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# THE EDITOR'S CORNER

## The Perils of Indifference

I recently ran into a friend unexpectedly in a foreign airport. He was in that country on a business-vacation trip with his family. While he was there, his father-in-law died, and the family had to hurry home to prepare for the funeral. I know from personal experience how disrupting an experience like this can be. Automobile and hotel bookings have to be canceled, room guarantees have to be forfeited, funeral plans must be initiated by phone, and quick and expensive reservations must be made for the return trip. None of this is easy under any circumstances, but when grief is added, the burden increases exponentially.

The airline my friend was obliged to use is one of the largest in the world. It has done a reasonably good job of designing a reliable and somewhat predictable flying experience. It has even given its investors a fairly good return on investment. It doesn't often lose baggage forever, its planes are usually clean, and its employees are generally well groomed. It has the size and connections to fly people almost anywhere on earth. In other words, it is pretty much like dozens of other airlines.

What most air carriers are not known for is their sympathetic and empathetic response to customers' (or even their own personnel's) problems. On this particular day in this particular city, the airline was anything but helpful to my friend. When I left him to make my own flight, he still didn't know whether the airline could return him home within the next two days. At that point, no amount of advertising or secondary service recovery was likely to convince him that the airline had an interest in serving clients' special needs. You can't unring a bell.

Rather than being authorized to solve problems for passengers, the employees of this airline have clearly been instructed to go by the book. And the rules in the book are apparently written in stone. The airline will provide a transportation service, but largely on its own terms, and servile conformity will be expected from the client. Please don't bother the employees with something as trivial as an unexpected death in the family.

I contrast that with the recent experience an acquaintance had at a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where he purposely stopped several employees—housekeepers, waiters, bellmen, and accountants—to make inquiries. He said that every one of them gave him The Ritz Pause. Each one took a couple of seconds, stopped, looked him in the eye, and asked, “How’s everything going? Is there anything I can do for you?”

My colleague discovered that a housekeeper or a doorman or a bellhop is authorized to spend as much as \$2,000 to solve any customer’s problem. Bank managers in my small town have a limit of only about \$5,000 without getting approval from above. What Ritz-Carlton has done with such a program is to turn housekeepers into franchisees of the hotel. They don’t see themselves simply as bedmakers or furniture dusters, but as problem solvers for hotel clients. And they solve problems with unusual dispatch, efficiency, and eagerness, much to the delight of their guests. Too bad for my friend that Ritz-Carlton wasn’t running the airline he had to use.

In an age when commoditization seems to have won the day, most companies show a commitment to little more than conformity. But even among airlines, this is not inevitable—carriers such as Virgin and Southwest Airlines have found distinctive ways of making themselves highly attractive to customers while remaining competitive. Frequent fliers can only hope that the reach of these superlative airlines is soon extended to include their own regions.

For enterprises to become outstanding in this sea of sameness, they need leaders with passion and enthusiasm to set the pace. General Electric CEO Jack Welch has said, “You can’t

behave in a calm, rational manner. You’ve got to be out there on the lunatic fringe.” Andy Grove of Intel has encouraged his company “to create a lust for our product”. Herb Kelleher lives and breathes for Southwest’s flying public and refuses to serve on other company boards.

There is a lesson here for orthodontists, because they, like effective CEOs, are the ones who ultimately bear the responsibility for developing and implementing the ideas that appeal to and excite both employees and patients. One of the few ways for orthodontic practices to build distinction nowadays is to redesign the way they deliver their products and services. If the reception area is too small to accommodate patients and their families comfortably, enlarge it or get another office. If the decor is still Early American maple furniture from the ’60s, hire a decorator to help replace it. If your therapies are compromising patient profiles too often, implement some appliances and techniques that won’t. If there is new clinical equipment that can help deliver more comfortable treatment for your patients, buy it. If you find yourself jaded to the point of ennui, take a course in a discipline you haven’t mastered or invite a consultant to help you and your staff see new possibilities for your practice. If you have an employee who is making problems for patients rather than solving them, replace that person—now.

Do whatever it takes to reignite the professional spark that you, your patients, and your staff deserve. Orthodontists have been given a great gift—to create the smiles that provide the social substance of our communities. Rather than squander this gift, let’s give it the zeal and enthusiasm it needs to prosper. LWW