

Striving for Number One Using the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Model

By Colin Bane

In April, Texas Jet Inc. was voted the number-one fixed based operator (FBO) and the number one independent FBO in the United States in the *Professional Pilot* magazine 2009 PRASE (Preferences Regarding Aviation Services and Equipment) Survey. And for the first time in its 30-year history, Texas Jet was ranked in the top ten U.S. FBOs in *Aviation International News'* 2009 FBO Survey.

The PRASE survey scores service in six categories: line team, customer service representatives, facility, amenities, promptness, and efficiency and value for cost. The key to this recent success, said Texas Jet President Reed Pigman, Jr., is an increased focus on customer service over the last decade and the implementation of what Pigman calls Texas Jet's Exceptional Customer Service program.

At the heart of this award-winning program are Customer Service Manager Holly Hopkins (pilots ranked Hopkins in the top ten customer service representatives in the U.S. on the PRASE surveys in 2007, 2008, and 2009) and a training partnership with the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center that began four years ago.

Looking for the Gold Standard

"We were looking to raise the level of service we offer, and the model we looked to was the five-star hotel business," Pigman said. "We knew that we had similar clientele, and we knew that we wanted to be able to offer the same level of luxury. Ten years ago, back when we were ranked number 44 in the *Pro Pilot* survey and thinking about how to get to number one, we were looking for the gold standard in customer service. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company had just won the president's Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for Service, and it was a key realization for us to understand how much the Ritz-Carlton had in common with charter and FBO businesses and to realize the level of service many of our customers have grown accustomed to."

At Texas Jet's Executive Terminal at Fort Meacham International Airport, Pigman offers fast, courteous "red carpet" service, from the line service technicians working with the aircraft to luxury terminal services like gourmet catering, executive

conference rooms, office space, rest rooms, fitness center, crew lounge, and rental car and limousine service accommodations for guests.

For the last four years, Pigman has sent all Texas Jet employees through customer service training with the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center, and in June Brian Grubb, corporate director of learning and content delivery for the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center, addressed NATA's 2009 Air Charter Summit and FBO Leadership Conference.

Grubb made the point that FBOs are, first and foremost, a service industry. Customer engagement, anticipation, and service are key, he said.

"One of the things we've been most impressed with as we've looked to the Ritz-Carlton hotels as a model and participated in training at the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center is how they've empowered their employees at every level to anticipate customer needs, make decisions, and solve problems," Pigman said. "If we have a problem out on the line, we don't want to the line service technician who encounters the problem to pass the buck and say, 'You need to go to talk to the line service manager about this,' because that's the last thing the customer wants to hear. Now we've empowered our staff at every level to take ownership of the problems they encounter. So it's up to that line service tech to own the problem until it's solved. They can ask for help—the line service manager's help, my help, anyone's help they need—but it's up to them to solve it and see it through to the customer's satisfaction."

Pigman said he's come to understand that the difference between good customer service and exceptional customer service is all about customer engagement: working to transform the ordinary, workaday experience of flying and traveling into an extraordinary luxury experience.

In his session at the FBO Leadership Conference, Grubb suggested that it's actually less important to measure customer satisfaction than it is to measure customer engagement. "Engaged" customers and guests are eight times more loyal than "satisfied" customers and guests, Grubb said.

A good company does what it does extraordinarily well, makes connections with its customers, and recognizes the importance of a customer's time and needs. Regardless of price point, "bedside manner

does count,” Grubb said. “Providing a level of legendary service doesn’t have to cost a lot of money.” Simple things like timeliness, a warm greeting, and attention to service can be worth more than almost any other investment you might make in your company.

A Culture of Continual Improvement

“At Texas Jet, we train everybody in the company on our customer service, what we call our Exceptional Service Program, everybody from the custodian to the bookkeeper,” Pigman said. “Customer service is more than the person at the front desk, much, much more. It’s got to be everybody. We try to run everybody through training twice a year to reinforce it and to foster a culture of continual improvement around here.”

At Ritz-Carlton hotels, all employees carry credo cards reminding them to give warm and sincere greetings using the guest’s name, to anticipate and fulfill each guest’s needs, and to give a fond farewell and warm good-bye, again using the guest’s name. Grubb also advocates “random acts of kindness,” such as giving a customer the correct change for airport toll roads, providing umbrellas for use in inclement weather, and offering additional service perks.

Making Service Memorable

“A company’s mission statement should be a written service strategy,” Grubb said. To fully engage customers, employees need to anticipate customer needs and stay in the moment with all senses on alert, remembering that great service to one is not great service to another. “Service should be unique, memorable, and personal.”

Grubb suggested the following areas where any service industry should seek continual improvement: smiling and welcome staff, greeting customers by name, treating every day as a special occasion, answering phone calls promptly, wrapping purchases, keeping the restrooms clean, inviting customers back, and inviting and welcoming customer feedback.

The bottom tier of customer service, according to Grubb, is what is “expected.” A customer counts on this level of service and quality product but will not remember an experience that merely meets expectations. The second tier of service is “requested.” A customer requesting a certain level of service expects responsiveness, and will likely remember the experience—good or bad—based on the level of responsiveness. Companies should shoot for a

third tier, Grubb said. Engaged customers should leave feeling “delighted.” When a customer receives world-class service that surprisingly exceeds their expectations, they will always remember it. Conversely, “People will always remember when you could not honor a special request,” Grubb said.

When measuring customer engagement, Grubb wants to grasp a guest’s likeliness to return (at Ritz-Carlton hotels, 20 percent of guests bring in 80 percent of the company’s business) as well as their likeliness to spread a positive word to friends and colleagues, their overall sense of well-being, and the degree to which a guest feels they’ve been treated as an individual.

“We go to great lengths to measure customer engagement here at Texas Jet, using all kinds of different measures,” Pigman said. “We just got voted number one in the country. That’s the best measure yet.”

Businesses interested in participating in training sessions with the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center can visit <http://corporate.ritzcarlton.com/en/LeadershipCenter> for course descriptions and a full schedule.



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