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How To Deal With Service Problems Before They Worsen

Service failures don't have to doom your client relationships, but why not do everything possible to prevent them in the first place?

By John M. Greene

Service mistakes happen to the best of companies. And whether you've been in business 30 years or three years, it will most likely happen to you. The question is: When it *does* happen, how will you deal with it?

A few years ago, an excellent client, a company we had worked with for years, had an executive flying from Boston to Texas, where I would be handing her off to one of our affiliates when she got off the plane in Dallas. Unfortunately, when she landed, the chauffeur was nowhere to be found and for some reason the company was unable to track his whereabouts. As it turns out, the chauffeur went to the wrong airport and I had one very unhappy corporate vice president to deal with.

I immediately went into *mea culpa* mode as it would have been easy to blame the affiliate, but it was my call and I needed to take the hit. I contacted the client personally, made a thousand apologies, offered her free transportation anywhere she wanted to go (even that I would drive her personally), and prayed she had a forgiving nature. Turns out she did. She's still our client.

The key here is not to ignore the problem hoping it will go away. Only the client will disappear, at least until she pops up on social media and lambasts your company. What's the theory? Happy customers tell one person; unhappy customers tell 10? That sounds about right, unless she has 1,000 BFFs on Facebook.

We handle 200-300 runs per day, all with the potential to go south at any time. But in an industry with a low profit margin, you can't afford mistakes. There must be a very low margin

for error. Fortunately, we have seen less than a 1% occurrence of error. Any ground transportation company with a culture that believes bad things will happen no matter what they do will not be long for an industry so corporate dependent. Yes, mistakes will happen, but the key is not to cultivate a breeding ground where they are likely and then ignore them when they do occur. It all starts with a preventative approach in two areas: your vehicles and your chauffeurs. This means you have to deal with potential mechanical breakdowns and human relations.

We are in the transportation business, which means our vehicles have to get from Point A to Point B. Now you can, and should, load up your vehicles with as many high-tech toys and gadgets as possible. GPS, on-board cameras and iPads are all tools to help track chauffeurs and vehicles as well as monitor what is going on inside and outside the vehicle at all times. But a warehouse full of iPads and Garmin's will be of no help if the vehicle can't make it out of the garage or decides to shut down in rush-hour traffic. This is why I can't overstress enough the importance of regular maintenance. Our vehicles do 100,000 miles per year, so we know we have to meet that insatiable thirst for motor oil and change it frequently, sometimes twice per month. We also take added measures, such as trying whenever possible to lease our cars for only a two-year period to reduce the likelihood of mechanical malfunctions.

Still, the key to any successful limousine company is the chauffeur. And we all have our horror stories. When I first started in the business, I sent a chauffeur down to Cape Cod

to pick up an important client at the airport. The client was in a bit of a rush but that didn't stop my chauffeur from stopping at a Dunkin Donuts for coffee and a powdered doughnut, which he proceeded to eat while driving — while wearing a black suit. By the time he opened the door to let out the client, he looked like Al Pacino in *Scarface*, with white powder covering his face and clothes. Needless to say, our company went into apology mode and that chauffeur is now navigating the Dunkin Donuts drive-thru in somebody else's car. The key to making sure your chauffeurs give a good impression is education. You wouldn't let a doctor with no education perform surgery on you, so why trust an uneducated chauffeur with your million-dollar client? Training is of utmost importance. Geographical knowledge, proper driving etiquette and the art of interacting with clients are all critical components. Knowing when to speak and when not



to speak, knowing the quickest and all alternate routes to a destination, are all of paramount importance.

We also have used companies that provide "mystery passengers," or "ghost riders," as is known in the industry, who report back on just how well chauffeurs perform their duties, their demeanor, driving ability, attire, ability to cope with distractions (i.e. detours, bad weather), etc. We have found them to be a valuable resource in evaluating and critiquing performance. *Bottom line: It's better to train your chauffeur without the client in the car.*

The human factor also includes dispatchers, who need to know how to give clear, accurate instructions while maintaining a calm demeanor during peak business. They are responsible for giving the chauffeur enough time to get from one place to another, and must be clear in making sure the chauffeur is aware the pickup time is at 9AM and not 9PM (and to use military time to diffuse

any possible misunderstanding).

Murphy's Law says that if something can go wrong, it will. I am not sure who Murphy was, but it wouldn't surprise me if he once owned a limousine company. The key is that when something does go wrong, you handle it quickly and professionally. I once had a client who, for numerous reasons, we failed to pick up on *three separate occasions in one week*. How many apologies can you make? It came to the point where on the fourth try I sent two cars just to make sure everything went smoothly.

It all worked out in the end, but at the cost of pulling that backup car away from a paying job. Still, it was worth it to keep a good client. Ultimately, it's much easier to burn a bridge than to mend one. **LCT**

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)		
PUBLICATION TITLE Limousine, Charter & Tour	PUBLICATION NO. 1097-4814	FILING DATE 10/1/2014
ISSUE FREQUENCY Monthly	NO. OF ISSUES PUBLISHED ANNUALLY 12	ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICE \$0
COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION Bobit Business Media, 3520 Challenger Street, Torrance, CA 90503-1640, Los Angeles County		
COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF PUBLISHER'S HEADQUARTERS Bobit Business Media, 3520 Challenger Street, Torrance, CA 90503-1640, Los Angeles County		
FULL NAMES AND COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESSES OF PUBLISHER, EDITOR, AND MANAGING EDITOR PUBLISHER: Sara McLean, Bobit Business Media, 3520 Challenger Street, Torrance, CA 90503-1640, Los Angeles County EDITOR: Martin Romjue, Bobit Business Media, 3520 Challenger Street, Torrance, CA 90503-1640, Los Angeles County SENIOR EDITOR: Tim Crowley, Bobit Business Media, 3520 Challenger Street, Torrance, CA 90503-1640, Los Angeles County		
OWNER COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS Ty F. Bobit, CEO, Bobit Business Media, 3520 Challenger Street, Torrance, CA 90503-1640, Los Angeles County		
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