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Creating Enchanted Customer Experiences

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Creating Enchanted Customer Experiences



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As the world attempts to recover from the seemingly endless Covid-19 pandemic, many hospitality companies have placed considerable emphasis on creating more engaging and enriching customer experiences. Indeed, there is growing evidence that customers are looking for something more and better (LaTour & Brant, 2021), and even great service may not be enough to meet the needs of the new normal. In particular, many customers are seeking extraordinary, “enchanted” experiences that are immersive and transformative (Phillips, 2019; Soulard, McGehee, & Knollenberg, 2021). As such, the curation of enchantment requires careful consideration of the customers who are seeking enchanting experiences, as well as the front-line employees and operational leaders who help make the magic happen.



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Enchanted Customers

People seek and experience enchantment in a wide-array of contexts (e.g., exotic travel destinations) and activities (e.g., weddings). Psychology and management scholars have extensively studied emotions of “awe, inspiration, wonder or surprise,” but these efficacious sentiments sometimes combine with other particular thoughts and feelings to produce an even more potent experience for consumers and employees – a sense of *enchantment*. As we previously discussed (Houran & Tracey, 2021), recent studies suggest that enchantment is a complex arousal state filled with competing “emotional, sensorial, timeless, rational, and transformative” themes. This psychological cocktail disrupts the mundane or difficult experience of daily life with a positive feeling of connection to a “transcendent agency or ultimate reality” (for a review, see Drinkwater et al., 2020).

We further proposed that Pine and Gilmore’s (1999, 2013) famous concept of the “experience economy” was evolving in important ways toward an “enchantment economy” (Houran & Tracey, 2021). *So, where do people find enchantment in their lives?* Preliminary research by Lange et al. (2021) reveals that consumers intend to pursue “enchanted marketplaces” via five categories of events or experiences which they labeled:

- *Escapade*, an adventurous escape to a particular destination.
- *Nostalgia*, reminiscence related to special “first-time” events.
- *Catharsis*, participation in events related to liberation or ecstasy.
- *Communion*, impromptu or planned fellowship under special circumstances.
- *Attachment*, family activities that reinforce bonding and a sense of legacy.

These features will certainly vary in salience across marketplaces. As such, hospitality leaders must not only develop a keen understanding about their context-specific enchantment drivers, but also leverage and enable their teams to help facilitate enchanting customer experiences.

Enchanted Employees

There’s plenty of evidence that links employee engagement with a wide array of positive customer outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and loyalty; see Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Schneider, Macey, Barbera, & Martin, 2009), and it’s likely to work the same way with enchantment. Moreover, just as customers seek enchanting travel experiences, many employees likewise seek out and thrive in “enchanted workplaces,” i.e., organizational cultures and settings that promote meaningful and empowering experiences on professional and personal levels (e.g., Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015; Michaelson et al., 2014; White, 1998). An enchanted workplace can be characterized by employees who are optimally resourceful, happy, resilient, passionate, motivated, and healthy at work (e.g., Fisher, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Suddaby et al, 207; Vallerand, 2008), all of which have substantial impact on employee engagement and performance.

For example, the *Escapade* variety of enchanting experience is associated with an escape or adventure to a specific place (e.g., Africa) or for a specific activity (e.g., trekking). Employees who are knowledgeable about the destination and share consumers’ passion for the destination’s featured activities may play a key role in shaping consumers’ getting-away-from-it-all experiences. Additionally, the *Nostalgia* type of enchantment is characterized by unforgettable first impressions and a sense of being lucky or blessed. In this case, employees who proactively take measures to anticipate and deliver on consumer expectations, especially in a creative and novel manner, may be able to amplify and enhance consumers’ sense of *Nostalgia*. Similarly, the *Communion* and *Attachment* categories of enchantment may involve intensive interpersonal interactions among individuals who may or may not be familiar with one another. Employees who are not only highly personable and open to new experiences, but also thrive in and energized by team settings may play a critical role in achieving these types of customer enchantment. Because these “wows” do not materialize by

serendipity, operational leaders need to be very purposeful in their efforts to promote enchantment.

Enchanted Leaders

Fundamentally, leadership is about “influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl, 2013, p. 7). One of the key leadership requirements for promoting customer enchantment is to ensure that front-line staff possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other individual characteristics (e.g., personality dimensions), as well as the tools, equipment, and support (e.g., training and incentives) that collectively facilitate emotionally engaging, memorable, and enchanting guest experiences. Thus, we advise operational leaders to directly account for the features of enchantment in all staffing, training, performance management, and reward decisions.

Additionally, a *blend* of several leadership styles will be needed to ensure that front-line staff are empowered with the requisite capabilities and support systems. One of the most influential types of leadership is *transformational* (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978), which encompasses traits such as the ability to articulate a unique and compelling vision of the future and instilling followers with a sense of pride, as well as behaviors such as delegation and providing followers with challenging roles.

Transformational leadership is particularly relevant in hospitality settings (Tracey & Hinkin, 1994; Gui et al., 2020), and this style further includes several key elements to support front-line staff in creating and promoting consumer enchantment. For example, a hotel general manager’s charisma and passion for a destination’s cultural heritage and unique history can inspire employees to share their own enthusiasm and excitement about the local context with guests throughout their visit, and in doing so, help facilitate an Escapade. Additionally, empowering front-line staff via flexible job designs and service-focused training and reward systems to customize their guest experience responsibilities gives them license to go beyond expectations and create immersive, memorable, and nostalgic “wows.”

Another style proven pertinent to hospitality settings, and perhaps critical in supporting consumer enchantment, is *servant leadership* (Brownell, 2010; Greenleaf, 2002). This form of leadership prioritizes followers’ needs, interests, and well-being (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008) and often has a positive influence on a wide range of outcomes, including *proactive customer service performance* (Ye, Lyu, & He, 2019), *creativity* (Ruiz-Palomino & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2020), and *team cohesion and*

performance (Chiniara & Bentein, 2018). These outcomes are clearly aligned with the ability to deliver unforgettable guest experiences and to develop *Communion* and *Attachment*, and thus, can help to guide leaders in their efforts to foster enchanting workplaces.

Lastly, *situational models* of leadership (e.g., Feidler, 1978; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), as well as explanations that account for contextual factors that might mitigate or enhance a leader's influence (e.g., Newman & Butler, 2014; Sarwar, Ishaq, Amin, & Ahmed, 2020) should also be considered as a basis for cultivating enchantment. While efforts to meet and exceed consumer expectations may certainly be orchestrated *a priori*, many memorable experiences are the product of serendipity or what psychologist Carl Jung called "synchronicity." Leaders who are acutely sensitive to local dynamics can be opportunistic and exploit the unique and unexpected moments associated with a particular time and place to cultivate consumer enchantment.

Assessing Enchantment

As emphasized above, hospitality leaders can actively build enchantment by engaging with and supporting front-line staff to promote the unique and awe-inspiring features associated with specific locations. So, *how can leaders tell whether they are successfully fostering enchanted experiences?* A recently validated measure of situational enchantment (Houran, Lange, & Lathe, 2020) can assist in this respect. As shown in Table 1, this measure offers a checklist tool that covers 21 thoughts and feelings that build the sense of enchantment. All are germane to customer enchantment, and most apply to employee enchantment. Leaders can easily incorporate this checklist into a wide array of measurement and feedback platforms (e.g., experience surveys, focus groups, mystery shopper assessments, etc.) and use the information for both diagnostic and evaluative purposes.

Scoring the checklist is a simple, two-step process: (Step 1) every "true/yes" response gets a "1" and every "false/no" response is "0," and (Step 2) convert the raw sum (range = "0 to 21") to a normed (or Scaled) score using the conversion system in Table 2. The average Scaled Score is "50" (i.e., a raw score of "12"), so the goal is to achieve a "true/yes" for at least 13 or more of these descriptors. The higher your Scaled Score, the more enchanted guests and/or employees feel. Your score and the guest/team member feedback can help you to identify specific opportunities to build and sustain enchantment. This type of data-driven, stakeholder approach can provide a sound basis for developing an enchantment agenda and advancing the enchantment economy.

Table 1. The Enchantment-Adjective Checklist (Houran et al., 2020)

1. Joy (great happiness)
2. Excited (enjoyable feeling of eagerness or expectation)
3. Delighted (great pleasure)
4. Energized (great energy or liveliness)
5. Goodness (feeling of ultimate love or grace)
6. Beauty (great allure or splendor)
7. Dreamy (quiet, restful, in a daydream)
8. Stunned (overwhelmed or great shock)
9. Lost-in-the-moment (focused attention, frozen in place and time)
10. In awe (great respect or admiration)
11. Surprised (a jolt, suddenly startled)
12. Aware (increased perception or understanding)
13. Important (great appreciation of the moment and its significance)
14. Amazed (feeling baffled or astonished)
15. Educated (enlightened, open-minded, or having new knowledge or wisdom)
16. Dazed (mentally perplexed or confused)
17. Inspired (filled or stirred with uplifting emotion or passion)
18. Fulfilled (feeling deeply satisfied, gratified, or complete)
19. Humbled (in the presence of greatness or something incredible)
20. Connected (joined or united with something greater than yourself)
21. Special (lucky or privileged to be there)

Note: The highlighted items are those that are especially pertinent both to customers and employees.

Table 2. Raw to Scaled Score system for Enchantment-Adjective Checklist (*mean* = 50, *standard deviation* = 15)

Raw Sum ^a	Scale Score
0	6
1	17
2	24
3	29
4	32
5	35
6	37
7	40
8	41
9	44
10	45
11	47
12	49
13	51
14	53
15	55
16	58
17	61
18	64
19	68
20	75
21	86

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