When Walt Disney started out as a young entrepreneur in the 1920s, he wasn’t sure where his fledgling business would take him and his brother, Roy. All he knew was that he wanted to entertain people of all ages. Walt’s determination to build a place where he and his family could have good, clean fun together led to the opening of Disneyland in 1955.

But it was Walt and Roy’s focus beyond the obvious core consumers -- children -- that truly sustained their company through good times and bad; a focus that remains the cornerstone of The Walt Disney Company today. We continually work on this concept every day, always trying to find new ways to surprise and delight people of all ages.

Each year we receive thousands of guest letters that share with us how a cast member went out of his or her way to make everyone in the party feel special and because of that, they will be back. In fact, we have quantified and correlated these interactions with higher levels of intent to return and to recommend – key drivers of growth and profitability.

At Disney Institute, we’ve helped thousands of clients integrate Disney best practices into their own businesses; turning ideas like these into business reality in a variety of industries and disciplines.

THE QUALITY SERVICE DIFFERENCE
The guest experience is something we at Disney understand well. With five destinations and dozens of hotels in operation around the world, Disney could easily lose touch with the millions of people who walk through its turnstiles every year. Disney Imagineers go to great lengths to make the theme parks feel intimate, but it’s the cast members who really make it work. A multi-million dollar attraction won’t be very memorable if the cast member at the front is impolite or inattentive.

Disney also clearly defines guest and “backstage” areas to make it easy for cast members to maintain the guest experience. When cast members are in guest areas, they know to always follow Disney guidelines for appearance and customer service. Cast members are asked not to eat or drink in costume, they don’t talk on the phone or text while in guest areas, and they are asked never to wear themed costumes or nametags while off duty.

We understand that cast members need a place to be themselves or blow off steam, and to take a break and be relaxed. All we ask is that they don’t do it in guest areas.

Now think about your business. Where are your “backstage” areas? Are they out of sight (and sound)? Do your employees have a place to just relax and be themselves for a few minutes? Consider how their inability to relax or simply decompress can begin to affect the quality of your service experience.

THE SECONDARY GUEST
At Disney, we constantly strive to surpass the expectations of our primary guests, but we also focus on what we like to call the “secondary guest.” A secondary guest is someone who frequently interacts with or exerts influence over a product, but is not considered a core consumer.

The secondary guest concept began with Walt Disney himself. Walt developed Disneyland because he was tired of sitting on the sidelines watching his daughters have fun. He wanted a place that was fun for them and him. His idea was an obvious success that led to the concept of the secondary guest.

Utilizing knowledge of the secondary guest can yield tremendous results for any business, regardless of size. When you can exceed expectations and create an unparalleled experience for your core and secondary guest, you can create a climate that produces repeat business. It’s really about adjusting the company culture and mindset to make sure
employees understand the purpose behind the concepts.

BUILDING A SERVICE-ORIENTED CULTURE
How often do employees interact with customers throughout the day? Every interaction is an opportunity to provide a memorable customer service experience. At Disney, it's the culture of service excellence that helps us succeed far more often than we fail.

Of course, getting all employees on board for this kind of culture isn't easy. In addition to having great leaders in place, Disney relies on a refined recruiting and training process that screens for the right behaviors and attitudes among potential cast members as discussed in the earlier people management article. We have a very collaborative culture, but we also have very clear expectations that are communicated on a regular basis.

We have a saying at Disney that it may not always be our fault, but it is our problem. Over and over again, guests tell us that all they really want is an apology and assurance that someone is trying to fix the problem. This principle is rooted in our company culture and provides all cast members with a common purpose.

IT STARTS WITH LEADERSHIP
The question we get over and over again, from executives in all industries, including health care is: How do you get all of your employees to be so friendly and invested in their jobs? The truth is Disney has worked very hard to create a culture that fosters employee engagement and trust. That leads to exceptional service and solid financial results.

Walt Disney once said, “I have an organization of people who are really specialists. You can’t match them anywhere in the world for what they do. But they all need to be pulled together and that’s my job.”

Disney’s service-oriented culture is rooted in strong leadership. By choosing leaders who understand that cast members are Disney’s greatest asset, the company improves the chances that every guest will have an exceptional experience.

Through consistent communication with their leaders, Disney cast members understand that their actions are integral to the company’s success, and know their extra efforts are appreciated. Leaders spend the majority of their day in the field looking for cast members who are doing things right. Positive stories and examples of cast member excellence are frequently shared with others, so that the right behaviors get recognized, rewarded, and most importantly, repeated.

The bottom line is that any business can easily apply the concepts we use at Disney because most of them cost little to no money to implement. It's really about adjusting the company’s mindset to make sure everyone - managers and employees - understand their role within the organization, and treat everyone as a guest and a potential customer.

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