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SOME NOTES ON SERVICE

By: John McConnell

I had flown from Brisbane to Adelaide to conduct a seminar in a motel in the picturesque winegrowing district of the Barossa Valley. A significant local limestone deposit had led to the establishment of a cement plant nestled amongst the vineyards. A client owned this plant, and I was there to conduct an introductory seminar for the managers. It was 10.30 PM by the time my rental car drove slowly through the small country town where the motel was located. I searched for the large sign I had been assured would proclaim the location of the motel, but the only sign that gave any clues was the one which announced the town limit had been reached, and that a new town was being approached.

About turn. More searching, at even lower speed. A cluster of lights indicated a bar, and I slowed again, thinking about asking the drinkers there if they could guide me towards my bed. At this much reduced speed a large non-illuminated sign loomed out of the foggy gloom. I swung the headlights onto the sign. It was my motel.

Relieved, but wondering why the sign was not illuminated, I drove to what appeared to be the reception area. Again, the lack of lighting made matters difficult. The door to reception was locked. A couple of matches later revealed a night 'phone, which unfortunately was not connected. Back to the car. I found my mobile 'phone and rang the number for the motel provided by the client. A very pleasant recorded voice cheerily told me the reception hours, or I could leave a message.

By now I was experiencing a small sense of humour failure. It was late. I was tired and wanted only a bed.

Fortunately, another car leaving the car park swung its lights across the glass reception doors, and I noticed a piece of paper stuck to the inside of the glass. Three matches and two burnt fingers revealed a message, for me, written in small print. It told me my room number and explained that my key was under the doormat.

Back to the car. I drove to the two storey accommodation buildings, but could see no room numbers. The doors were recessed into the walls, and the meagre lighting was placed against the walls, casting shadows on the doors and on the smallish room numbers located on them. I swung the headlights across two buildings until I found a room number that was close to mine, figuring that my room was likely on the upper floor. It was.

Into my room. I stashed my luggage and turned on the air-conditioner to warm the frigid air. Coffee was prepared and I attempted to set the alarm for the following morning. It was broken. Fortunately, I carry a small alarm for such emergencies.

It was not a complete loss. I was in a rapidly warming room. I had coffee and a bed.

I connected my computer, logged on and collected my mail. Nothing urgent was found, so I logged off. My computer had a flat battery because I had exhausted it during the flight, but it would recharge overnight. I turned on the bedside light and then flicked off the main room light before turning in. A loud beep from my computer issued a warning that all was not well, and it shut down. The power outlet was wired through the main room light, so it was impossible to charge the battery if the light was off.

By now my sense of humour failure had deepened somewhat. Bed and sleep. The computer could wait until the morning.

Rested, freshly showered and full of anticipation for the day ahead I headed for the function rooms to cast an eye over the facilities for the seminar before breakfast. The building was locked, so I headed for reception and asked if the building could be opened. The receptionist's stunned expression was not promising, and after a short delay she informed me that there were no functions booked that day for the function rooms.

My sense of humour failure was threatening to make a return when another staff member arrived and explained that our seminar had been moved to another smaller room adjacent to reception. "It hardly seemed worth while to open the function areas for one small group from a local plant when we have the motel board room available." Following a query from me, she responded that, no, she had not cleared this change with the client who had booked the room. The new room was tiny, and completely inadequate for the number of people anticipated.

The staff were immune to my protestations, and further explained that our original room had been used the night before and had not yet been cleaned. I capitulated and decided to have breakfast and to await the arrival of my client. Breakfast was excellent. There was no waitress, but the cook looked after his diners admirably. Afterwards I set out my transparencies and went looking for the toilets. The men's room was windowless, and it took me a few moments to find the light switch so I could safely use the toilet.

Daylight was burning. The seminar was due to commence in 30 minutes. I returned to the receptionist and asked when the white board, OHP projector, screen and data projector would be delivered to the boardroom. She seemed to resent being dragged away from her very important paperwork, but a short time later the OHP and screen arrived. I turned on the OHP. Nothing happened. I switched to the spare globe. More nothing. I opened the device, confirmed that both globes were blown, and wandered off to reception to report the dilemma and to enquire after the data projector and the whiteboard.

A short time later another member of staff arrived with the data projector. It was brand new, and still in its original packaging. I indicated where it was to be set up, and returned to the dining room to liberate a cup of coffee. A waitress who appeared to have stepped out of a Wagner opera descended upon me as I was leaving the dining room with my coffee. Brunhilda interrogated me, and on satisfying herself that I was actually a guest, allowed me to leave with my coffee. People who wander into motels and steal coffee must populate this part of the country.

On returning to the function room I found the staff member who had delivered the data projector on her knees surrounded by packaging with the projector in one hand, a mess of cables in the other, and a most confused look on her face. A few moments later I realised she hardly knew what a data projector was, let alone how to set it up and connect it to my computer. I relieved her of the task of setting up the projector and asked her to pursue the white board and fresh globes for the OHP.

The client arrived, and we had a short chat. Only minutes remained before the seminar was due to start. The white board arrived, with a single black pen, but no eraser. She couldn't find it. The pen did not work, and I remembered why I carried spare pens and an eraser. Still no OHP globes, so back to reception I go only to discover that the motel had no spare globes but that someone would be sent into town to hunt some down. We started the seminar late, without the OHP.

After a little under an hour the owner arrived, brandishing a single globe for the OHP. Why not two? Because they are expensive!

The seminar broke for coffee at 10.00 AM. I wandered off to the toilets, and found the lights turned off. On returning to the function room I found many people complaining about the coffee. It was so bad that one local man who was familiar with the motel had brought a thermos flask containing his own coffee. Apparently the dining room rated decent coffee, the conference rooms did not. I spoke to thermos man. He knew the owner, who, he explained had a loathing for wasted electrical power, amongst numerous other forms of waste, such as honest coffee. The owner spent much of the day wandering around the complex turning off lights in rooms not currently being used, including the toilets. I found in the reception area a large board with switches that allowed the staff to remotely control the flow of power to many of the rooms in the building.

On the afternoon of the third day, the OHP globe blew. We finished the seminar without an OHP.

"But you don't understand. We are a service industry. That Deming stuff doesn't apply to us as it might in a factory."

Is this motel owner atypical; or can we find many managers in corporations who are similarly hell bent on reducing costs, without understanding the costs of their actions?

If anyone out there wants to start a motel and functions centre, I can nominate a grand location in a truly beautiful district that grows some of the world's best wines and where the only competitor will drive business into your arms.

