

**JHTA PRESIDENT'S
SPEECH TO THE
JAMAICA CUSTOMER SERVICE ASSOCIATION
JAMAICA PEGASUS HOTEL
OCTOBER 6, 2010**

"Service Excellence – The Phoenix: Restore! Renew! Revalue!"

I wish to thank the Jamaica Customer Service Association and in particular Mrs. Ilsa DurVerney, the Founder and Chairman of this almost 10 year old organization for the invitation to speak to you this morning on the critical subject of Renewing and Revaluing Service Excellence.

I am sure there are many more qualified persons in the room who have delved more deeply than I into the whys and wherefores of Customer Service. But if you will indulge me for a few minutes I wish to place the subject of Service Excellence squarely in the realm of my own experience and from there see if we can raise that consciousness to where we really need to be.

Maybe today with the proliferation of media and information, persons are far more informed about their rights as a Customer than I was growing up in Kingston. So much so, that back when I was fortunate to spend my parents money, it would hardly concern me if a Store Clerk didn't greet me with a pleasant good morning or ensure that I was recognized as being in line and soon to be attended to. It was normal to be treated as one of many rather than the individual that I was. It wasn't until I was given an opportunity to work in the Hospitality Sector 21 years ago that my awareness of the critical value of a Customer became not only apparent but imperative to my professional survival.

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Being a little up town boy (not rich mind you) but proud of my ‘above the clock’ status, I was not sufficiently cultured in allowing myself the confidence to graciously serve someone without that uncomfortable feeling of being taken advantage of. In my first week of working at the Front Desk of a hotel, I marveled at the Receptionists skillfully receiving vicious complaints and gracious compliments as if they were the same and bending over backwards to ensure their guest issues were resolved to full satisfaction. My queries to the Receptionists of why they would allow ‘that guest’ to speak to them so, was answered with a similarly calm response that it’s not personally directed at them and as they are customer we should endeavor to give each of them more than he or she expected. In theory it made sense, but in practical terms, being spoken to with sarcasm, cynicism and sometimes downright rudeness was not something I could abide by. Thankfully, I had some patient tutors who helped me to breakdown the fundamentals of my role in the service sector. One lesson taught was from a waiter, who made it very simple. He asked me if the salary I had negotiated was being paid as agreed – I said yes. He asked me what I would do if when I spent my salary with a store and they gave me a bad product in return, would I be pleased and not speak about it – to that I said of course I would be upset and seek redress. Then he said, our customer is no different, we have promised an experience and he paid for it, so it is now our job to deliver it. The next thing he said was that it was a fair exchange proposition: “If the money we want is paid for the service they expect, then we should have no difficulty making

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sure that the customer is not only satisfied, but that he returns for more and more in the future”. So since I was being paid and consistently so, I learnt how to put my intolerance aside and began learning how satisfying it was to satisfy someone else.

But it is even more instructive that my journey through customer service behavior also had a profound effect on my own expectations for service. I was now so in tune to how I was being treated when I spent my hard earned money with supermarkets, airlines, other hotels, banks, car dealers etc. It was patently clear that so many of our businesses didn't take the time to select the right persons to be on the front line of their customer service experience. We all are blessed with different gifts in life and many of us have the aptitude to learn new ones. But it is equally true that many of us ought to stick with the things we do best and very often it is not to deliver customer service.

The hiring policy of a business must be rooted in understanding the dynamics of a person's attitude. While I have a great amount of respect for qualifications, I will always lean to candidates that presents with a pleasant, confident and engaging and as we like to say, disposition - as it is indicative of him or her having an attitude that is first of all approachable and secondly trainable. Too often the personality at your front door is best suited to be the person you should send out through your back door. Training in many cases would be wasted on that person.

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“If them born with a sour attitude, believe me, them qwine dead with a sour attitude” and you should not subject the customer, who is your economic lifeline to that experience. Alternatively, there are some “diamonds in the rough” who, with opportunity, time and patience will be the reason why your customers revere your business.

It is interesting but not surprising that major drawing cards for the hospitality sector in Jamaica is the quality of the Jamaican workforce, and this is borne out by the high levels of recruitment by Cruise Ship companies and overseas Hotels. Jamaicans certainly because they want and need to work, have also developed a strong ability to please customers. Their infectious and easy smile, unreserved and unconstrained personality puts them in the forefront of customer service circles all across the world. However, we are challenged to see that permeate the rest of the so called services sector, particularly here in Jamaica. Why is this?

I submit to you that it is not that we cannot perform the customer service roll – the instances above tell that we can. I think it is more that we have not yet learnt to appreciate how to be treated as customers, thereby demanding of our fellow Jamaican who serves us to be treated as we deserve. When you spend your hard earned money with a company whose staff didn't have the courtesy to bid you good morning, flash you a genuine smile as if to magnetically extract your funds from your pocket or purse, you have cheated no one else but yourself.

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You know, if nothing else, this recession should teach us that the Consumer is king. The money for what it's worth has not dried up and disappeared; however, many of the Customers with cash have chosen not to spend it. When they do, they are far more discerning about what they want to buy and who they want to buy it from. Question: is your company on the customer's short list for a visit.

I am so intrigued by the new found openness to customer service practices by the banking sector in Jamaica. The post JDX period is a blessing to those who are prepared to take a chance and borrow. Banks that previously didn't have time to assess business plans, now want to write them for you. Interest rates that were un-moveable are fast becoming negotiable. In one week I had three commercial banks competing to write a loan for me and it was a pleasure telling the unsuccessful ones what the other did to win my trust and signature on the dotted line. But while the cost of the loan was important to me, that wasn't what I remember most from the experience. It was a Personal Loans Officer, who has for the better part of two years not let be walk into his branch. He leaves Negril and visits my office in Montego Bay, takes documents for me to sign at home and follows up with my vendor to ensure that my interest is assured. I am sure the bank trained him, but somehow I think that bank 'lucked out' when they hired him, because he came with that "can do' and "will do" attitude for his customers and of course for the bank.

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I am now at the stage where if I am not engaged and taken care of, I am prepared to leave the planned purchase and move to another store. If I go into a restaurant and the environs aren't clean and the people friendly I excuse myself and find another. I proudly take my hard earned money to a service provider who has taken the time to consider my needs and their success into account.

Every business must differentiate themselves from their many competitors by investing in the human capital of the business and not only match but far exceed the company's physical infrastructure. This may be a little touchy – but it must be said, sometimes the owner should accept that they are not the best 'face' for their business and swallow their pride and put an employee in front to take care of the customer.

Jamaica has the pre-requisites to soar like the Phoenix in the world of business, with the ingenuity and innovativeness that we are better known to exhibit when we go abroad, we can apply all of it here. But critical to success is remembering that we all deserve to be treated like the important people that we are, particularly when we call them CUSTOMERS. Remember they pay our salaries and our many bills and deserve to be surprised with kindness and in turn their word of mouth and goodwill might reward you with their loyalty.

End.