Validate

They say "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery!" but, there is no point in copying even the best service in your sector – by the time you have updated and VALIDATED whether yours works the competition will have moved on!

It is always worth VALIDATING your service against the best players in your industry to see what you can learn from them, the trick is using that information to make an even better service experience for YOUR customers.

Hat's off to them! There are some stunners out there! Working in the customer service industry you cannot fail to be impressed by the companies that create genuine innovation and continue to raise the benchmark for their and other industries. The knack is to be aware of the latest developments and the pack leader, but see which, if any, would work for you, then adapt and incorporate this into your own service provision. By establishing clear standards and having a sound mechanism to validate that these work in practice you can lead rather than follow the pack.

So who is great out there from a service perspective? Let's start with a quick review of the service V's! Values – It is usually helpful if the leader of the business truly values service, every year Richard Branson head of Virgin opens his house up to his employee's to thank them for their efforts and to recognise the great service they have provided! Claridges Hotel in London encourage all newcomers to the team to spend a night in the penthouse suite so they can experience and value the service they will come to give, of course at the same time they will feel truly valued by the new employer!

Vision – When the new British Library opened last year they had already created a clear vision for the service it would provide to its readers. Every new member of the library gets a copy of this "code of service" Their vision is measurable and will be transformed off the paper and into reality.

Venture – Mercedes Benz and Harley Davidson, recognised the fact that a loyal customer costs less to replace than heavy advertising to get new customers! They wrote to their existing owners to ask them for their suggestions as to how to improve their vehicles, and then set about building new ones incorporating the feedback.

Got a question about your Service VALIDATION?
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V.I.P's – Disney have a policy of "Aggressive happiness" actively going out of their way to make their customers happy! Whilst Domino's pizza will give anyone a free pizza if they have to wait more than 30 minutes, this guarantees a win-win for the customer and makes them think of Domino's for 30 minutes!

Vibes - Lucozade used to be seen as a child convalescence remedy, by repositioning the Brand and refocusing the messaging around the product and setting vibes around the product it is now seen as a low calorie energy drink and highly desirable to sports people and couch potatoes alike!

Vis-à-Vis–The University Hospital of Georgia has taken customer relations to the extreme! They have totally re vamped their morgue to make it as pleasant an experience for the relatives of the bereaved as is humanly possible!

Validation – who has got this right? Wanting to have no barriers between himself and his customers to get immediate and undiluted comments on his service, Julian Metcalf founder of Pret à manager chain is so keen to receive feedback from his customers his telephone number is on all the serviettes!

Once you have tracked what's out there see what you can adapt for your business, take note of Harley Davidson and Mercedes Benz and involve your staff and customers in creating your own unique enhanced service standards. Once you are clear on what you will deliver, make sure everyone is willing and able to deliver the standards.

You will need to be really transparent about how you will measure the success or otherwise of your service provision. You can choose to use either hard or soft measures. Hard measures could be any of the following; an increase in average transaction values, mystery shopper scores or sickness levels of your team (South West trains use this method) Softer measures include the use of CCTV and feedback forms. Many businesses plump for a mixture of measures implementing a balanced scorecard with data on customers, people, operations and finance.

No matter what the scorecard or measure there is often no replacement for getting back to the floor and really experiencing the customer experience

first hand from both your staff's and your customers' perspective.

Let's not get carried away, You do not have to go as far as the Nike Brand where some staff (the Ekin's) care so passionately about the Nike Brand they have had the Nike swoosh tattooed onto their body. Just start by looking at the details of your offer. It could be something quick and easy. Harry Ramsden's in it's airport outlets ask the customers how long it is to their flight to make sure they are not disappointed and cannot fully experience their fish and chips!

It's as simple as that, make sure you are clear on what will delight your customers, implement it consistently and make sure you validate it has worked!

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