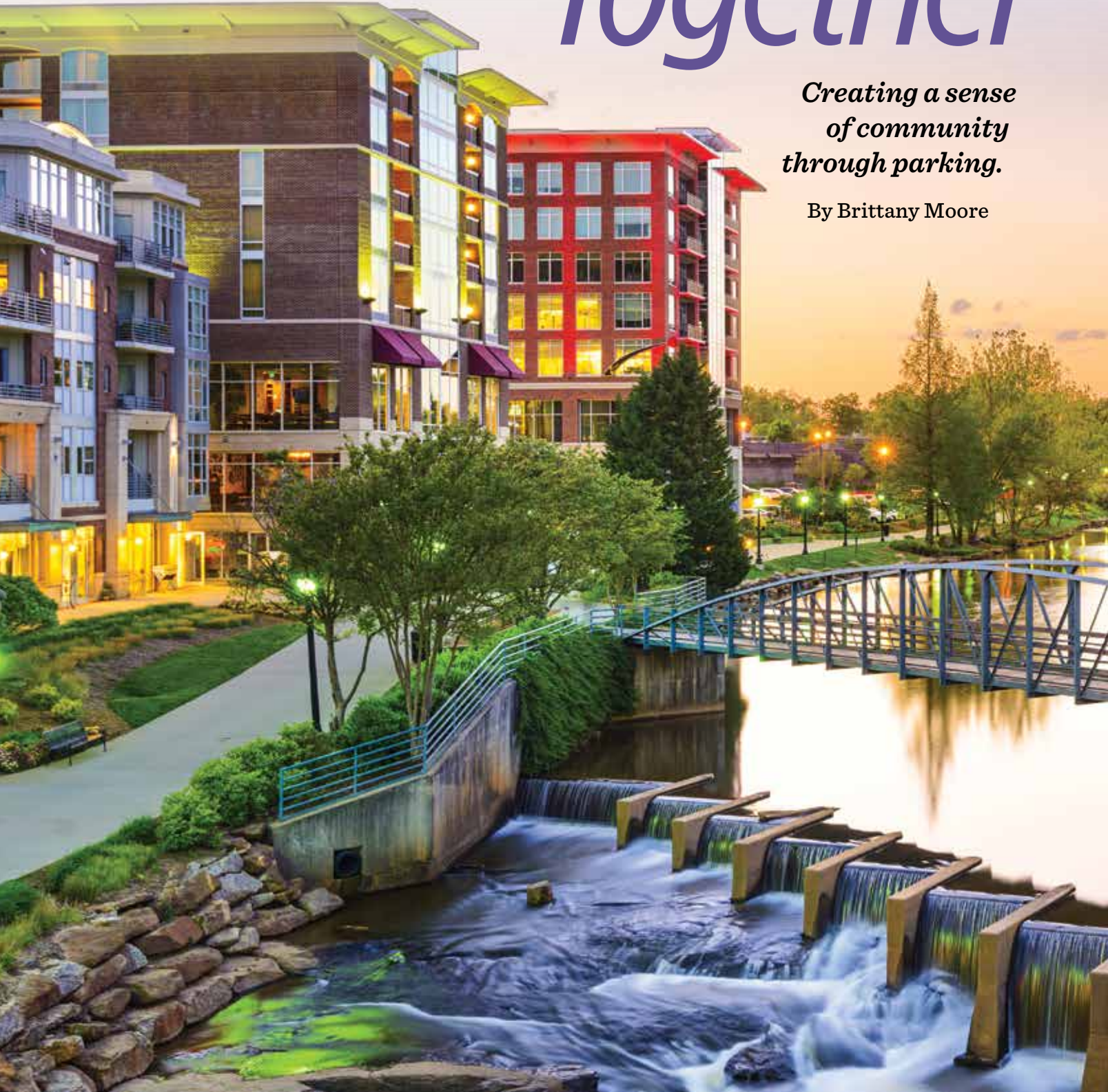




Bringing It All Together

*Creating a sense
of community
through parking.*

By Brittany Moore



A S A POSITIVE PERSON WITH A MARKETING BACKGROUND, it was initially difficult to step into a role with parking. Sure, I enjoy a challenge, but the negative connotation surrounding parking weighed heavily. There was little public support, morale was low, and communication was lacking between departments, community stakeholders, and event venues.

I thought it would be a good idea to bring some of my marketing practices into parking. I try to look at things in municipal government, parking included, through the eyes of the customer. This does not mean giving the customer whatever he or she wants and never saying no, but it does mean aiming focus toward customers—their needs, feedback, and overall experience. Losing sight of the customer is doing a disservice not only to the customer, but to your operation as well. Now, let's be real, in the parking business you are not going to make everyone happy, but small steps in the right direction sure take a lot of stress out of the day-to-day.

The City of Greenville, S.C., has 11 garages, four surface lots, and 800 on-street parking spaces,

totaling close to 9,000 spaces. Many of the facilities are tied to development projects in the form of hotels, office complexes, event venues, residences, restaurants, and retail. Here are a few tips from Greenville to connect with the community through parking:

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Small Touches Matter

Small details make all the difference to customers as they walk to and from their vehicles. Painting elevator walls and landings is a simple wayfinding technique that also brightens the garage. We took it a step further and applied an epoxy paint with speckled flakes to landing floors. It took a few tries to get this right, but our maintenance team found the perfect color combo that hides stains and gives the garage that polished look. That paired with clean, new signage and tiled elevator flooring make the areas more approachable.

We started making these changes, and, much to our surprise, customers noticed. We partnered with local high schools to hang student artwork in one of our garages; it serves as not only a focal point but as part of the overall wayfinding package. We were awarded an IPMI award for this project in 2015.

Another garage has wind chimes hanging in an adjacent breezeway that provide a relaxing cadence on the walk to work. Local maps are hung in each garage that detail public restrooms, ATMs, and major landmarks. These maps are in frames with printed inserts that allow changes to be made easily and affordably as our city grows. Another simple replacement that truly made a difference involved trash cans and clearance-height bars. I've come quite a way in my short parking career—now I get excited to order both! You have no idea how tattered these look until you replace them. It is an easy fix that makes garages look cleaner, is highly visible, and that people notice.

Taking Ownership

Our employees are ambassadors for our city, and we urge them to take pride in that role as well as in their workspaces. The city has full-time maintenance employees who are each assigned to two garages. They are in charge of cleaning, minor repairs, lighting, painting, sweeping, and removing trash. We encourage them to get to know those parking in our garages. This has helped to reduce calls to our office, and customers seem pleased with the garage aesthetics.

Employees are praised for going the extra mile—helping a customer in need, even if that means carrying

a box a block away to someone's office. When hiring, make a concerted effort to build a team that shares your philosophies and goals. If you are lucky enough to find a group that wants to put in the extra effort, take on special projects, and make customers happy, hold on and don't let go! More importantly, when they take the time to go the extra mile—for example, come in early to paint an entire stairwell top to bottom at the request of a hotel—you as a manager need to take the time to admire the work and praise all involved.

Building Community Relationships

The importance of building community relationships cannot be stressed enough and has been one of the keys to Greenville parking's operational success. We meet regularly with downtown merchants, hotel and concert venue staff, and homeowners associations. These meetings take place in various forms: face-to-face, phone calls, emails, board meetings, and lunches. Building these relationships keeps our operation running efficiently with fewer headaches.

We make sure stakeholders know when we are performing any maintenance work in the garages, whether sweeping, blowing, lighting repair, touch-up painting, or pressure washing, not only because we want them to be informed but because we want them to know the garage they use every day receives just as much attention as the next. More importantly, they know who to call with any concerns before elevating it to a higher level.

We ask for input on paint colors, signage wording, and cleaning schedules. We ask for suggestions and share our goals with them. Quick and effective communication makes all the difference. Greenville continues to be generous with parking specials to thank our customers and encourage downtown visitors. Every weekend, parking in our 900-space garage and in on-street spaces is free. We offer free parking specials for major holidays citywide. This is a perk that comes with great support and input from our downtown businesses and visitors. Programs such as these, along with other efforts, have really helped shape the image of parking in Greenville (outside of enforcement, of course).



Signage

It only took a few months in my role to see the low-hanging aesthetic fruit in our garages. I often heard that the garages were confusing and drab and not user-friendly. Our monthly parkers could navigate the garages, but guests were lost. Having six hotels and more than a dozen residential complexes attached to the garages meant working toward a better solution. That became top priority.

Our sign campaign began with an inventory of current signage and a list of desired signage. This turned into quite a large project involving the city's public information team, but it produced great results. Fresh signs were strategically placed for pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and we added signage in elevators and stairwells, including maps on the ground levels. All of this reduced confusion, and we started to get those (rare) parking compliments. With 11 garages this is an ongoing project, but we are well on our way.

The most important thing to note when starting a project like this is to stay organized. Be prepared to meet, take pictures, keep a tape measure at close reach (so important—those signs look much smaller when looking up at them from the ground), spend lots of time in your garages, and add more signs even after you thought you were finished. It is no easy task, and to be successful requires a fresh set of eyes. Have someone who's not a frequent parker walk and then drive the garages with you. Let that person point out what you may be missing. After your signs are in place, keep an eye on them and make sure your staff does too. Do not be surprised if that sign in the elevator only lasts two months before it needs to be replaced. Be smart and save yourself some time by ordering in advance spares of the small signs that might be more prone to damage.

Customer Service

You always hear it, but any organization is a reflection of its employees. An employee's attitude, determination, and demeanor all translate to his or her work. It is important to take the time to invest in, encourage,

and get to know your employees, especially those in customer-facing positions. It all starts with hiring the right people and giving them the tools to succeed in this business.

I am a firm believer that mistakes are inevitable, but you must use them as an opportunity to learn. I am not afraid to admit that we should have done something differently and to make adjustments after the fact, but I will support employees if they were doing what they felt was right.

We offer a wide range and many types of training. The most effective seems to be discussing real scenarios with employees and how they handled or would handle each situation. Sometimes this means analyzing phone calls, event operations, and field decisions. Mostly, we try to take advantage of group training scenarios, but we take time for one-on-one trainings if the need arises.

Training should be positive, informative, and concise. Get your point across, address the tone and dialogue, ask for feedback, and offer advice. Engage the employee in the training to ensure you are making progress. Ultimately, you want to get to a point that you trust your employees to carry on your customer-service mentality when you are no longer in the room. This takes time and requires a lot of attention.

I have found sometimes a pat on the back (and maybe a lunch) is the best motivation you can offer. Feeling appreciated goes a long way—it is something we as managers need to be reminded of because with customer service you should always be striving for more. Complacency is unacceptable.

So there you have it: Make the extra effort, build those relationships, provide exceptional customer service, and pay attention to the details. But also take the time to invest in your employees and get involved in your operation. Remember, it is all what you make it. ♦



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