

Be Who You Represent

By Cindy Cambell

RECENTLY SAT DOWN FOR DINNER in a well-known chain restaurant during my travels. Arriving in town the night before a long week of training, I decided a decent meal would be a good idea. Now, I've dined at this national chain a number of times and I always leave with a very positive feeling about food quality and customer service, so it surprised me when the proverbial wheels came off the wagon on this particular visit.

It started out as it always has: I'm seated, menu provided, drink delivered, order placed. It did seem to take an exceptionally long time for my simple order to arrive, and when it did, I immediately noticed that it wasn't right. Knowing that things like this happen, I politely pointed it out to the server. Without comment, he picked up the plate and took it back to the kitchen.

After 20 minutes, I asked if he thought it would be much longer. His response started with a heavy sigh and finished with, "I'll check with the kitchen." An additional 25 minutes passed and at that point, I was done. The server stopped again at the table and told me he would recheck with the kitchen, to which I responded, "No. I'm done. I believe I've waited long enough. If you would give me my bill for the drink, I'd appreciate it." Again, without comment, he briefly stepped away and came back with my bill.

As he set it down, another server arrived at the table with my order, which, frustratingly, was still not correct. The server silently stood looking at me, presumably waiting to see if I wanted to keep it this time around. "Sorry, still not what I ordered," I said. He shrugged his shoulders and curtly responded, "Well, I don't know what to tell you. It's not my fault. I gave the right order to the kitchen." In fairness to this young man, his observation could have been accurate—it's entirely possible that he had entered

the order correctly and kitchen staff had misread it twice. Here's my point: The issue wasn't in the mistake happening; it was in the server's failure to understand his role as a representative of the brand.

Representing the Brand

We all work for someone. Whether you work for a private company, a public organization, or even if you're self-employed, in some way we all represent a larger entity. Let's say for example that you work for a municipality as a parking ambassador. You may be the only city representative with whom members of the public have ever personally interacted. At that very moment, you are the face of the city. Your attitude, demeanor, word choice, and body language help shape their opinion of you, your agency, and of the city—the entire city.

What about service limitations, agency policies, or even errors that are out of our control? What happens when the customer is unhappy and you're left holding the proverbial bag on behalf of the city? Is it OK to simply shrug your shoulders and declare that it's not your fault? The public will not always be satisfied with the answers and options you are able to give. In that moment, you have the responsibility to recognize that you are the city, and even when you don't agree with the options, you must

always be who you represent. With your words and actions, you have the potential to shape perceptions and future decisions about you and of your greater agency, even if the circumstances are completely out of your control. Setting our personal viewpoints aside can be difficult. Because we represent a larger brand, we must consistently fight the urge to disassociate ourselves from regulations or circumstances with which we disagree. This type of professional disassociation serves no one well.

The Takeaway

That night at the restaurant, I left feeling frustrated. I know that I will never go back to that specific restaurant, and it will probably be a very long time before I set foot inside another of the franchise locations. I committed to telling others about my bad experience, knowing that many of them may adopt my viewpoint and avoid experiencing it personally.

One more notable thing to share about this experience. As I walked away that night, I was also thinking about situations early in my career where I'm certain I reflected poorly on my personal brand and that of my employer. On many occasions throughout my career, I know I've made similar customer service blunders where I lost sight of my brand and who I represented. The lessons are there if we're willing to recognize and learn from them. 



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