

# Status is the new Black



British Airways frequent flyer tag on my suitcase, and had immediately passed the information to his colleague, who opened the passenger door for me and greeted me by name, and onto the receptionist who checked me in, obviously after referencing my name on their database. You have to admire the simplicity of the piece. No capital investment, no new training programme or fancy manuals, just common sense and a desire to raise the service threshold at work.

I had arrived in Bahrain after a lengthy flight from New York City, where I had been staying at The Plaza hotel, opposite the eponymous Apple store at Central Park. My visit coincided with a visit by a senior member of a certain royal family – for the purposes of discretion, the name shall remain anonymous – for whom a seating area shaped in a square ‘U’, with some 20 seats, had been reserved in the hotel lobby. Every day during my stay, this member of royalty held court in the lobby, surrounded by acolytes and advisers. As each new visitor arrived, the entire group stood

up, ascertained how senior the new visitor was, in relation to who was already sitting there, and changed seats according to the new pecking order that had been established. It was all about status.

I admired the respect that everyone already seated extended to each new visitor, and the recognition offered in return. Similarly, smart CEOs surround themselves with the best talent available and a smart board of directors will always defer to the customer, whosoever is speaking for the customer within a given set of circumstances. Every director within a retail board has a responsibility towards the customer, and not least of all, because the customer should be at the heart of every decision made within a retail organisation. And customers should be present at every board meeting. For any cynics who would disagree, I ask the question, “How can you make a decision within a retail organisation without considering how your customers will be affected?”

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**WHAT’S RELEVANT IS THE COMPETITIVE NATURE OF RETAIL AND THE NEED FOR RETAILERS, WHO ARE REGARDED FOR THEIR ‘QUALITY’, TO PROMOTE SOLELY ON ‘PRICE’.**

At times, capital investment, training programmes or fancy manuals are not required. Just common sense and a desire to raise the service threshold at work do the trick.

By Brendan Dorrian

THIS IS AN ARTICLE ABOUT EVERYTHING AND NOTHING AT ALL. IF YOU’RE READING IN SEARCH OF ENLIGHTENMENT, THEN LOOK AWAY NOW. SIMILARLY, IF YOU’VE TIME TO INDULGE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND USE IT TO ILLUMINATE THE SCOPE FOR OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN YOUR BUSINESS, THEN I URGE YOU TO READ ON!

→ Times change, people change; however, in the end everything remains the same. Those are my words, although there was an Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who, in AD 34, put it more succinctly: “The only true eternal is change itself.” And I agree.

When I arrived recently, and for the first time, at Ritz Carlton in Bahrain, from the international airport, my driver slowed the car to a bump-free halt at the front entrance. The trunk popped, the passenger door opened, I gathered my belongings and stepped out, only to be met by a blast of hot air and a very courteous ‘Welcome to Ritz Carlton, Mr Dorrian’. Arriving a

few moments later at the reception, the same courtesy was repeated, ‘Welcome to Ritz Carlton, Mr Dorrian, we hope you enjoy your first stay with us.’

You may consider there’s nothing unusual in any of this, until you learn that the driver of the car from the airport was an agency driver unconnected to the hotel, and that they did not know when I was arriving, or by what means. So, how did the Bellhop know who I was and how did the receptionist know that it was my first time at the hotel? It wasn’t until the following day I realised that the Bellhop who popped the trunk had read my name off the



## customer service

and pushed the traditional triumvirate of 'quality', 'price', and 'value'; and in the current economic climate, 'price predominates'.

On August 19, 2010, a full-page advert for a product that costs just £3 appeared in *London Times*. Turn the page, and a similar advertisement appeared, also promoting a £3 product, alongside others, with a maximum selling price of £17, free delivery included. So, who would run a full-page advertisement for a product costing only £3? Asda and Marks & Spencer, respectively, and the product is school-wear, but that's irrelevant. What's relevant is the competitive nature of the retail marketplace and the need for retailers, who are regarded for their 'quality', to promote solely on 'price'. Compare the Marks & Spencer 'School motto' of 'Quality and Value' against the



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'George at Asda' strap-line of 'Quality, Style and Value'.

We, however, maintain that these are now being subsumed by the fourth consumer criterion – 'Status'. It's globally pervasive and becoming ingrained within consumers' psyche. Traditionally, there's the very British 'Class' system; the 'Caste' system in India; or the 'Blue Collar, White Collar and Ivy League' in the US. But for creating status among consumers, the

modern world beats the traditional world hands down. Consumers' narcissism is being stroked like never before – LinkedIn connections and Facebook friends; Tesco Club card points and BA Air Miles. To my mind, there's nothing worse than acquired snobbery in a classless society, but acquired status in the digital age makes all the difference.

The all-new iPhone app 'Foursquare' is being adapted by retailers to offer regular customers the chance to become a 'Mayor' of a particular store which, in turn, offers them additional selective discounts. BA Miles, like other airline programmes, are being challenged by airlines who simply offer passengers the opportunity to buy the benefits of a loyalty programme on a one-time basis: join a shorter queue, get a seat at the front of a plane, carry on additional baggage or check-in online – traditionally the gift to the loyal are all now yours at a price.

Times change, people change; however, in the end everything remains the same. Wrong.

Everything has changed, it is just that no one has really noticed. Loyalty is dead, long live Status. ☒



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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