

YOUR BUSINESS

Passion for job leads to happy customers

By JAMES WATSON

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Have you ever gone to a familiar place -- a place you've visited every year for nearly your entire life -- knowing that the visit would be your last?

The New York Mets have played baseball in Shea Stadium since 1964; 2008 marks their final season in the ballpark that's been a second home to thousands of loyal fans for 45 years. I recently made what likely will be my last pilgrimage to those hallowed grounds. (Apologies to Red Sox fans who harbor bitter memories of 1986.)

As I made my way out of the mezzanine tunnel on that Saturday afternoon, I was greeted by an enthusiastic gray-haired usher who offered to help me find my seat. What followed was a lesson in passion -- passion for vocation and passion for delighting customers.

Mr. Bartelli told me he began working full time as a Shea Stadium usher when he was 18 years old. Since graduating high school in 1973, he's worked nearly every game at Shea and has witnessed more baseball lore than most of the iconic sports writers and players who've also worked there during the past four decades. In fact, he shared half a dozen amusing stories with me in the few minutes we spent talking in the aisle.

Then he said something that really hit home: "People have asked me how I can clean off seats for a living, but most people don't understand. To me it's easy because I feel I have the greatest job in the world."

This man clearly loves what he does, and his enthusiasm is contagious. I could see it in the faces and reactions of every fan he greeted that afternoon.

The more I spoke with Mr. Bartelli, the more I realized how genuine his passion is. He explained, "Some of these fans -- kids and adults -- have been looking forward to coming out to the ballpark for weeks. I may be the first guy they talk to when they get here, so I gotta make sure it's exciting for them."

He may not have an MBA, but Mr. Bartelli definitely understands the importance of delivering a great customer experience. He knows his role in the process, how he as an individual employee at the ballpark can do certain things in a certain way to improve the experience of each fan he greets. And he makes a point to do those things consistently, throughout the entire season.

After being around Mr. Bartelli for just those few minutes, I began thinking about my own passion for my work. Sure, I like what I do, but do I exude that same level of enthusiasm that Mr. Bartelli does? How does my approach to what I do affect the experience of my clients?

And how about your company? How well do the people in your organization understand the connection between what they do and what your customers feel? Are employees purposefully trained to connect the dots between their actions and their customers' reactions? Do they have that clear line of sight, and do they follow it regularly? Or is the customer experience left to chance, assuming that if you "hire good people," they'll figure it out and execute with passion?

Beyond just teaching your employees to see the impact of their actions on the customer experience, what else can you do to cultivate their passion for customers?

According to the Strativity Group, the way to do this is to treat your employees the same way that you want them to treat your best customers: "You can't force passion, but you can nurture it. Treat your employees well, surprise them with your care, and they'll care for your business. Show them your commitment and they will reciprocate."

Mr. Bartelli doesn't just wipe off seats for a living; he delivers a first-class customer experience on a major-league level. And so can the rest of us, if we keep our eye on the ball and keep a clear line of sight between our actions and our customers' experience and follow it with passion.

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