
Consumers and Stakeholders

Becoming a Welcoming Organization

Erica Brown

With so many nonprofits to support and the economy not quite at recovery, more Jewish organizations are including customer service training for professionals and lay leaders so that they can stand out and be noted for a high level of efficiency and effectiveness, politeness, and warmth. Each of our organizations wants to offer the elegance and friendliness of a Ritz-Carlton, the flexibility of an L.L. Bean, and the return policy of Nordstrom's—all leaders in the business of customer service. When we offer mediocre service and fail to smile through it, we are aware that lay leaders can and will offer their time elsewhere and that donors have many other places to invest their philanthropic dollars.

But the term “customer service” does not feel right somehow; we do not want customers to treat us merely in a transactional fashion because with transactions that are more business-like, we risk losing people after one bad encounter. We do not want people to complain, exchange, or return what they perceive as a bad experience, to use language familiar to customers. Instead, we want stakeholders: individuals who are highly engaged, informed, and committed. A stakeholder does not leave us after one bad experience. A stakeholder understands that in all relationships mistakes happen. In transactions, one bad interaction spells doom, whereas in relationships, one bad interaction is an accepted norm and an occasion for learning and improvement. Customer service is too shallow a term to create and cultivate the kind of relationships that will ultimately make the difference in our work.

At the same time that we want stakeholders, however, our professionals are often too busy creating and reinforcing consumer-like relationships. If we want stakeholders, then we need to treat people like stakeholders. Contacting a “customer” once a year for a donation, sending a thank-you that is really a request for more money, and offering only one way to be involved—by check—is not going to create a cadre of supporters, volunteers, and leaders. Neither will scripting every speech, rubber-stamping decisions, or e-mailing every “conversation” instead of meeting face to face and talking. The breakdown in the lay/professional partnership is hardly a surprise when you consider how far this once engaged partnership has moved for many from a relationship to an obligation to a chore.

One word that best captures the relationship we are trying to create is not service but *hospitality*. If we shifted our orientation from transactional to hospitable, we might notice a sea change in relationships. If I treat everyone like a guest in my own home every time they come into my office, I am signaling to them that I care in a more intense and profound way about them and about the organization where my office sits. One business guru who has mastered what he calls legendary hospitality is Danny Meyer, the head of a conglomerate of restaurants

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known for the way they treat guests; his restaurants include Gramercy Tavern, Union Square Café, and Eleven. In his 2008 book, *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*, Meyer makes the case for hospitality:

Hospitality is the foundation of my business philosophy. Virtually nothing else is as important as how one is made to feel in any business transaction. Hospitality exists when you believe the other person is on your side. The converse is just as true. Hospitality is present when something happens for you. It is absent when something happens to you. These two simple prepositions—for and to—express it all.

He makes a key distinction between service and hospitality and the importance of knowing the difference between the two:

Understanding the distinction between service and hospitality has been at the foundation of our success. Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient feel. Service is a monologue—we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards for service. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a dialogue. To be on a guest's side requires listening to that person with every sense, and following up with a thoughtful gracious response. It takes both great service and great hospitality to rise to the top.

Elsewhere Meyer suggests that service is what people expect, but that hospitality is what they get that they did not expect—the gifts of kindness and graciousness that have staying power and make a customer return again and again. In the category of legendary hospitality for Meyer is the experience of the couple who came into one of his restaurants to celebrate their anniversary. Knowing this, the waiter offered them each a complimentary glass of champagne. Since this offer was expected, it falls in the category of service rather than hospitality. But when the husband asked the waiter if an expensive bottle of champagne that he put in the freezer and forgot to remove would explode, and the waiter said yes, the husband panicked and told his wife he would have to excuse himself. The waiter calmed him down, asked for his address, and then sent someone to remove the bottle of champagne from the freezer, leaving a card and a small gift on the kitchen counter—all at no charge. Meyer's attitude about this encounter is that it was the cheapest advertising he could hope for because he knows that legendary hospitality is what people remember, what people share with others, and what makes people return.

We have our own tradition of legendary hospitality; it is called the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orkhim*, welcoming guests. Technically speaking, the word “welcoming” does not fully capture the true meaning of this mitzvah. To welcome is merely the way that we make our initial encounter—it is the doormat rather than the sustained relationship over time. Instead, the infinitive *lehakhnis* means to help one enter, to bring someone in, to take someone who is on the outside of our orbit and put him or her within our universe of concerns.

There are many laws and traditions that help us accomplish this mitzvah. Welcoming guests is not merely about inviting someone to dinner; it is about making our table into a place of safety and comfort for those most vulnerable, particularly strangers. Newcomers, those not in nuclear families, and people suffering loneliness should be on the top of our guest list according to Jewish law. Our most important meal of the year, the Seder, emphasizes this by inviting all

who are hungry to come and eat. This invitation graces the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in Emma Lazarus's poem and is from a talmudic passage about a special scholar, Rabbi Huna:

Raba said to Rafram bar Papa: "Tell me some of the good deeds which Rabbi Huna has done." He replied: "Of his childhood I do not recollect anything, but of his old age I do. When he had a meal he would open the door wide and declare, "Whosoever is in need let him come and eat"' (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 20b).

According to an ancient rabbinic text, we should take pleasure in being able to provide a sense of welcome and belonging: "Be happy as you sit at your table and the hungry are enjoying your hospitality" (Derech Eretz Zuta 9).

But we need to go further back from the Talmud, all the way to Genesis, where Abraham becomes the primary model for the commandment to welcome guests:

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them (Genesis 18).

If you read this text carefully, you notice a few critical details that help us understand the key to welcoming guests. Abraham sits outside of his tent in the heat of the day, not a particularly comfortable time to be out in the Near Eastern sun, specifically on the lookout for those in need. We all recognize people with that Abraham-radar; they make it a point of reaching out to new employees, new neighbors, new faces. They do not worry about the embarrassment of a "no" when they ask, "Are you new here?" They care more about connecting and communicating warmth than saving face.

Abraham oddly bows low to his guests, a gesture that suggests humility. A humble posture makes sense in response to the stranger because in actuality, it is the stranger who feels humble. Those who do not know the language, the inside jokes, the mannerisms of the citizens and residents of a place can feel the indignity of ignorance. Abraham lowers himself as if to suggest that he has no upper hand merely because he is of the place. He puts himself on equal standing with three people he has never met.

The text also emphasizes speed. Abraham insists that his guests rest themselves, wash, and allow him to feed them. He rushes his household to prepare an elaborate and expensive meal. He does not offer his guests a snack, but the best of what he has. There is a Jewish custom that the owners of a home should be the one serving guests because they are least likely to be stingy with their food.

We learn from Abraham that one must accompany guests out of our homes a distance of four cubits—the equivalent of about six feet. We are not rushing

them out or slamming a door in their faces when a meal is done. In fact, *hakhnasat orkhim* has little to do with food, but has everything to do with welcoming people into our space, embracing their presence when they are with us, and ushering them out with a nurturing hand by moving our feet in consonance with theirs. We are sad when our guests leave.

Contemporary scholar Blu Greenberg writes about the importance of teaching children this fundamental Jewish value in *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (1988):

Hachnasat orchim [welcoming guests] is a wonderful mitzvah for children: a) it is a concrete model from which to learn the art of sharing; b) children have an opportunity to become acquainted with all different kinds of people, including non-Jews; c) it reminds them, periodically, that they are not the center of the universe.

You cannot be a Jew alone. Community is at the heart of our people, and we build communities one relationship at a time, moving people from the outside of our world to the intimacy of our lives. When we educate people about this value we are communicating to everyone—not only children—that we are not the center of the universe. The tension between self and other need not be a tension at all.

Using Abraham's legendary hospitality as a precedent, we begin to understand the difference between service and hospitality, between a customer and a friend. Abraham sat at the threshold bringing guests into his tent. Too often, we stand behind doors and now, security desks, complaining that not enough people are members, joiners, or participants. That is different from placing ourselves on the other side of the threshold, looking out for strangers and ushering them into our spaces or letting go of the language of insiders and outsiders, buildings and builders altogether. We often believe that if we could just get someone through the doors, we would have a customer for life. That is different from believing that if we could just reach out to meet people where they are, then we might have a friend for life who will accompany us to programs and services simply by virtue of being part of a relationship of meaning.

Any conversation about *hakhnasat orkhim* must also consider what it means to be a good guest, not only a good host. In the traditional grace after meals, the guest blesses the host: "May the Merciful One bless the heads of this household, their entire family, and all that is theirs." This is a public, formalized statement of thanks. The Talmud also mentions some private conversations or gossip that guests might think or say to others. All hosts take a risk when they invite a guest into their homes and into their lives. Others can and do inspect, reflect, criticize, and judge us in our most intimate spaces. For this reason, the Talmud offers us some guidance:

What does a good guest say? "How much trouble my host has gone to for me. How much meat he has set before me. How much wine he has given me. How many cakes he has served me. And all this trouble he has gone to for my sake!" But an inconsiderate guest, what does he say? "What kind of effort did the host make for me? I have eaten only one slice of bread. I have eaten only one piece of meat, and I have drunk only one cup of wine! Whatever trouble the host went to was done only for the sake of his wife and children" (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 58A)

Good guests notice and praise in detail all that a host does. Inconsiderate guests diminish a host's selflessness and minimize a host's efforts. The noted

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scholar of ethics, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (2000), observes this dilemma in his own house:

I know that when my wife and I entertain, we spend hours preparing the house and planning the event so that our guests can spend as pleasant an evening as possible. The thought that some of them might afterwards dissect us critically pains me. And I don't think I am being paranoid in suspecting that many of them do so; I realize how often I have acted that way myself.

When we put ourselves out for others, especially strangers, it is painful to be skewered or be the subject of malicious conversation. Instead, we might take a recommendation from Miss Manners:

It is easy to be the perfect houseguest. All you have to do is to remember everything you've learned in the last few years about being totally honest, in touch with your feelings, able to communicate your needs and committed to doing what makes you feel comfortable. And then forget it.

She mentions that the best gift a guest can offer is silence and a thank-you note. Maybe this fear of guests was the inspiration for something my Zeide, of blessed memory, used to always say about company: "Put a dollar in the *pushke* (the *tzedakah* box) when they come and two dollars when they go!"

In a culture of entitlement, sometimes we extend legendary hospitality only to be met with criticism and dissatisfaction. It is hard to maintain the enthusiasm and energy needed to provide great hospitality when nothing we do is good enough to make someone else happy. For this reason, it is important that we help educate people about what it means to be a good guest. Some people lack the self-awareness to understand when their incivility or rudeness is dampening any chances of creating a relationship.

Legendary hospitality can have legendary consequences. In the story of Abraham, it is only later that his mystery guests reveal themselves to be angels delivering a message of relief and redemption for Abraham and Sarah. After decades of barrenness, Sarah would finally become a mother, and Abraham would finally get his long-awaited heir. We cannot always expect such results from our efforts, but we can remove from the story its mythic dimensions and appreciate its most basic lesson, one seminal to the ethos and Jewish values that should permeate our nonprofits. Sometimes when we bring strangers into our lives we turn them into friends. Sometimes, they even become angels.

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