

CHAPTER 1

Animation

“My company created my role for one reason: to make you very happy, sir. And, the best part is that they picked me to do it!”

—*Charlie, a doorman at Marriott Quorum,
Dallas, Texas*

We knew we had a treat in the offing when the answer to our “Where’s the best lunch in town” question got escalated to “White’s is the best in the state!” We were almost out of earshot when the local on the street corner added, “Ask for Katie.”

The target of the local’s affinity was White’s Restaurant in Salem, Oregon. The restaurant had the look of a 1935 diner. The inside was neat and spotless; the atmosphere warm and upbeat. The hostess on the other side of the “Please wait to be seated” sign gave us a bright Steinway smile as we crossed the threshold.

“We heard Katie was the best in the house,” we announced. “We’d like her table.”

“Well, well, well . . . it’s your lucky day!” the hostess teased. “There’s is normally a two-hour wait to get Katie but we just had



White's Restaurant¹

a cancellation,” she said with a wink and a grin. “I think I can squeeze you in.” The needle on our fun meter was already racing to the top.

“We are so glad to have you!” said our waitress. Her words came straight from the frying pan of a zealous spirit. “I’m Katie, and I’ll check back with you in a minute. You know it’s Thursday. Don’s vegetable soup is already getting rave reviews.” We were beginning to feel like locals.

When we noticed the breakfast menu listed “Don’s Big Mess” as a headliner and the burger choices included a “Whoopie! Burger,” we began to think we’d walked into a comedy club. Our spirits registered another uptick.

People throughout the restaurant were engaged in warm conversation, noisily greeting people they knew as they came through the front door. An hour later, we were back outside with satisfied stomachs and very happy hearts. The meal was awesome, but it was the animated service that told us we were witnessing the spirit of “take their breath away.”

Animation is our moniker for the clear and present energy that reflects an unmistakable joy of serving. The label reminds us of what a great cartoonist does in turning stills into moving pictures—like the late Chuck Jones, who created such famous cartoon characters as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Wile E. Coyote, Road Runner, and Pepe Le Pew. When we interviewed him a few years back, the then-88-year-old genius sat in his studio in Irvine, California, and reflected on his 60-plus years as a world-renowned animator. “The secret to making a character come alive,” he mused, “is not how you draw that particular character. Animation happens when everything in the frame moves with the character.”

The power of an animated service person is how that person helps everything around them move with them. Katie was an animator. But, then, so was everything about the restaurant in which she worked.

THE SPIRIT OF ANIMATION

We all know customers are attracted to people with spirit. And, today's customers are frustrated with indifferent service; we're not talking bad service, just plain old boring, comatose service. Too often customers witness service people sleepwalking through the workday. They long to interact with—even relate to—employees who act like there is still a light on inside.



The Bumblebee

Bumblebees are very useful pollinators, spreading the heart of the flower to other flowers, which enables them to reproduce. There is a popular urban myth that aeronautical engineers have claimed it was impossible for bumblebees to fly. This fueled the notion that it is the sheer determination of the bumblebee that enables it to fly anyway.

Think about organizations known for delivering over-the-top service: Apple, Ritz-Carlton, Southwest Airlines, Zappo.com, Chick-fil-A, Trader Joe's, USAA, JetBlue, Amazon.com, and Lexus, to name a few. What do they have in common? While their products and offerings may make their prospects' and customers' heads turn, it is the experience they create that makes their customers' hearts soar. They have cracked the code on managing the emotional connection with customers.

That connection has become even more critical in the digital age. Today, customer-generated media, especially via the use of the Internet, has dramatically increased customers' ability to tell stories about their experiences with those who serve them. This once-nerdy path has morphed into an information freeway, dramatically escalating your customers' power and capacity to influence other customers. Are customers always right in their

blogs and “to whoever will listen” missives? Of course not. The customer is not always right. But the customer is always the customer. Pete Blackshaw, EVP of strategic services at Nielsen Online, has offered compelling research showing that customers will now tell up to 3,000 others (and rising) about their bad service experiences!² While the dark side of that Internet gossip game can quickly demolish your reputation, the positive side can catapult your standing right into the stratosphere.

We begin our journey through the 12 take-their-breath-away strategies with animation for one reason: *Animation is a shade of engagement that every service encounter should be painted with.* Since the connection with the customer is an emotional one, the attitude you exhibit as a service provider is the most crucial key to success in attracting and retaining devoted customers.

The focus in this chapter will be on ways to take animation to such a level that customers become a part of the frame and eventually sign up for your cheerleading squad. We will examine five tactics—attitude, comfort, personal, respect, and sparkly—all important to pumping up the liveliness and the outlook needed to take your customers’ breath away.

ATTITUDE

What’s behind the sparkly Katie we witnessed at White’s? What fuels her non-stop spirit of greatness? Katie selected the attitude she knew would likely unveil a customer smile and help boomerang that same spirit back. Her attitude is what philosopher/psychologist Rollo May had in mind when he wrote, “There is an energy field between all humans. When we reach out in passion it is met with an answering passion. . . .”³

Consider the characters kids the world over enjoy seeing at Disney theme parks. How can Mickey be Mickey, no matter what the circumstances? There is no “Mickey shot” to inoculate the character against crying babies, surly guests, or a costume

without air conditioning. Mickey (like all the characters) selects the Mickey attitude to exhibit on stage, without regard to whether it is Monday morning or the day after late-night TV. It is the cast member in the Mickey costume who selects the Mickey attitude.

Spirit of Greatness Pledge

I promise to be in charge of my attitude each and every day, to let no one affect that attitude at any time, and to be a contagious spirit of greatness—24/7, 365 days a year!

Eighty-five percent of success in life, according to a well-known and often-cited Harvard study, is due solely to attitude. An attitude that shows the spirit of greatness provides the energy and magnetism needed to deliver an animated experience for customers and draw devotion from them. While customers like dealing with employees who are committed, they absolutely love being served by someone whose spirit to serve is unmistakable in its passion, pride, and commitment. Occasional animation is not sufficient. It is both the consistency and sincerity of attitude that brings customers back and causes them to tell all of their friends to “ask for Katie.”

Leeches suck the blood from their target; *spirit leeches* suck the energy and passion from theirs. Some spirit leeches are negative—they remove optimism and hope. Mention an opportunity; they can tell you why it’s a mistake. Some are transparent, preying on personal accountability. They play the blame game. Some are almost invisible, specializing in putting wet blankets on joy. Spirit leeches are removed the same way real leeches are—with fire. Not with a real match, of course, but with the warmth and energy of positive spirit. You do not inherit spirit, acquire spirit, or borrow spirit. You choose spirit much like you choose to introduce yourself to a stranger. Those who opt for an upbeat, positive spirit are happier, healthier, and more productive.

Take it from Vickie Henry, CEO of Feedback Plus, Inc., a Dallas-based mystery shopping firm with more than 30 years experience and more than a million anecdotes in their files from work with well-known retailers, restaurants, banks, and municipalities. Vickie was preparing for a keynote speech in London, England, and decided to do a few random mystery shops. As she walked into Sam's Club, Paul Hastings greeted her singing: "Welcome to Sam's! We're so glad you're here!" He pushed a cart her direction. She told Paul she was only there for a few items and really did not need a cart, at which Paul sang, "You can't have fun without a cart!" Vickie was blown away! "Paul made me feel very special," she told us. "And, Paul was having a great time! The one fact that is obvious from our years of mystery shopping: Customers love to be served by associates who love to serve them."

The most important thing to know about attitude is that it is something one *selects*. No normal person comes into the world with a particular attitude. It is chosen (or not). While we could blame our parents, our background, or our circumstances, the truth is we choose whether we want to soar through life as the passenger of our attitude or as its pilot. Eleanor Roosevelt said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Unless you are sick or hurt, your attitude is what you want it to be. Psychologist and concentration camp inmate Viktor Frankl observed that the major reason those who survived did was the fact that they never saw themselves as victims. "Every thing can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances," wrote Frankl in his classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.⁴

The second important thing to know is that an animated attitude can be contagious. When we are around happy, upbeat people, it is much easier for us to join in the spirit—especially if the invitation to join is coming from someone who clearly prefers we enroll. An unbridled spirit has a magnetic power on customers. It draws out their higher self. Being in the presence of

a Katie causes customers to feel good about themselves. It's difficult to misbehave or stay cranky in their company. Few among us want to drag storm clouds into the perpetually sunny skies of such vivacious life forms.

University of Rhode Island students enjoy going to the nearby CVS/pharmacy in the Kingston Emporium to buy a snack and to see The Excellence Lady. The attraction is CVS head cashier Helen "Nonni" Plummer, who bids farewell to every customer with the phrase, "Have an excellent!" Should someone inquire, "Excellent what?" she quickly adds, "Whatever you want it to be." Her infectious spirit has spread to a Facebook.com group titled "You Have An Excellent" that has hundreds of members.

In his book *Authentic Management*, author Stan Herman captures the essence of this type of animated service. "No one grants you freedom," he writes. "You are free if you are free. I do not know how to tell you how to be free. But I do know some signs of freedom. One is in doing what you want to do even though someone tells you not to. Another is in doing what you want to do even *though* someone tells you to."⁵

It is the attitude of those who serve customers that provides customers with a peephole into the values and qualities most revered by the unit or organization. Remember what Chuck Jones said: "Animation happens when everything in the frame moves with the character"? One of the reasons we have such fond memories of White's is the way Katie was a character in the theatrical performance of "White's." Katie no doubt helped others get in the spirit of greatness; others like the wise-cracking hostess played their roles alongside her. And, owner Don Uselman—and inventor of the Whoopee! Burger and Don's Big Mess—was the cheerleader for them all.

COMFORT

Think back about your very best friend as a child. It was the person who could tease you in a way no one else could get away

with. It was the person who could make you laugh, keep a secret, and cheer you up when you were feeling downhearted. You had a relationship filled with a consistent enthusiasm. It was without pretense, free of anxiety, and laced with consideration and comfort.

As an animated service tactic, comfort comes from familiarity. It is all the ways a service-providing organization creates an “I know you” experience. Starbucks gets great marks from customers for turning the order-taking incident into a memory-making relationship. Step up to the counter to place your order and you’ll hear “tall skinny cinnamon dolce for Chip” repeated several times—the information echoed from customer to clerk to the drink maker (barista) and back to the customer. The repetition not only creates the security of familiarity, it enables Starbucks personnel to quickly learn your specific drink preference so you do not have to start at the beginning each time you show up.

Comfort is the product of an emotional connection that feels familiar plus an experience that is anxiety-free. Don always makes Maynard’s meatloaf on Wednesday at White’s. The turkey club sandwich always tastes so fresh you expect to see feathers out back. Katie always teases her customers. The consistency makes customers feel empowered and secure. The reliability breeds a sense of contentment, the type that says to the customer’s dissonance meter, “Calm down, we’ve been here before, and it’s okay.”

Katie was more than friendly. She was a pro working with a resourceful team in a well-oiled system. She had the White’s menus in our hands before our bottoms touched the chairs. Our wait was not even noticeable. She refilled our iced tea glasses without prompting, brought more rolls, and left the check with the caveat: “Don’t think I’m trying to rush you out. I just don’t want you having to look for me when you’re ready to leave.”

Want to add comfort to your service experience? Take a close look at all the aspects of the experience that could make your customers feel apprehensive or nervous. Take an empathy walk with

frequent customers willing to take the time to talk you through every step of their service journey with the goal of informing you of all the points where they experience the slightest unease. Call your own unit or organization, disguise your voice, and ask for something out of the ordinary, even something weird. Had we waited a long time for our menu at White's, we might have generalized that delay to the whole dining experience and concluded that lunch was going to take way too long. Had Katie been too hasty to take our order, we might have worried about her accuracy and wondered whether the apple pie we ordered was going to be Marionberry pie instead.

PERSONAL

Katie's version of animation works for Katie because she is authentically animated, delivering it in her own Katie fashion. Customers have a well-tuned sincerity sonar and will pick up even a hint of hypocrisy. Animation must come from the heart and be filtered through a conspicuous respect for the customer. Otherwise, it will feel as phony as a politician at a barbeque shaking hands and kissing babies. When you are Mickey Mouse, the costume can disguise your true self. But when you are serving out of costume, what you show to the customer must come from who you are, not who you pretend to be.

We arrived at the Marriott Hotel in Rocky Hill near Hartford, Connecticut, after a late-evening delayed flight. As we came through the lobby entrance the front desk clerk announced, "Where have you boys been? I waited up for you, but it is way past my bedtime." The affable sparring was coming from the front desk supervisor, Lillian Koster. We felt at home! Her animation was, as always, genuine and delivered with an approach that was signature Ms. Lillian. Not only did she make us feel like home, she showed unmistakably that she truly cared!

The personal tactic does not mean customized, it means *personal*. As one customer reported when describing her bank,

“They installed this new customer relationship management system so all my correspondence from them is now tailored—they even knew my son was heading off to college this year. Now, when I call and give them my account number, they do little chit chat about my neighborhood or comment on the fact that I have a new Buick, financed by their loan department. But all that is just mechanized. When I walk in any branch no one acts like they know me or even wants to get to know me! Give me back old fashioned personal service, not this customer-ized baloney. It’s no more genuine than the ATM.”

We reference this illustration because too many units and organizations confuse personal with customized. Most of us like tailor-made service. We enjoy a service provider that knows our preferences and caters to our unique needs and expectations. But, we still want the service provider to treat us like an important and valued person. We know that inside animated service is a human, not a program.

Look for ways to get to know your customers better. When now retired “Coach” Jim Miller was the CEO of Miller Business Systems in Arlington, Texas, he held a customer appreciation day each month. Miller Business (now Corporate Express) provides office supplies to businesses. On customer appreciation day, Miller employees constructed posters of the spotlighted customer company complete with displays of what the company did or made. All employees wore special “We love _____” buttons. A special luncheon gave employees a chance to meet and talk with customer contact people they formerly only knew as a voice on the phone. The best part of the day was the opportunity for the customer’s employees to observe Miller warehouse workers “picking” the customer’s actual pending order!

RESPECT

Katie never commented on our way-too-obvious Southern accents. “You boys ain’t from around here, are you?” would not

have exactly made us feel like a neighbor. She was warm and a bit of a character, with a non-stop friendly tease. But even at the summit of her impishness, she never lost sight that we contributed to the currency that funded her wages. Katie's motivation was clearly not about tit for tat—her honor for our honorarium. She seemed genuinely thrilled and respectful we were there to eat Don's Fatso Burger.

Animation must always reflect respect. One important dimension of this is the degree to which the animation strategy fits your situation. The customer bond must make sense in its context. A complimentary bottle of champagne at a fast food drive-through would be as dissonant as a free serving of French fries at a five-star restaurant. But a congruent connection is more than matching connection with conditions or affirmation with ambiance. The connection must also be congruent with tone and style. As a former service quality instructor at the Disney Institute put it: "Disney makes magic with pixie dust. Whatever they do smells right, tastes right, sounds right as well as feels right. Bottom line, it is theatrically pure." Animation takes your customers' breath away when it is theatrically pure.

Zappos.com is fast becoming one of the country's leading online shoe retailers, with sales growing from \$1.6 million in 2000 to more than \$1 billion eight years later. It is not just their wide collection of goods or their renowned return policy that makes them great. It is the animated respect their phone reps deliver. One blogger wrote, "Awesome customer service. I didn't order the half size smaller and realized it before the shoes shipped. I was immediately helped and was so happy, then realized I went too small. I called back and again I was immediately helped and after a good laugh got the correct shoes shipped. I am sure Zappos people thought I had lost my mind but they were very supportive and had me laughing about my errors! It was the best customer support I have ever had! And I buy a lot online." Notice the reference to laughing. One of Zappos' core values is "Create fun and

a little weirdness.” Also, note the demonstration of respect. “Be humble” is another of Zappos’ core values.

Respect is also about bigheartedness. There is nothing animated about greed. A miserly approach narrows relationships rather than expands them; it closes rather than opens doors. Customers value service providers who avoid the pound-of-flesh mentality. When the balance-the-books bean counters search for all the pennies to possibly squeeze from customer transactions, they risk losing the dollars of a devoted customer who desires a respectful relationship with a bit more give in it.

Several years ago, Chip purchased an industrial-strength sleeper-sofa and had it delivered to his lake house. This was his first experience with the furniture store. The salesperson neglected to tell him the standard mattress on the \$900 sofa bed was a “pretend” mattress, one you might endure only for a short night after partying real late! After one night on it, Chip called the furniture store and was informed of the rules: An upgrade mattress would cost \$60, but the pretend mattress could not be returned. There would be no free delivery on the upgrade mattress. Mattresses do not fold up to be neatly transported in the back seat of a car.

A friend with a truck and a half-day off came to his rescue. With prior agreement from the furniture store, Chip mailed in a check for \$60 so his friend could pick up and transport the new mattress. No one called to learn if the new mattress worked better. Two weeks later, Chip received a bill for \$1.80 with a note from Mr. Rules ’R Us: “You neglected to pay tax on the upgraded mattress. Remit immediately so we can balance our books!” This was Chip’s last experience with the furniture store.

Customers remember what you give to them long after they have forgotten what you take from them. Customer devotion happens when the customer experiences service from providers willing to overlook imperfections in the math of the moment in exchange for the fairness of the future. Customers are particularly

averse to service providers who wire their systems to their own strong advantage. Respect is not what you believe, it is what you show.

SPARKLY

Don's Big Mess, it turns out, is an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink breakfast amalgamation that is rather new to the White's menu. Owner Don Uselman likes to tease his customers now and then. "We don't tamper with the main menu, mind you," Don reported about his unusual entrée. "But a few little surprises once in a while help keep our customers coming back... sometimes, just out of curiosity."

Sparkly as an animated service tactic is designed to evoke a sense of adventure in customers. Service providers using the sparkly brand of animation serve as happiness scouts, convincing us to experiment and enticing us to expand our service horizons. Succumbing to their magic, we try that unique entrée we otherwise might have avoided, or embrace a color, style, or version of clothing we might have formerly thought outside the boundaries of our taste. Persuaded by their confidence and sheer joy in discovering the new, we are jolted out of our routines in ways that renew our spirits and help us see the value of taking calculated risks.

"A visit to the dentist" is hardly the phrase you would couple with "a wonderful experience." Yet that is exactly how Wayzata Dental, a 60-year-old, 20-plus person dental clinic in Wayzata, Minnesota, envisions their goal: to become the Nordstrom of dentistry. Dr. Jason McDowell, the clinic's owner since 2004, has pursued that goal with a passion, and he has succeeded. Warm smiles with a lively "Hello, John!" greet you as you walk in the door. Amenities are offered to each guest on arrival. They may choose to relax with a heated neck pillow, listen to an iPod, hook up to WiFi, or watch a movie during the visit. The reception area contains three flat-screen televisions (listened to via headsets so

as not to disturb the other guests). There are Xbox 360 video games and a virtual aquarium. A refreshment bar completes the anti-dentist-office feel.

In a separate area of the clinic, designated the “Smile Spa,” guests can have their teeth whitened using Zoom or Lasik’s BriteSmile system. The procedures are offered with all the amenities to give the experience the feel of a mini-vacation with the result being beautiful, white teeth. No wonder the clinic is so enthusiastic about donating Smile Spa visits to silent auctions. Dr. McDowell states, “It’s a great way to give to the community and reward an auction purchaser with something they will remember every time they look in the mirror.” Creating a “Smile to Last Lifetime” is a very important theme at Wayzata Dental.

“We constantly work on making little things work right for our guests,” says Brian Denn, clinic director. For instance, follow-up calls are made to guests who have had a particularly difficult procedure. Every guest has the doctor’s business card, which includes the doctor’s home phone number. There is a consultation area where the doctors can take guests and discuss their treatment in detail. “We don’t think lying on your back with your mouth wide open is very good for communication or decision making,” says Denn. “Time is really the most valuable service we can give our guests,” says Dr. McDowell. “Each and every patient will be provided whatever time they need and never feel rushed. Even if they just need to talk about their day, our staff is happy to do this because we want every guest to feel like they are with friends.” The experiment in patient-centered dentistry has paid off well. Growth has been remarkable, even in a down economy. The sparkle of the service they provide matches the sparkle of the smiles they help create.

Customer connections are about forging strong links, not about making superficial contacts. They create a bond when they stir our emotions, not just get our attention. This means they must be laced with spirit, energy, and attitude. And the most notable take-their-breath-away service providers are masters at balancing

the familiar, the comfortable, and the respectful with the sparkly. In a word, animation is their forte.

Just like White's Restaurant, the culture that supports, encourages, and nurtures animation will be the one that attracts and retains devoted customers. And just as Wayzata Dental knows, animation is a service strategy that makes you, as well as your customer, smile. For the customer, animation stays in their memory banks for a long time afterward, or it quickly surfaces when someone mentions the service provider that created it. And it makes you, the service provider, look forward to delivering it with all the excitement of a nine-year-old waiting for Santa.

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