Lobbying for a five-star law firm

Next time you stay at a leading hotel or resort, take some notes on how the experience could transform client service and workplace culture at your law firm, advises Linda Julian

Each time I stay in a fine hotel the experience is both enjoyable and truly impressive. And I am struck by how different is my guest experience from client experiences at many professional services and law firms.

For a few hundred dollars spent with a fine hotel, my service experience is much different from what clients who spend tens, hundreds or even thousands of times that recount of their interactions with their lawyers and expert professional advisers. Let us learn some lessons from fine hotels, exquisite resorts and the best cruise lines: they can teach us so much.

Sense of appreciation

Every guest is greeted warmly by every staff member, every time. Whether in contact with the general manager, cashier, room attendant, or person arranging flowers in the lobby, hotel employees invariably initiate a friendly “good day” with a smile. Would not this be a nice start for every professional firm client? I am made to feel that my custom matters and the value of my business is noticed.

The hotel general manager recognises frequent guests with a note, a card, maybe some small gift, and adds their welcome. It is usually hand signed – presented at the front desk, waiting in room on arrival or delivered soon after. Contrast this with how professional firm clients too often feel taken for granted or underappreciated. Showing appreciation for your client and their business – in deeds and in words – is always a good idea.

In a host of small ways, hotel guests are noticed and treated as important. By the second day of my stay, hotel staff seem to remember me and give me a sense that I ‘belong’ there. They remember that I like a cappuccino with breakfast and grapefruit rather than orange juice. By the third morning, they ask me whether I would again like the mushroom omelette (which I ordered two days in a row). By contrast, too often preferences, foibles and idiosyncrasies of professional services clients are overlooked or unnoticed.

Fine hotels always welcome guest comments and make it easy for me to offer my feedback. They politely acknowledge my comments, compliments, even occasional complaints, and go so far as to give me a sense that they have really taken my input aboard. Compare this with some professional firms that
do not want, let alone seek, frank client feedback. These same firms tell me variously that ‘we know the clients are happy’ or ‘if we send a survey, the clients might make an adverse comment or complain’.

This analogy goes only so far: when a client goes to a professional services firm, it is for expert advice; when they are a guest at a fine hotel, it is both for accommodation and the entire guest experience. Service is no substitute for professional substance, but technical prowess is rarely sufficient.

**True team effort**

We can also learn much from great teamwork strongly in evidence at the best hotels and on the best cruise lines. From the moment I approach the entrance, I get a strong sense that every hotel team member is respected by their colleagues (at least in my presence). Everyone ‘gets it’ that it takes the whole team operating as a well-oiled machine to deliver stand-out service because they make it about me, rather than about them. Contrast that with a widespread professional firm vibe that ‘it’s all about partners’.

Hotels recognise and reward exemplary service delivery by team members. Clever technocrats and senior management do not get ‘employee of the month’ accolades: instead, it is the laundry person who tracked down a guest’s lost garment, a pastrycook faithful to 4am starts, or the parking attendant who came in for so many compliments. The employee honour board is displayed conspicuously and proudly for public applause. All too often in the professional firm, it is only the partners who take the bows.

Hotel staff are discreet and my idiosyncrasies stay truly private. They do not divulge details of other guests, and I do not hear tales about unreasonable requests or expectations. So I am pretty confident that my foibles are not held up to gossip or ridicule, they do not moan about me (even if unnamed) and there is total discretion around my presence in the hotel.

While a professional firm’s sophisticated client is rarely in any doubt that truly confidential information stays that way, sharing tales about unreasonable, unusual or difficult clients is a way of life in the professional services world, leaving some clients to wonder ...

**Premium service offering**

Staff of fine hotels always look perfectly composed and give me a sense that they do have time and attention for me. No complaints that they’re frazzled or boasts that they are overworked, no matter how frenetic things are ‘out the back’. Never do they cite as an excuse how late they finished last night.
Service rituals of the finest hotels are so consistent and seamless that they appear ‘natural’. Fact is, they are not. Hotel staff are trained, coached and retrained until the right responses become second nature. Too often, professional firms limit training to technical competence.

Exemplary behaviours are modelled by supervisors and managers, always. Everyone knows that superb service is a prerequisite to keeping any top hotel job, a positive performance appraisal, and to every promotion all the way to the top echelon. The world’s finest hotels develop reputations and loyal followings lusted after by the rest of the hospitality industry, and enviously eyed off by other businesses, including some expert professional firms.

**Some takeaway lessons**

As lawyers and other professional experts, we can draw dozens of lessons from fine hotels. These include:

- they think less about differentiating themselves from others than being truly excellent in all they do
- these organisations aim to be perfect in every detail, not just getting the substance right
- every client interaction with every function and each touch point is important, every time
- in big and complex service operations, every link in the chain must be treated as important, because it is
- every member of the team knows that they are there to do their own specific set of tasks plus provide service that will build reputation and bring paying business back, time after time
- often it is the little (and perhaps not so clever) things which count
- success and prestige of fine hotels comes from getting great facilities and the technical capabilities in place, fully tuned and exactly right, and then delivering with consistently superb service
- the best hotels constantly maintain, renew, finesse, update and refurbish their offerings – before it is overdue
- when things go wrong – and sometimes they do, even in the very best establishments – the fine hotel comes shining through with immediate attention from staff empowered to resolve a problem to the guest’s satisfaction
- when there has been a problem, the best hotel goes the extra mile and lays on a little extra attention to make amends and restore goodwill
- unlike some professional service firms, the fine hotel does not take the bill being paid as a signal that there is no problem and all is well with the world
- they know ‘the word gets out there’
they know the markets and clientele they want to attract and keep.

If fine hotels can produce excellent service experiences at every level of the organisation, with staff who are not all highly educated, all super smart and all highly paid, then it must be possible for law firms and other professionals to go a long way down this path, their impressive qualifications, supposed superior intelligence and high remuneration notwithstanding.

Professional service firms spend much on promotions and marketing, improving their brand, sponsorships, advertising, winning awards and amplifying fine points of difference from their competitors. Imagine how much there is to gain from taking some lessons from fine hotels ... and, mostly, it costs next to nothing to roll out, or it is free.

**Culture pays off**
I do not want to stretch this analogy with fine hotels too far, but as expert professionals, we can and should draw valuable lessons from it. Mindless mimicry is not the way: a personal note from the managing partner every time a client visits the office is unnecessary, nor is a ‘pillow treat’ the perfect thing. But imagine the success of a professional firm which reached this level and consistency of service ...

Fine hotels build cultures and traditions around this and then gain great advantages in terms of reputation and status, strongly positive word of mouth, attractiveness to first-choice staff, consumer demand, and ultimately prices they command.

I urge you join me on the journey to bring our expert professional firms – yours and mine – much closer to the fine service standards of the best hotel operations so we can achieve the advantages they enjoy in their local markets and worldwide.

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