impressed that she told everyone she knew – and a few people she didn't.

A very long time ago, Sam Walton said, "The goal as a company is to have customer service that is not just the best, but legendary." In addition, John Nordstrom is famous for espousing a philosophy of "customer service before

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profits.” And L.L. Bean’s product quality and no-questions-asked return policy was an industry innovator. As the legend goes, you can still bring back a pair of snow boots you bought 20 years ago and receive a full refund.

Nordstrom gained tremendous public relations mileage in 1975 in Alaska, when one of the company’s young clerks refunded a customer for a pair of snow tires that were bought at the original store that had been on that site before Nordstrom replaced it and moved in. The clerk looked up the retail price of the tires, and the customer received a full refund. And Nordstrom doesn’t even sell tires!

There’s a reason these companies (and the ones who have followed their lead) have such a strong, loyal customer base – and price has very little to do with it.

### The Rule of 3 and 9

Back in the day, customer reviews – good and bad – were strictly the word-of-mouth variety that spread through the neighborhood. Over time, if you

got enough “bad” on the street, your business would eventually suffer. Today, negative reviews travel at the speed of one’s Wi-Fi connection, and poor operators are left with little or no time to recover, especially if there are other quality laundromats in the area from which to choose.

Laundromat owners live and die by the “Rule of 3 and 9.” In other words, a happy customer will tell three friends about your laundry business, while an unhappy one will tell nine. Bad news always travels deeper and farther than good news. Just watch the nightly news for a few days, and you’ll see what I mean.

No doubt, if your customer service remains at a consistently high level, your store eventually will become the shining star amongst all of the other competing laundries within the neighborhood – and the rewards will be fantastic.

I recently walked into a brand new laundromat and met the two young owners to wish them good luck. The store was only two weeks old, and they were extremely excited.

During our conversation, they asked for my opinion. They said they had been told by another laundromat owner that – if the store’s last customers had left, the laundromat was empty and no machines were engaged past “last wash” – it’s all right to allow the attendant on duty to close up and go home early. The reasoning: customers can’t start a new wash anyway, and the owners could save some payroll money.

I thought about this for a moment, and then relayed to them this true story about a good friend of mine whose night attendant went the extra mile and did the right thing:

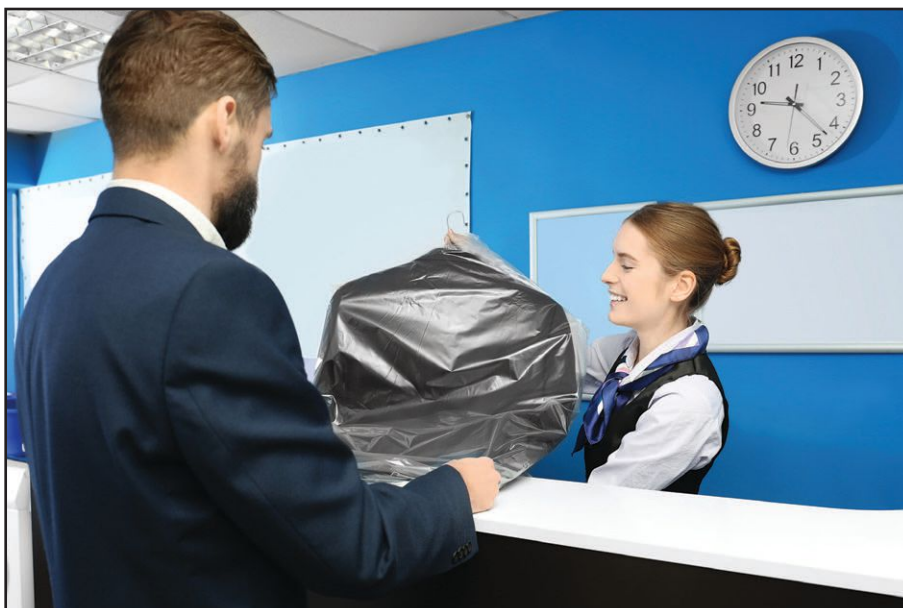
*The store’s hours were clearly posted on the door – 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., with the last wash at 8:30 p.m.*

*At 9:15 p.m., a desperate mom with her two kids pulled up to the laundromat to use only the dryers. She had just come home from a long day at work and threw the kids’ clothes into the washer for school the next day. When she put them into her dryer, she discovered it wasn’t heating. She knew it was late, but she packed up the kids and her wet laundry and rushed over to the laundromat, hoping she would be able to simply dry her children’s wet clothes. And, of course, my friend’s attendant, who had not closed up early, agreed to let her use the dryers.*

*As it turned out, that mom was a local school teacher, who knew just about every family in the neighborhood.*

Then, I asked the new owners which story they would like this customer to bring to school the next day, as well as splash all over her social media platforms:

*“The store had closed earlier than the time posted on the door, and I couldn’t get my kids’ clothes dry for school the next day. I’m never going back there again!”*



Or...

"I arrived at the laundromat long after its 'last wash,' but the amazing attendant opened the door and even rolled out a laundry cart to help me into the store with my wet clothes. She allowed me to dry and fold these items while she was busy cleaning up for the night. She really saved me in a time of crisis, and I will never stop telling everyone I know what a great laundromat this is!"

The young owners smiled at me. They got it. It wasn't about saving payroll money – it was about customer service. From that day on, they've never allowed their night attendants to close earlier than posted. As a matter of fact, they instruct them to stay a little later whenever necessary to help out customers in need. They also make sure their morning attendants open the doors early if someone is waiting outside. Although this practice may sound like common sense, you may be surprised to learn how many businesses don't follow it.

## Connecting to the Community

The operation of a vended laundry is in no way difficult or complicated. So, why am I still seeing dirty, dingy and totally neglected laundromats out there?

I've run across machines that have been broken for months at a time or that are being cannibalized (never to be used again) to keep other machines working. In some of these "ZombieMats" almost all of the lights are out, and the floor is covered with some unidentifiable goop. And don't even try going into the restroom. I'm constantly asking myself, "What are these owners thinking?"

Vended laundries come in all shapes and sizes. They can be unattended, partially attended or fully attended from opening to closing. There are small, mom-and-pop stores that are open for 12 hours a day, located on big-city streets. There are 10,000-square-foot, 24-hour laundries in free-standing facilities with layers of management and staff. And there's everything in between.


There also are innumerable management styles and personal involvement, which can be vastly different from one store to another.

Despite these differences, there are some common denominators. If you create a safe, clean, friendly environment with machines big enough for people to wash a lot of clothes at one time, they will come and make it their own. And this hasn't changed since the beginning of the history of dirty clothes.


Go back in time far enough, and all of the people located in one particular area would meet regularly at the same local water hole or the same spot at the river to wash their families' clothes, and to catch up on the news and events of the day. Other than today's technology, has the laundry task really changed that much?

In my opinion, cultivating consistent, positive laundry-day experiences is the main business we're all in. Developing this type of attitude and culture will draw customers into your store and, ultimately, keep them coming back. I truly believe it's what pays the rent and keeps the lights on.

With new technology changing the landscape of our business for the better, I always try to remember that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." By combining today's high-tech equipment being provided by the manufacturers with your own personal connection to the community and legendary customer service, you will successfully and profitably operate your laundromat well into the future.



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