

# At your service

**C**AN YOU GRAB YOUR CUSTOMER'S ATTENTION in just three minutes? Yes, says Ron Kaufman, the master speaker of service who recently launched his virtual Up! Your Service College in Dubai. He tells **Sandhya Rajayer** how it can be done

Attending a Ron Kaufman seminar on 'UP! Your Service' is like being swept away by a mental tornado. Your ideas and creative instincts are stirred, dusted and given such a violent shakedown that you emerge feeling gloriously invigorated – mentally fresh, your mind brimming over with new concepts and thoughts.

A self-confessed junkie of the speakers cult, I was however blown away by his spontaneous response to a trick question: how can you grab a customer's attention in just three minutes? Ron's answer is just two words: "Pay attention."

Seeing that I am waiting for him to say more, he explains: "You need to genuinely show a sincere, dedicated and present-in-the-moment attentive concern to listen to and care for that person."

"People offering genuine attention are so rare these days that once you offer this to your customer, he/she is bound to get hooked to what you are saying. For instance, think about what happens at home," he suggests.

"How often do you really listen and are totally connected to the person you are speaking with? But establish the connection with the person ... and you will get him/her to open up. She might tell you what is worrying her and you may be able to offer her some help. Or she might tell you what a wonderful time she had and you could share in her happiness."

Ron Kaufman, internationally acclaimed innovator and motivator for partnerships and quality service, has helped organizations around the world achieve superior service, increase customer loyalty, create strong partnerships and build winning teams. He has worked with multinational companies, government agencies and industry associations in high technology, financial, professional and medical services, manufacturing, retailing, entertainment, tourism and public recreation.

So, when it comes to the service industry, what separates the boys from the men?

"If you want to stand out from the competition in terms of your [corporate]

culture, in terms of attracting the best people to work with you ... then you have to show a genuine passion for the experience that the consumer is having," he says.

You have to look at everything from the customer's viewpoint ... essentially be in their shoes. You need to find out where they came from before they met you, what concerns they have while they are with you and where they are going after they've been with you, he says.

"This way you end up providing a much more robust quality of overall service experience not because you are selling them something which happens to be good (that's part of it) but the experience of being sold something that is also good. The other part of the service experience is that if you have to differentiate, you have to be clear what segment of the market you are aiming at."

He offers the example of Southwest Airlines, a budget airline. "The aim of their game is to get you there fast, cheap and safely. [They are not spending too much effort on fancy things like coffee, seating area, etc.]



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They focus on very specific areas which their customers will value and then they're doing everything they can to accentuate and heighten their value in that clearly defined space."

So, what can they do to up their service?

Ron offers some plans: "Take the issue of security," he says. They could offer the exact-sized plastic bag for you to put your lotions, creams, etc into; they could send out a reminder either by email or inform you at the check-in counter about your shoes, your laptop, your belt ... They could put up the information on their website and link it to the email that they send you when you confirm your tickets, he says.

"There are things that all airlines can do to offer the guest a better experience. With the new regulations on what you can carry in your hand baggage, lots of the time you hear comments like, 'Oh I forgot that my scissors are in my bag. And they are \$200 scissors because I'm a hairdresser.'" Or it's about a very expensive lotion someone bought on vacation which (naturally) they don't want to have to throw it away.

An airline could have a tie-up with a courier company or the post office and respond to such travelers' woes with a 'never mind, mail it to yourself'. "The service would then seem so seamless. But airlines go 'that's not my business'. Yeah, but that's

not a solution."

Our service mindset evolves from our academic background, family upbringing, social status, culture ... So how does one teach people to be different from the mindset they already possess?

"It's more about teaching people how they can find the best in the upbringing that they have," he says.

"Robert Fritz, author of The Path of Least Resistance, once said the people who make the greatest progress are the ones who are very clear about where they want to get to. And they are also very clear about where they are right now. So you got your feet on the ground and you got your head in the clouds. When you hold on to the two simultaneously, the path of least resistance is in the direction of what you are trying to create. So you need to have both – a fantasy and then an awareness of where you are in order to move ahead. My course at the 'Up! Your Service College' is designed to move up one step at a time and eventually get where you want to be."

So do nations and countries have a definitive service culture? With close interaction with several countries, Ron has zeroed in on the service culture of a place. The people of one Far Eastern country, for instance, he says are very gentle, kind, compassionate and caring. Now if they could add speed to the service

aspect, it would be great combination.

How would he rate Dubai? "Before I talk about Dubai, I'll give you another example from the Middle East – Oman," He says. "Their hospitality is so gentle, it's legendary. It says something about the culture within the Arab world."

"Dubai is a very interesting spot because there's so much commerce going on here ... It is way too multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-industry to be categorized in blanket terminology."

## Raising the bar

We all often have bad days. But how do you get to the level where you rise above your own preoccupation and ask someone else about his/her day?

"This is a discipline," insists Ron, who firmly believes that his future doesn't have to be determined by his past. "If I've been told off by the boss and I'm carrying that [rebuke] around, [it's not good]. I throw it at my wife and my kids and they are really sad. Ideally, I should sit down with the boss and clear this up or analyse it in my mind and resolve the issue."

"In the service industry you can't always [sit down and analyse] that because you are on your feet all the time. You get a rude customer, then you handle him and then comes another customer who doesn't know that the last one was rude. But why should I bring the problem I had with the last customer to the next customer?"

"I want to uplift this spirit of service in everyone I meet all the time. It's a huge objective and there are times when I don't even live up to it but then if I don't live up to it, what's my next challenge – to try to live up to it. That's the essence of how you keep regenerating for yourself this willingness of being nice to the next person. If you realize that, you can be in control," explains Ron.

## Reaching out

Ron's seminars are popular with companies that can afford him. But, keen to reach out to the maximum number of people Ron has, over the past two years, invested huge amounts of time and about a million dollars developing UP! Your Service College, a virtual college where his teachings, the course ware, exercises, activities, discussions, role play, debates, all are available on DVDs.

The Training College was launched last year in Singapore where Ron has a number

of government and commercial clients. He now has clients in London, the Netherlands, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, China, Finland, India and Indonesia.

#### Early years

Ron Kaufman grew up in West Port, Connecticut, USA. He studied International political history from Brown University, London and spent two years in Europe while still in College, specifically in the south of France to learn French and understand the culture and “enjoy myself”.

He returned to Brown for his senior year and wanted to learn more about how countries that have been at war can forge business alliances almost as soon as the war is over. He was fascinated by the fact that people would wage a war and kill each other and five years later they could be doing business with each other.

Sport, he found out, played an important role in bridging the gulf. For example, he says, immediately after the Second World War countries that had been fighting with each other were busy playing football.

Ron decided to take up citizen diplomacy in a professional capacity. He took groups of people to China and the Soviet Union, “helping to bring down the walls of misunderstanding”.

His insight into the role of sport in creating bridges between people is perhaps a reflection of the times when he was busy organising Frisbee Festivals in his high school days.

Ron used to play Ultimate Frisbee, which is a bit like aerial soccer, for his school – Staple High School, Connecticut. When he went to Europe he began organising Frisbee tournaments and festivals there as well which were huge successes.

Ron’s organizational role and his high voltage performance in the commentary box led him to his first corporate seminar at American Express and this eventually led to his becoming a specialist in Adult Educational Design or Instructional Design.

In 1990, the Singapore government invited him to help establish a service culture across the different government departments. Ron went for a week’s programme, but he liked the place so much that he stayed on in Singapore. He went on to become the Project Manager for curriculum design and later master trainer.

## THE SIX LEVELS OF SERVICE:

**Criminal:** The very lowest kind of service.

- a) “The room will be ready” – it’s not;
- b) “The bill will be accurate” – there is a mistake;
- c) “I will call you by name” – (vis-à-vis) I don’t care who you are;
- d) “I will be properly groomed” – but he/she is slovenly. (“This is unacceptable and therefore criminal.”)

**Basic:** It means you get the job done but it’s not a very nice experience for the others. “You answer the phone with a ‘hullo (sic)’ not a cheery ‘Hello!’ or you deliver but it’s late, or you

bring the food to the table but you plop it down rather than place it gently and with care. It won’t give you food poisoning but it’s just basic.”

**Expected:** That’s the industry average, according to Ron.

**Desired:** Is the level of service that the person who is getting it would prefer ... it’s the way they like it. “Maybe a nice tone of voice on the phone, addressing you by name and wishing you a good morning; the delivery that came in at the promised time; the room the hotel gave you was just the kind they promised ... Something that makes me go ‘gee they’re nice ... that’s desired.”

**Surprising:** when you serve somebody at a level that they didn’t expect but they like it. It’s something

special. “What this requires is that the service provider has to anticipate, get into the world of the other person they are serving and wonder ‘what else could I do for this person?’ For instance, guests are leaving and the hotel has prepared tiny bags with nuts and raisins in them (it’s actually only using up the stuff that’s sitting at the buffet all day but using it for your benefit). They wish you a good day and say ‘here’s a little snack to take with you’. Wow! What a nice surprise! That level of service requires thought and creativity on your part”.

**Unbelievable:** It’s this extraordinary thing that you don’t try to do all the time. It’s completely out of the box. “It becomes very memorable. These things get talked about and they become legend.”



**I want to uplift the spirit of service in everyone I meet all the time, says Ron Kaufman.**

Singapore has also proved to be a good launch pad for doing programmes in the Middle East and he’s been spending a lot of time in Dubai conducting public as well as in-house programmes. His recent visit to Dubai was to launch the Training College, in partnership with Right Selection, Dubai.

So how does Ron integrate his message and ‘up his service’ in personal life? “It’s not easy,” Ron says. “I have to mention something which I learned from a gentleman whom I admire a lot. I don’t have a commitment to live a balanced life. That doesn’t mean I don’t admire and appreciate balance in my life. It is just not my top priority. I do have a commitment to living an incredibly passionate life. So when I am with my daughter, Brighten, for example, I really want to be with her.”

“Whenever I’m in Singapore we have what is called dad and daughter dinner. So she’ll be with me every weekend (as I have got

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divorced and my daughter lives with her Mum, just two blocks away from my home in Singapore). It’s not easy but every time she has a vacation, I stop working and we take off on camping trips together.”

“At 11, Brighten is a very mature kid And part of the reason why she’s mature is because she’s been traveling with me since she was five weeks old.”

Ron is keen to design a curriculum for kids that teaches them fundamental principles of service at a really young age. “I’d like to

share with kids how we need to leave this place better than we found it. That could mean cleaning someone’s dish off the table that you know wasn’t yours; it could be in a larger sense what you do with your life.”

The secret of Ron’s unbounded energy, he says, is several big glasses of mocktails of celery, zucchini, tomato, carrot, cucumber and ginger. Naturally, Ron benchmarks the hotels on how well they serve up his recipe. Happily, Dubai makes it to ‘Desired’. **13**

## UP YOUR TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE

**Whether we work at home or in an office, we are all service providers. And there’s one area of service that we can all improve on – telephone interaction. Ron’s book *Up Your Service* offers some tips:**

**Say ‘Good Morning and this is (your name)’ rather than an empty ‘Hello’.**

**Say, “I’ll be glad to help you rather than “let me see if**

**someone can help you.” Say, “I’ll call you on Monday at 9am,” rather than “I’ll call you back.”**

**Say, “Can you repeat that for me, please?”, rather than “What did you say?”**

**Say, “Can you hold on for just a moment, please?”, rather than “you hold on, eh?”**

**Pay attention to:**

**Speed:** Talk too fast and people struggle to understand you. Talk too slowly and people struggle to stay awake.

**Tone:** Put energy in your voice and other people feel it. Drone on and in a lifeless monotone and people feel that too.

**Clarity:** Articulate clearly and succinctly

**Choice of words:** Use listener-friendly words.

**Leave a positive last impression:**

Say “Good bye” with style. Review the situation. Promise appropriate action, including future contact. Establish contingency plans. Close with appreciation for the call.

## TRENDS

# At your service



**UP! Your Service** provides world class service education that is easily customized and proven effective across diverse industries, languages and cultures.

College courses are quickly deployed for managers and staff at all levels using video-based courseware and in-house Certified Course Leaders.

**UP! Your Service** combines service education with culture building support in twelve essential areas, providing effective tools, techniques and best practice case studies.

This integrated approach engages employees throughout the organization to build a superior service culture for sustainable competitive advantage.

**UP! Your Service** was founded by Ron Kaufman, the world’s leading educator and motivator for uplifting customer service and superior service culture. Ron is the author of the bestselling “UP! Your Service” and “Lift Me UP!” book series.

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