

Guest Service / Customer Experience Mgmt**Bang for the Buck: Enhancing Your Team's Loyalty Know-How***By Shannon Dooley, Operations Manager - Quality Assurance Practice, LRA Worldwide**Ms. Dooley*

I have a confession to make: I am a hoarder.

No, I'm not a hoarder of the canned goods, collectibles, or cats variety; rather, for me the thrill comes in the form of points, miles, or nights. I bask in the delight of the chase - strategizing how to maximize my earnings through codeshares and credit cards, double points and triple mile challenges. Chances are that if there is a loyalty program out there, I'm probably in it. In fact, I'm willing to bet that some of you reading this article right now are nodding feverishly in agreement, perhaps wondering if I will share some of my tricks of the trade. Sorry, but I keep those (loyalty) cards close to the vest.

As our good friends at American Express like to say, "membership has its privileges." Indeed, membership is quite privileged when said membership is used effectively. Low-cost vacations thanks to complimentary hotel nights, holiday gifts purchased on points, your favorite Starbucks coffee creation on the house... all well-earned perks available for the savvy, point-conscious consumers' taking. I will not take full credit for discovering loyalty programs on my own, or how to best maximize my earnings. Rather, I learned the ropes from one of the best in the loyalty program business: my father. Although retired now from his former road warrior days, he can without hesitation tell you how many years (yes, years) in room nights he has spent staying with his favorite hotel chain and how many

points he has in any one of his frequent flier accounts at any given moment. Naturally, this quest for point maximization has led to consternation in the family from time to time - vacations, for example, were dictated not by where we wanted to go, but rather by the proximity of a points-eligible property. Still, after some tough negotiations we were usually able to come to a very agreeable destination, leading to a wealth of fun, sun-soaked childhood memories. These trips were the reward for those hours spent cramped in the middle-seat on a cross-country flight, the nights spent "sleeping" next to the freight elevator shaft, and the countless non-smoking rental cars that clearly someone had lit up in the drive prior. In essence, it was a thank you not only from Dad to my mom and me for putting up with his time away from us, but also from his travel partners along the way.

So that's what a loyalty program truly is: a thank you. No, I'm not naïve enough to think it's just that - loyalty programs are an invaluable tool in driving wallet-share, creating effective marketing plans, and ultimately serve as a goldmine of customer data. In the hotel world nowadays it's a "price of admission." but humor me if you will and let's focus on the initial premise: the loyalty program as a thank you. Thanks for staying with us, thanks for spending with us, thanks for choosing us. That's the heart of the matter: you need your guests to choose to spend their time, energy, and money with your property. Guests who, like me, may have their favorite "go to" brands, but also have a stack of loyalty cards... and aren't afraid to use them.

Ask anyone anywhere about basic service tenets and thanking a guest will come to the top of the list. In the case of the loyalty program, the thank you does not arrive verbally, but rather in the silent but significant deposit of another point, night or mile into the loyalty bank. On a more frequent basis properties around the world are complementing that "silent" thank you with verbal recognition. Good hotels do this routinely through thanking each guest at the end of a transaction and, in the case of many hotel brands, sharing the guest's point totals or nights earned as part of a routine script or on guest request during check-in or check-out. Great hotels, however, do this by not only engaging the "bookends" of a guest experience at check-in and check-out, but also by weaving it throughout the guest experience in subtle ways.

A few simple adjustments to your team's knowledge and approach can make all the difference in the world to your guests, your associates, and ultimately, your bottom line. It's a no-brainer that all other things being equal (great service, great facility, great staff), valued guests are usually happy guests. Guests feel valued when they are recognized and thanked for their business, and happy guests mean fewer headaches for your associates and less compensation for properties to write-off. But let's take this a bit deeper: valued guests - guests who feel that recognition, welcome, and gratitude throughout their stay - drive your business. They drive your Guest Satisfaction Scores, your TripAdvisor ratings, your occupancy levels, your revenue streams, and can strengthen your property's (and ultimately your brand's) position in the marketplace. Let's go back to my dear old Dad for a moment: aside from the on-command recitation of points levels and nights stayed, he is a staunch advocate for his preferred brand and created other life-loyal fans, including yours truly. That advocacy stemmed not from just some extra chocolates on the pillow at night, but from associates that, upon seeing him enter a lounge six months after his last stay at a property, had his drink ready and waiting. It was an acknowledgement that his presence was anticipated, welcomed, and relished.

In short, a thank you can go a long way. So this leads to the ultimate question: how is your property thanking your guests - from new members to your most elite - and demonstrating that their membership is worthwhile?

First, look at every associate in every department. Start by challenging your team at the Front Desk. The Front Desk is "Grand Central Station" for all guest issues and answers the lion's share of loyalty program questions from your guests. Each associate should be able to share, without hesitation, your property's or brand's specific elite levels, perks, bonus percentages, etc. Not sure if your team can? Stop reading this article and ask them right now. If your front desk associates and leaders can't do that off the top of their head, make sure they can by the end of this week. In the quality assurance business, we are seeing an increasing top-level focus on associate knowledge of rewards programs, whether it be specialty mystery shops focusing solely on elite members or more rudimentary knowledge of program basics. It will serve your guests - and your QA scores well - to make sure this basic expectation is met and fulfilled with every Front Desk associate on every Front Desk shift.

If your team can recite these facts in their sleep, it's time to push them further. In this instance, it's as easily said as done, as your team already has a wealth of information at their fingertips. Today's CRM and loyalty program databases yield precious gems of information

about each guest, from their pillow preference to, in some of the most sophisticated ones, their children's birthdays. Use this information – carefully – to your advantage. As Charles Duhigg discusses in his New York Times Magazine article, "How Companies Learn Your Secrets", guests can quickly get turned off when a company shows just how much they know about a guest before they tell you themselves. That cautionary note aside, encourage your associates to get to know your highest repeat guests. Does Mr. Diaz, who stays with you every other week, have a 500,000 point balance? Rather than just tell him his balance, ask if he's saving it up for a special trip to spark a conversation. Better yet, take that knowledge and, on his next stay, present him with a guidebook about that dream vacation spot. You've put the thought of a vacation in his mind, and created an outstanding guest interaction all in one.

With your Front Desk squared away, shift your focus to other high-touch guest areas, particularly Food & Beverage. Ask those associates the same basic questions about your loyalty program as you did with the Front Desk and see what the response is. If they are unfamiliar with your program, now is the best time to get them involved. F&B is often a great but untapped area of opportunity for promoting loyalty programs. Again, subtlety is key – no one wants a "sales push" while enjoying a nice meal or nursing a beverage – but basic guest engagement can lead to major rewards for both you and the guest. Let's use the hotel lounge as an example, where many guests unwind at the end of a hectic day. Most loyalty programs account for overall property spend; while some guests will be aware of this, others may not be aware that their after-work martini may bring them one point closer to Maui or the Maldives. Why not have bartenders share that in a casual way with your guests? In the resort world, it's textbook guest engagement: a bartender engages a guest in light conversation, finds out they are there on vacation – maybe even that they are there thanks to some free nights – and, understanding how the loyalty program works, brings the cocktail to the guest and says "this will help you come back to us faster!" In just a few words you've shown the guest they are valued and wanted, the hotel has made a positive impression, and the guest has earned a few more points...a winning combination.

Continue this process internally within every department to see just how well your team knows your program. To adapt a best practice from successful Quality Assurance programs, if not already in place, consider designating a "loyalty program" champion both property-wide and at the departmental level. This person will be the property lead for driving knowledge of the program and, more importantly, collaborating with departmental leaders and other property champions on unique ways to thank your guests who are loyalty program members. Maybe it's a specific turndown amenity, a spa promotion, or even a signature cocktail that, when purchased, earns the guest additional points. As with anything, programs that are given support, focus, and leadership at every level of a property are those that are often the most successful. Your guests – and your bottom line – will thank you for it.

Serving as an Operations Manager for LRA's Quality Assurance practice, Ms. Dooley specializes in LRA Worldwide's foodservice, airport, and gaming clients. During her time at LRA, she has spearheaded the development and implementation of customized, experience-driven evaluations for Hard Rock Hotels & Resorts, FLIK International, and the San Diego Zoo. Prior to joining LRA, Ms. Dooley worked with the Walt Disney Company as a Guest Service Manager. She is a graduate of Duke University and is currently pursuing her MBA at Villanova University. Ms. Dooley can be contacted at 215-449-0349 or Shannon.Dooley@lraworldwide.com



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