

Mark Roche-Garland

General Manager, Back Bay Hotel, Boston

The economics of superior customer experience

The new competitive battleground for a couple of years, customer experience has become a top-of-mind issue for all senior executives around the globe as a way to surpass competition and generate profitable sales. Great experience makes your customers not only committed to your brand and acting as your best advocates, but also defending your values and staying longer in a business relationship with your company. Too often seen as just a marcom initiative, the economics of great customer experience are real and translate into higher market share, reduced customer churn, improved repurchase, shorter and cheaper sales cycle, and proactive referral.

The hotel business is probably the one where customer experience counts more than in any other activity, and so are the lessons to be learned for all sectors. The Back Bay Hotel in Boston, part of the Irish group The Doyle Collection, reaches exceptional scores and customer advocacy on Tripadvisor and other similar sites for its legendary service. For Mark Roche-Garland, General Manager of the Back Bay Hotel, great customer experience is not a strategic programme nor is it just a marketing initiative. Instead, it is a full component of the company culture, entirely based on people.

Why does customer experience differ so much in the hotel industry from other business sectors?

MRG: Customer experience is a critical factor in all industries. But in many cases, customers remain loyal even if they have some negative perceptions. If you are not fully satisfied with your airline company, your supermarket or your bank, chances remain high that you will stay with them anyway. In the hotel business, it's not. Once a client is dissatisfied, even for the smallest detail and after years of loyalty, chances are very high that you'll lose it forever.

What are you doing, concretely, to deliver superior customer experience?

MRG: Many hotels believe they deliver a "great experience" to their customers. But customer perception is often very different and shows much, much lower appreciation of their



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providers. Now, what sets the Back Bay Hotel experience apart? Firstly by offering the right service and experience to the right customers. We are a top level hotel, and so are our clients, traveling for business or pleasure. Their expectations are very different from those choosing to stay in a 2-stars resort. Secondly, by focusing the entire organisation on our guests. We do not divide clients into categories, nor do we design a specific service for each one. Service is exactly the same for everybody, whether you pay the full fee or have got a price promotion. And thirdly, we permanently develop our capabilities to please customers again and again by continuous training of our team and establishing direct accountability for the customer experience.

Do you mean that people are the cornerstone of customer experience?

MRG: Yes, most definitely. At the core of the hospitality business is 'being hospitable' and 'being genuine' in

your efforts. It is much more than having a nice lobby, a pleasant room or a fine restaurant. Guests mostly remember the people. Therefore, it starts with hiring the right people to be part of the team and training the latter to ensure a seamless experience is delivered consistently. Listening to your staff, taking their ideas and remarks into account, and treating them as your internal customers are the keys to our approach. They feel trusted and empowered to resolve issues on the spot and to react actively to a problem instead of just following standard guidelines. Of course we have a set of guidelines and procedures to be followed, but they are a basis, not the ultimate bible. Having a genuine concern and care is what really matters and makes the difference.

And... how do you create this level of engagement from your staff?

MRG: We have two sets of customers: our guests, and our staff. I am convinced that employee loyalty and satisfaction play an enormous role in delivering consistent and great customer experiences. Unhappy employees will not provide the type of customer experience that our guests expect of us. Everyone at the Back Bay Hotel knows every other employee really well, everybody knows who is doing what, and every-

body knows each one's responsibility. Therefore, we focus on motivating our entire team, from the doorman who is the first point of contact with our clients, to housekeepers and kitchen stewards to deliver our value proposition across the entire customer experience journey. In the same way, positive interaction with clients is critical. Listening to clients, seeing things with their eyes instead of ours, and quickly reacting to any complaint or proposal for improvement is another important resource to reach the ultimate level of great customer experience. In addition to keeping up and keeping ahead of ever changing guest expectations, we engage the team to feel part of the hotel's success, and they are very proud to work for us. Working at the Back Bay Hotel is not just another job in another hotel. In short we are a big family.



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How do you measure the return on customer experience?

MRG: Great customer experience leads to great customer loyalty, and afterwards to customer advocacy. Loyal customers are those who actively grow your business by regularly coming back, frequenting our bar and restaurant, conference space and treating their family and loved ones to a weekend away or holiday. A true reflection of this is when customers recommend you to colleagues, friends, or to a larger community via Tripadvisor for instance. Today, people do not ask the best recommendations to their travel agency anymore. They rather search for best experiences via the internet or their relationship network. Even with all the social media and the mass communication that we are bombarded with today, it still comes down to personal recommendations and those can be from anywhere.

What metrics are you using to measure the customer experience and loyalty?

MRG: Too many companies view customer experience as just surveys and statistics. When people become too focused on data, they unavoidably stop hearing the real voices of their customers. On the one hand, we have the rates given by customers on specialized websites. It's a good indicator, but it's

not always right. On the other hand, a key metric is the number of clients -and their colleagues from a same company- who come back more frequently, stay longer, use more services, etc. We have an extended satisfaction survey that we send out to our guests a short time after their departure. This helps us to quickly perceive their satisfaction level, what was right, what we could have done better, which staff members have particularly been excellent in meeting their needs, and if the model is still aligned with clients expectations. We answer personally to those having experienced some disappointments to clearly understand what happened and how it can be avoided in the future. By doing so, clients know we listen to them, and that the experience is ever evolving and improving.

Which items prove to be the most important to create a great customer experience?

MRG: There are numerous parts to a guest experience -what we call touchpoints- including ease and quality of booking, welcome on arrival, flexibility of upgrades or reservation changes, room design and cleanliness, room service, IT connectivity, quality of food, breakfast organisation, doorman, concierge, barmaid, etc, etc. These are all critical parts to the guest experience that we are continually monitoring to ensure we deliver the very best in service standards. The best customer offering can quickly be rendered impotent by poor execution of even the smallest things. So consistency in everything we do takes here another dimension, and this can only be achieved through strong employee buy-in.

What is your role, as General Manager, in the experience journey of your guests?

MRG: I see it as the one of a conductor, a Mister Positive, an ambassador devoted to the satisfaction of our guests and our employees, not just looking at the numbers, although that is a crucial part of course. This means being available to our guests, available to the team, and detecting and fixing issues rapidly. In many hotels, the general manager is someone you never see. In my particular case, my office is located just behind the reception desk so that I can intervene in real time when required and spend as much time as possible on the floor interacting and being part of the experience. I also invest a large part of my time talking with customers to get their advice and suggestions. By giving customers the opportunity to submit their views face to face, you not only measure the experience but also nurture it.

Mark Roche-Garland is graduated from Glenstal Abbey School and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. He made his entire career in the hotel industry, including Jurys and Marriott. He joined the Doyle Collection Group in 1999.