

## **Some Things Never Change, And the Golden Rule is One of Them**

*Woodall's Campground Management – From My View – February 2001*

Some time ago I heard a radio advertisement by a large Sacramento-based independent grocery chain that caught my attention. It described a level of service that should also be offered by RV parks if they are to be successful.

The advertisement talked about the letters received from satisfied customers and described one of those letters. The letter told of a customer's little girl who had been stricken with chicken pox before she was able to visit Santa Claus and tell him her Christmas wishes. During the mother's visit to the grocery, she noticed that Santa Claus was there, and an idea popped into her mind. She approached Santa and explained her little girl's misfortune and asked Santa to make a house call to a nearby neighborhood. Santa indicated that he would need to get the manager's okay, but that he would try. In just a few hours, the doorbell rang and the jingle of Santa's bells was heard to the absolute delight of the sick little girl.

This is an example of how a smart business went beyond the mediocre, beyond what was required and beyond normal service levels to satisfy the unusual request of a customer. How is it that this large chain would allow their managers such latitude in responding to a customer's rather presumptuous request? Why did the manager approve Santa's venturing off of store property? Didn't the manager realize that there were reasons why he should not allow an employee to do this? Didn't he realize that if this store employee had a traffic accident the store would undoubtedly be liable?

Why was this customer's request even considered? There is only one answer - the company's core belief, a core policy transferred to every employee from store managers down to the stock clerks and carryout personnel. What is it? It's the same policy that drove Tom Raley, the founder of Raley's, who opened his first store in a small California town in the mid-1930s: *"Treat your customers the way you'd like to be treated and they will come back."*

He must have been right because today there is a chain of Raley's 151 super stores that offer groceries and drug stores. This chain has constantly been ranked among the very top of its competitors in nationwide surveys. A look at their web page reveals that once again, for the second time in four years, this chain has been voted the No. 1 supermarket in the nation. It ranked No. 1 in courtesy to customers, in fast check out, in produce, in meat and in cleanliness.

Today, this supermarket chain is run by Tom Raley's daughter, her husband, their four

daughters and four sons-in-law. The web page declares that: "Together the family - along with a large and loyal family of employees - is leading the firm into a bright new century of growth. Along the way, customer service has remained a priority." Current management declares that the original philosophy continues to be the company's "Golden Rule."

Now you say to me, "Okay, so that is a nice story but what does it have to do with me?" Let me tell you! I just had a conversation with one of my son's customers, who deadheads his diesel motorhome over 125 miles each way to have my son service it. Why? Because my son understands customer service.

Here's his story about an RV park he recently visited on California's coast. He had stayed in this park many times and liked a certain area of the park. He called to make a reservation and asked if a site in that area was available. The park employee told him that they were all reserved. When he and a friend arrived in their motorhomes, they noted that there were four empty sites in the area they had requested. Assuming that this park practiced good customer service, they assured themselves that the sites must have been reserved for someone arriving later. Surely, if they had become available due to a cancellation, their request would have been noted when their reservation was processed upon their arrival and they would have been given those sites.

However, the next day and the following day, four of the sites they had requested were still empty. On the third day, a motorhome was assigned to one of them. On the fourth day, our congenial guest's curiosity got the best of him. He approached the occupant of the site and asked, "Did you reserve this site ahead of your arrival?" To his astonishment, the answer was "no." Then he asked, "Did you request it when you arrived?" Now he was even more taken a back when the guest replied, "No, they just gave it to me when I arrived."

What is the end result of this story? Well, this RVer told me it is doubtful that he will ever go back to that park again. Of course, he has shared his unpleasant experience with his friend. I wonder how many more. I know of at least four and I'm sure there are more.

Thinking back to the story about the core policy of the grocery chain, I cannot help but wonder how that park employee, owner or manager would like to have the very same experience at some other park.

Is this a rare, isolated case? I don't think so. I've heard similar stories, and I remember reading an article in this publication about an RV owner being assigned a back-in site that was too small for his motorhome and being required to unhook a tow vehicle when

several large pull-thru sites were available. I surmise that in this case the park employee may not have even looked to see if the sites were available. Perhaps he was involved in a conversation or watching a favorite TV program when the phone rang or perhaps he was in the middle of his lunch. I don't know why he did it, but I am sure he did not treat this guest like he would have liked to be treated if he had been on the other end of the line.

Here are two diametrically opposed examples of different philosophies of service. In one case the firm had set the standard, then made that standard of customer service known to all employees. When this request to have Santa visit a customer's sick little girl came, the manager knew what he was expected to do and that he would get the backing of the firm's management. Instead of just saying no, which would have been easy, he found a way to deliver customer service with a WOW! How many people do you think this little girl's mother told about this experience?

Today's RVers expect and have a right to expect common courtesy and a satisfactory level of service from every park they enter. We must remember that they do not have to tolerate such inexcusably poor service. If nothing else, they can buy their own lot in a condo park paying up to \$150,000 to ensure decent treatment. They are doing it every day. In fact, the individual who told me this story is a condo lot owner in a very upscale park in Southern California.

The J D Power survey of 12,000 owners of 1997 model recreational vehicles should give us food for thought. It revealed that 57% of those responding could not say that their last camping experience was either "very satisfactory," or even just satisfactory." Why? There were likely many reasons, but other surveys indicate that one of those reasons is the lack of good service and hospitality.

At a National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds (ARVC) convention a few years back, a speaker told of a discussion with a colleague regarding the customer always being right. The colleague said, "Of course, we all know that the customer is not always right, but the customer is always served." In my mind, that even falls short of the proper goal. I'm sure that the park employee who allowed the above incident to occur would say, "OK, so what, I served him, didn't I? He got a space didn't he? He should be thankful we built this park and are here at all. What is he complaining about anyway? After all, we put in long hours and put up with a lot of complaining campers just like him. If he doesn't like it, let him go someplace else next time."

To that I would say, "He probably will." But wouldn't it be better for our business if we could all absorb the philosophy of Tom Raley: 'Treat your customers the way you'd like to

be treated and they'll come back." If we could all say that has always been and still is our Golden Rule, what would the benefit be?

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