

A SHOT IN THE BUCK

The Answer's Yes... What's the Question?
a guest column by John DiJulius

I hate the word "NO!" I truly do. I can't believe how many people from so many companies use it. It should be stricken from the English vocabulary. Ok maybe that's a little severe, but it certainly should be stricken from any customer service focused company. Recently, I was speaking at a prominent hotel in Las Vegas and when I got to my room I ordered room service. When I was asked if I wanted fries or coleslaw as my side, I inquired if I could have a side of fruit. The person's response was a quick and unfriendly "NO. Fries or coleslaw?" Now they offer fruit as a dish on the menu, so obviously "No" was not the correct answer. How about, "Certainly. While you cannot substitute the fruit for your side dish, I can add it to your order should you wish"?

Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, 27 upscale restaurants in seven states, headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, not only has removed the word NO from their 2000 associates vocabulary, they have one of the best service brand promises that I have come across; "The answer's yes.now what's the question"? This is not just lip service -- everyone in this company walks this talk throughout the organization. They have created such a strong, above & beyond, legacy that nearly everyone is trying to outdo each other daily with unconventional ways they can exceed their guests expectations.

Cameron himself created a brilliant metaphor that the company's service philosophy is founded on. It is known as the "Milkshake." Legend has it, several years ago, Cameron was a customer with his family at a restaurant and his son asked if he could have a milkshake. The server said, "NO!" There's that word again.

Cameron, knowing that the restaurant has ice cream, milk and a blender all at their disposal, couldn't fathom why someone wouldn't accommodate a guest when the request was so simple. So the "Milkshake" became an icon to remind everyone in the organization about finding a way to say, "Yes."

Having three young boys myself, I can't tell you how many times this exact scenario has happened to me. More than a few times, we have been to a restaurant and one of my sons didn't like anything on the kid's menu and asked if he could have a grilled cheese sandwich. Nearly every time, the answer was "NO!" You mean to tell me that every restaurant doesn't have bread & cheese they could throw on a stove?

The "Milkshake" has grown into a life of its own at Cameron Mitchell. The company does an incredible job with the constant awareness of what the milkshake represents. They start every company meeting with a "Milkshake Toast," they have a "Milkshake Award" that is given to an associate who best demonstrates the spirit of their service brand promise, "The Answer's yes.now what's the question."

If you walk into any of their locations, it is likely you will see several associates wearing milkshake pins, and milkshake icons and pictures on posters, memos, and training materials.

Action Plan

To start, ensure that every employee understands that there is NO worse crime that they could commit than saying that horribly offensive two-letter word "NO." Are there times when you absolutely cannot accommodate someone's wishes? Certainly, that is why you must do two exercises as an organization.

The first exercise is: consider all the common situations that may arise that are difficult for you to say, "Yes" to and work on creative alternatives responses to each. Your employees will be trained to make your customers feel like their request was granted, similar to my "side of fruit" dilemma.

The second exercise is: create a metaphor that is similar to Cameron Mitchell's milkshake. Then advertise the hell out of it to your entire organization on a daily basis through recognition, signage, awards, and other themes. Empower everyone in your company to do whatever it takes to deliver genuine hospitality.