

Customer Loyalty Creator: The Decorator

By Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson

www.chipbell.com

Legend has it that in the mid 1600s when Dom Perignon invented what we know of today as champagne, he called to his friends and exclaimed (in French, of course), “Come quickly, I am tasting the stars!”

Catalyst Ranch is a place where people go to “taste the stars.”

Catalyst Ranch is a meeting and event space in Chicago. But unlike most meeting facilities, Catalyst Ranch was constructed and choreographed for the express purpose of cultivating creativity and birthing breakthrough ideas. Companies like Kraft and Pfizer use the facility to brainstorm about new products, consulting firms like Accenture and McKinsey use it for strategic planning and retail giants like Whirlpool and DaimlerChrysler favor it as a site for marketing innovation. Room sizes range from 700 to more than 3,000 square feet and can be configured any way the customer desires. Groups of up to 125 people can be accommodated, and restrooms are a mere 11 steps from any meeting room.

Every room is adorned in outlandish colors and stocked with furniture that might have fallen off the back of a gypsy caravan. You expect magicians, mystics and juggling clowns to come out of the woodwork. Refreshments and meals range from the unique to the bizarre. The whole ensemble is designed to lift customers out of the pothole of routine and elevate them into a playpen of creative idea generation. The Ranch operates under the belief that one of the best ways to open the mind and clear it of stale notions is to disorient it – and disoriented you are when you walk into the facility and see all the elements that would never appear in a traditional meeting setting. Log on to www.catalystranch.com for a taste of this fantasyland.

The founder of this unique think tank-for-hire is a shining example of the Loyalty Creator we call The Decorator. Her website photo shows her donning a funky, fuzzy bright red hat. Her website self-description is as follows:

Name: Eva Niewiadomski
Title: Ranch Czarina
Favorite vacation site: Thailand
Favorite color: Chartreuse or tangerine
Favorite mode of transportation: Unicycle
Favorite dessert: Mom’s rhubarb punch
Favorite recreation: Dancing the salsa
Favorite quote: “If you think you are too small to have an impact, try to go to bed with a mosquito.” —Anita Roderick

Eva Niewiadomski is not the eccentric leader you’d expect to find in such a non-traditional setting. Her resume includes a CPA and senior roles at Arthur Anderson, Frito Lay and Quaker Oats. Eva launched the company in a renovated sausage smokehouse in 2002 with one overriding purpose: to create enchantment through a whole new kind of meeting experience. Her vision was a creativity center that would have the space, staff support and props needed to stimulate “ideation” while also delivering the highest levels of service quality.

“One Ranch goal is to always say ‘yes’ to our customers,” says Eva. “Our staff is instructed to never tell a customer ‘no.’ If they are uncomfortable with ‘yes,’ we encourage them to say ‘give me a minute’ and then find another Ranch Hand to help with an unorthodox customer request. That goal goes hand-in-hand with another -- always look at a customer’s experience through ‘kaleidoscope eyes’ to find different ways to approach an issue or request. Need an LCD projector? We have three brands to insure compatibility with laptops. And, if that fails, a customer can borrow a jump drive and one of our computers. The best things that happen to us are customer problems; they encourage us to see customer experiences in new ways.”

The Champagne Style of The Decorator

Champagne is the liquid of celebration. When people “bump glasses,” more often than not it’s champagne that fills their flutes. As the Rolls Royce of beverages, it conveys a hat tip to excellence. It is also the favored potion of surprise and delight, the ambrosia for magical moments.

Think of Decorators as the human form of bubbly — playful, distinctive and a source of captivating delight. The Decorator lives to create enchanting, memorable service moments for customers. Enchanting service is different from value-added service. Ask customers what actions they would consider value-adding and they will focus on taking an expected experience one notch higher -- meaning “they gave me more than I anticipated.” It’s the upgrade, the extra helping, the complimentary dessert or the baker’s dozen. Think of it as service on the upper end of a linear continuum.

Excellent service makes you smile, but enchanting service makes swoon! As Eva Niewiadomski says, “When prospects visit Catalyst Ranch for the very first time, we do not want them to be pleasantly surprised...we want to take their breath away. And if a client leaves without feeling astounded and amazed, we have more work to do.”

What are the secrets to creating this kind of ecstasy for customers? If Eva is the “poster child” for Decorator-like traits, what might we learn from her example?

Popping the Cork

The Decorator is always searching for opportunities to “pop the cork” on service experiences. The moment the cork explodes from the champagne bottle is usually an unpredictable and pleasant surprise. The Decorator seeks to evoke the same feeling of “joy unleashed” for customers.

The term Decorator is used because these Loyalty Creators “decorate” ordinary service experiences with acts of originality and charm. Decoration occurs when, following a manicure, the manicurist walks out to open your car door and start your engine so you won’t scuff your nails. It is the housekeeper who leaves a foreign coin, flower or kazoo on your pillow at turndown, not just a mint. It is the bank teller who opens a complimentary \$5 passbook savings account on the occasion of the birth of your first child. It’s the taxi driver who comps your ride because he remembers how generously you tipped him the last time he transported you.

“It’s all about generosity,” says Eva. “When we have a small group of six people for breakfast, two large coffee cakes would be more than enough. But we put out four or five different types. I grew up with Polish parents who taught me that the old world way of hospitality was to make a gathering a major event. You would never skimp; you would always serve in a way that was

lavish. Extra to us says you care. Two desserts at lunch confirms your manners; three creates a memory. We want our guests to remember our service as bountiful.”

The Elevator Effect

Don't think of elevator as a quick route to the 14th floor, think of it as what cheerleaders do to their hometown fans! Decorators feel their charge in life is to lift the spirits of others, especially customers. They know it is the “spirit” of champagne that makes a moment special, not necessarily the liquid in the bottle. The magic of champagne is more in what it indicates than in how it intoxicates. In the same fashion, Decorators are not typically glad-handing, back-slapping kind of employees. Instead of relying on hail-fellow-well-met personalities to impress customers, they seek to embellish processes, settings and delivery systems to elevate the service mood of clients.

The Decorator takes dead aim at the intersection of service place, performance and process to hit targets that trigger customer enchantment. Understanding that good service is a highly sensory experience, they open every sense-tickling gate in efforts to fully engage and delight customers. They are forever on the prowl for ways to take service interactions to new heights -- “What if we made service prettier, enhanced by a guide, done backwards, completely tailored, designed through the eyes of a child, more effortless,” and on and on. The Decorator's ideation never ceases.

“We examined every square inch of this facility to find ways to captivate,” says Carrie Smith, director of operations at Catalyst Ranch. “We put make-a-sentence word magnets on the bathroom stall walls and hung dragons from the ceilings. You'll find flowers where you least expect them. You will find a colorful figurine in a total surprising place. Everything...I mean every single thing here...is a part of the creativity-enhancing experience.”

Embellisher Extraordinaire

Try this. Surprise your friends by ordering a bottle of champagne with an ordinary dinner out. It brings a touch of elegance and celebration to the event. Champagne also makes people feel more affluent than their bank accounts might suggest. The Decorator has the same effect of making customers feel special and like their best, highest selves.

Eva Niewiadomski describes her Decorator influence on the Catalyst Ranch this way: “Some meeting facilities seek to be invisible, like the movie set people never remember. If we were a school, our goal would be to have students leave inspired, not just instructed. We partner with our customer's purpose in a way that generates pure magic. We call it ‘catalyst’ because the effect helps set ideas and experiences in motion. It is like what champagne does to strawberries. We want to help people who come here become more, not just accomplish more.”

Two Sides of The Decorator

Decorators believe in the self-fulfilling principle that if you expect the best and demonstrate the best, you almost always get back the best in return. They teach others that distinctive service doesn't require a complex formula but is accomplished by understanding customer expectations and then going them one – or two -- better. When Decorators add a touch of mirth and magic to the routine and the mundane, they remind everyone, including the customer, that “God is in the details.”

Of course, while the ‘give more than you get’ philosophy is the very soul of great service, when taken to extremes it can lead to a quick trip to the poor house.

The best Decorators learn to embellish and amend in areas that have the biggest impact on customer loyalty, redirecting time or resources away from those performance dimensions that have little effect on customers’ repurchase intentions.

Leading the Decorator

- Insist on kindness to others.
- Be quick to provide affirmation.
- Remind employees of the service vision in word and deed.
- Never let employees take service air for granted.
- Encourage employees to get on the high wire (take risks).
- Be the net that catches employees when they fall off the wire.
- Be crystal clear about the limits of freedom.
- Be your employees’ greatest fan.

Decorators are among the rarest of Loyalty Creators. In a crowd of 50 servers you might be lucky to find one natural-born Decorator. But there is no shortage of Decorator wannabes who, with the right care and feeding, can blossom into the real thing.

There is a tendency to think Decorators will have flamboyant, quirky personalities, but the truth is they are often understated and business-like. Their power lies less in sheer force of personality than in an abiding inventiveness and capacity to grasp what out-of-the-ordinary experiences and special touches will delight their customers.

Power of Supportive Cultures

Magical service flourishes amid supportive and caring cultures. One of the first things you notice about the employees of Catalyst Ranch is their teamwork and liberal recognition of others’ efforts. “Let me help with that” and “Girl, you are really good” sprinkle their behind-the-scenes dialogue. Catalyst employees act as if they get just as much joy out of helping each other look good as they do in helping the customer feel good. That kind of behavior takes its cues and cascades down from the leadership of an organization.

Affirming Others

Affirming efforts to deliver memorable service is one of the best ways to produce more of the same kind of behavior. Employees at Catalyst Ranch hold frequent gatherings to brainstorm about ideas for boosting customer service, and those who come up with the best ideas – or who are caught in the act of exceeding customer expectations – are celebrated for their performance. If a clever idea fails or backfires, Ranch leaders spend more time helping associates extract lessons from the experience than assigning blame.

Ask a Catalyst Ranch leader how he or she affirms people who deliver exemplary service and you’ll likely hear a long, diverse list of recognition practices. One of the best affirmation tactics in our eyes is how customers are involved in recognition efforts. A customer comment about a delicious snack, for example, might lead to a response like, “That’s the specialty of our snack

pros—Lauren and Caroline,” with the praise being communicated directly to the employees or even broadcast throughout the company. As Operations Manager Rob Hanlin puts it, “Praise for Ranch Hands from our customers is more important than praise from one of the managers. It reminds them of who they are here for.”

Cover the Basics First

Customers value the extras only after their basic needs are met. They won’t be impressed by the complimentary newspaper or free Wi-Fi access if the heating or cooling system in their hotel room malfunctions. The personable flight attendant and tasty meal in an upgraded first class seat vanishes from memory when the plane lands too late to make a critical connection. Customers only love Catalyst Ranch after the commode flushes, the meeting room chairs feel comfortable, all needed supplies are on hand and the air conditioning works.

“We are about courtesy and creativity. That is what our customers see,” says Eva. “But behind the scenes we are all about efficiency and taking care of the basics. There are things that are fundamental to good hospitality and employees are not allowed to ignore them. We encourage our people to dress artistically, but we also require them to dress professionally. We would never hire someone our corporate customers could not accept.”

Empowering the Decorator

“It is hard to change the paradigm from within the paradigm,” wrote Albert Einstein. The kind of service experiences that leave customers shaking their heads with surprise and delight emerge from outside the usual service paradigm. Such innovation takes daring and valor.

The role of the service leader is to nurture that kind of courage, even when unable to reasonably predict its outcome. Says Eva: “If you believe in your employees and want them to try new things, you encourage them to do so not just through words but through actions. When two of our people, Lauren and Caroline, mentioned we should do something special with our snacks, I realized they had a passion for desserts. We funded their snack R&D effort and it yielded tremendous results. We now have a snack manual with hundreds of ideas. Our customers not only rave about our snacks, they rave about our two snack pros!”

Decorators are architects of uncommon service experiences, the kind of encounters that build lasting memories and make customers thirst for repeat performances. Like that cherished bottle of champagne, they make customers feel as if they are “tasting stars.” And in today’s world of bland, indifferent customer service, there is no better way to set yourself apart from the masses.

© 2007, Chip R. Bell & John R. Patterson

Adapted from *Customer Loyalty Guaranteed: Creating, Leading and Sustaining Remarkable Customer Service*, by Chip R. Bell and John R. Patterson, (Boston: Adams-Media, Due in bookstores or your favorite e-seller, Fall, 2007) This article can be copied. However, it cannot be republished in any form, including electronic, without permission from the authors. See www.chipbell.com/contact.htm or www.johnrpatterson.com/contact.html to contact the authors.