Secret Shopper

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This past week, my wife Linda and I were in the San Francisco Bay area attending to some personal and business matters. During that time, we stayed at several hotels and played the role of “secret shopper.” We booked through routine channels open to all customers. No one knew we had any connections in the travel and tourism industry. We just kept our eyes open and learned again what it is like to be in a hotel lobby “on the other side of the Front Desk.”

One of our stops was at a deluxe property south of San Francisco run by an international hotel management group. Thinking back about our overall experience, I realized that there was not one big thing that stood out to make our stay excellent but, rather, a number of small things, mostly our encounters with staff, that added up on the positive side of the ledger.

The hotel’s pre-arrival communications were very good. I received several emails reminding me of my reservation and offering me opportunities to book services at the hotel’s spa, airport transfers, or restaurants.

Staff inquired of our arrival time, if we preferred feather or foam pillows, and which newspaper we would like delivered to our room. I replied with “1:30 p.m., feather pillows, and The Wall Street Journal” in the appropriate blank boxes.

When we arrived at the hotel’s porte cochere on schedule, the doorman and valets were very efficient, quickly taking care of our luggage, and parking the car. They spotted our names from our luggage tags and called us by our names as they escorted us to the Front Desk.

There, the clerk thanked us for returning to the property, apparently referencing information on our reservation record. Without spending too much time on the computer screen, she verified our request for The Wall Street Journal and added that because the Journal was not published on Sunday, we would get a local Sunday paper. She said it would be about an hour before our room would be ready and suggested a seat in the lounge or complimentary use of the spa facilities to freshen up prior to a scheduled 3:30 p.m. meeting. As soon as the room was ready, she called us on my cell phone.

Unfortunately, the requested feather pillows were not in our room upon check-in. We called the Front Desk and, in under 10 minutes, a gentleman who looked like he might have been an Executive Housekeeper, arrived at our door with a set of feather pillows.

Cocktail hour in the hotel’s lounge was busy, but the Bartender made the effort to go from behind the bar to deliver a cup of nuts to our table while the servers were all occupied.

The Maître d’ in the dining room came by our table several times to ensure that everything was all right.

The hotel does not have a sundry store, but when I notified the concierge that I needed an AA battery, they quickly produced one.

The only deviation from this superior service came on Sunday when a second copy of Saturday’s Wall Street Journal arrived at our door instead of a local Sunday newspaper. It was not a major issue, but many might have let it become one. The hotel had a chance to correct the error, but a staff member at the Front Desk insisted that because we had signed up for The Wall Street Journal that is what we had received. She backed off slightly after we explained that we were assured upon check-in that we would receive the local Sunday paper. She then offered to send someone to a store to purchase us a copy of the Sunday paper but knowing that the nearest store was some distance away, we declined.

After departure, we received an email asking us to evaluate and rate our experience at the hotel.

Continued on page 2
Overall, we had a very nice experience, and it might be summed up by the following quotations that relate to customer service.

“Little things don’t mean a lot.
Little things mean everything.”

Harvey Mackay
Syndicated columnist, author, motivational speaker

“Don’t make promises you can’t fulfill.”

Author unknown

But in most cultures, a promise, even a small one, generates an expectation from the second party and great disappointment when that promise is not met. It is always better to under-promise and over-deliver.

“The customer is always right.”

According to The Phrase Finder, this philosophy is credited to a number of individuals, particularly department store magnates Marshall Field and Harry Gordon Selfridge. César Ritz, the celebrated French hotelier, is believed to have stated in 1908, “Le client n’a jamais tort,” which means “The customer is never wrong.” That’s not the phrase today that people remember, but it is quite similar to “The customer is always right.” (http://www.phrases.org.uk)

At Outrigger and OHANA hotels, we try to live and practice these philosophies daily. It’s an inherent part of the way we do business, whether we are in Hawai‘i, Fiji, Guam, Australia, Thailand, Bali or, soon to be added, Vietnam and China. It’s who we are.