



# Four-Star Staffers

Great Customer Service Depends on Hiring Right

BY GARY HENKIN

**C**an't anybody get any service around here? Too often, the answer seems to be no. In a 2006 survey by Zagat guidebooks, the No. 1 complaint about hotels, resorts, and spas was poor service. In fact, 55 percent of the 14,461 frequent travelers who supplied opinions for Zagat's hotel guide and 72 percent of the 123,000 people who contributed to its restaurant guide listed poor service as their top gripe.

At the same time, managers in a survey by Signature Worldwide listed hiring and retaining good employees and maintaining customer service levels as their first concern. In today's extraordinarily competitive and demanding environment,

customers expect (and deserve) high-quality customer service. In addition to the customer complaints you hear first-hand, a failure to meet this challenge can mean unflattering reviews on Web sites such as tripadvisor.com. With the Internet, consumers have ample opportunity to let others know of any disappointments.

Placing a premium on the hiring and retention of personnel who share your values, culture and service ethic will reap substantial dividends. Whether your business is a private or commercial club, hotel, resort or residential development, sourcing quality personnel and retaining them for the long term can help your business stand out from the crowd and attract loyal repeat visitors.



A great golf pro like Hilton's Jerramy Hainline celebrates members' achievements with sincere excitement.

### Finding the Right Fit

Clients consistently ask, "Where and how do you find qualified staff, and what qualities and traits do you seek in the selection process?" In the past, our response skewed more toward the specific qualifications and experience candidates had on their resumes. Although this experience is clearly an important factor, it should not be the ultimate criteria in finding the best person for the job. Today, it is even more important to establish what we refer to as "core qualities and values," and your staff selection traits should embrace and mirror these. Taking a hard look at a candidate's customer service and communication skills will yield better results than looking at a resume alone.

Having a broad base of candidates for open positions allows you to match the right person to the job responsibility and to the site. Such a job "fit" must be present if a relationship between the staff and the club, hotel or residential property is to succeed over time. Each property develops its own personality, and it's important that new employees fit in with existing staff and with the clients they serve. Sometimes, management hires a qualified applicant, but there isn't necessarily a clear fit between the person and the property.

There are any number of viable ways to source qualified staff, including advertising in trade publications and associated magazines and periodicals. In addition, the Internet provides a broad means of reaching people in your particular market niche. Attending trade shows and networking with colleagues in the industry also produces positive results.

One of the best ways to find capable individuals who will be a good fit for your property is soliciting recommendations from your existing personnel. Because these individuals are experienced in what is required to serve guests to your standards, they typically have an effective understanding of the traits a new hire must possess to be successful. Several of our clients have utilized creative ways to achieve this goal, including holding contests or offering employees various incentives for referring successful job candidates.

You might even find a winning candidate from outside hospitality management. Some of the very best fitness managers, spa directors and front desk personnel have experience and backgrounds in areas beyond the obvious, such as public relations, marketing and sales, guest or member services, or retailing.

### Hiring for Smiles

By focusing on the skills and qualities crucial to the success of your business, you can develop a list of requirements to seek during the staff selection process. These may include a warm and engaging personality, excellent verbal and written communication skills, organizational know-how, work ethic, special customer service skills and experience, computer skills, financial acumen, and leadership ability.

The interview is your best chance to determine if an individual has the qualities you're looking for. During the interview, create scenarios that mimic possible situations at your business and then ask candidates how they would respond. Of course, you'll want to include situations involving customers, but also pose some with fellow staff members. If they can't handle a surly personality in an interview, how will they do so on the job?



The physical proximity created by personal services makes a pleasing personality an essential job requirement.



Restaurant and bar guests always appreciate a friendly atmosphere, and a smile goes a long way when busy periods mean service is a little slower.

Another effective tactic is to ask potential employees to describe situations in past positions where they have had to step beyond their own job description or go beyond the call of duty. Look for specific details and ask how the situations were resolved. (If a candidate can't provide an example, or stumbles with this question, perhaps you should not hire that individual). Then bring the interview back specifically to your business and explain the importance you place on employees being team players and customer-service oriented. A candidate's reaction to your stated standards may tell you a lot about their ability to satisfy your requirements.

Call past employers and references to verify the information on a resume. Although many companies will not provide specific information about past employees, most will verify dates of employment and tell you if a past employee is eligible for rehire. It doesn't hurt to go ahead and ask if the employee got along well with others or received any recognition for providing stellar customer service.

Finally, don't ever be so wowed by an applicant that you don't complete the basics. Study resumes carefully for gaps in employment or hopscotching from job to job. Ask all job applicants to take a drug test and search for any criminal history.

## Retaining Enthusiasm

Once you've hired the right candidates, make sure your employees keep their enthusiasm alive. The creation of support

systems and internal resources, combined with customer service training programs, will result in both employee and facility user retention. These systems are often overlooked, particularly in the spa industry where I believe the importance of ongoing staff training and execution isn't stressed as much as it should be.

According to the International Association of Business Communicators, almost half of all companies have failed to effectively explain to employees the purpose of their jobs and the mission and strategy of their businesses. Don't be one of those companies! Clearly explain to all new employees (and reiterate to existing ones) that your business exists to serve your customers. Make them aware that customer service is paramount and you will support reasonable actions taken to support that goal.

If you hire staff with a natural desire to please other people, you'll attract and retain a loyal, enthusiastic clientele. Realize that retaining high-quality staff members is just as important to your success as an effective marketing program. If you make this a top priority, you'll likely meet or exceed your own financial and operational expectations. **R+R**

### RESOURCE BOX:

Gary Henkin is president of WTS International of Rockville, Md., a spa and fitness consulting and management firm providing services to private clubs, hotels, resorts and residential communities worldwide. Visit [www.wtsinternational.com](http://www.wtsinternational.com) or call (301) 622-7800.