

IMPECCABILITY

When I was in sales, our sales team was allowed to wear polo-style shirts – short-sleeved shirts with three buttons, a collar and our embroidered company logo – during the hot summer months. It was a welcome change for most of us. Traditional long-sleeved dress shirts and ties – our standard throughout the rest of the year – were optional. But the only way our boss, David, would agree to this more casual seasonal attire was if each of us agreed to never launder our own shirts. Instead, we were asked to dry clean our shirts; *dry clean only*. And each year, those of us who opted for the casual look (and additional comfort over the traditional shirt and tie) were required to purchase brand new “summer shirts.” In other words, the previous season’s shirts were not to be reused ... at least not on work premises.

Why the strict rule, you might ask? In a word: *impeccability*. Some might argue that our clients would neither notice nor appreciate the matching, dry-cleaned-only shirts. But David realized that after just one season of traditional laundering, the shirts would begin to look tattered. The embroidered logo would no longer rest flatly on the woven fabric, the color would fade, the collar would curl and the shirt would cease to appear professional. And David knew our clients *would* most likely notice that.

Dress shabbily, and they remember the dress. Dress impeccably, and they remember the [person]. ~ Coco Chanel

Like Coco Chanel, David knew that impeccability is woven into every detail of the customer’s experience with your company – from the way your salespeople dress, to the way your receptionist answers the phone, to the way you fulfill whatever manner of transaction it is that comprises your business. In this chapter, we’re going to take a look at impeccability from both a big and little picture perspective.

IMPECCABILITY

Here's an example: While writing this chapter, I took a lunch break with my friend and fellow writer Mali. We visited a well-known Italian restaurant and noticed that when we received our salads, the bowls were hot. Clearly they had just come out of the restaurant's industrial-strength dishwasher. You don't have to visit a five-star restaurant to receive a chilled salad bowl. Many *franchise* restaurants chill salad bowls before filling them – some establishments even install a salad bowl chiller next to their self-serve salad bar. This practice demonstrates an element of practicality – after all, who wants to put chilled salad greens into a hot bowl? It also shows a commitment to creating an impeccable guest experience. If you're visiting a restaurant that *really* takes impeccability seriously, you may even receive a chilled salad *fork*.

Google, Apple, Starbucks, Nordstrom: Impeccability as a Brand

Branding – creating the aura around a business – is a huge and growing industry. Consider the associations conjured up by the brands named above. Successful organizations such as these operate at a level of impeccability that places them in a class by themselves. Each of these four companies (Google, Apple, Starbucks and Nordstrom) has achieved a reputation for impeccability in its field. That effort has resulted in a highly regarded brand. Google simplified search; today its sites account for more than 6 percent of all of the world's Internet traffic. Apple's products, retail establishments and customer experience all draw rave reviews and the company continues to increase market share. For their first fiscal quarter of 2012, Apple reported record earnings of more than \$46 billion. Starbucks is so committed to its patrons that in late 2010 it enacted a policy prohibiting baristas from creating more than two drinks at a time (only starting a second one while finishing the first). And Nordstrom has become the benchmark by which other companies measure themselves. It isn't unusual to hear a business owner say, "We aspire to be the *Nordstrom* of the _____ business."

Think about your company's brand – how are *you* being perceived in the business community?

IMPECCABILITY

What Impeccability Says About You ... and Your Business

Having attended *and* hosted numerous events ranging from weddings, conferences and book launch parties to workshops and seminars, I'm always impressed when great attention is paid to detail. I recently participated in an all-day conference hosted by MyLegal.com. The event lasted from 7:30 am to 7:00 pm and went off without a hitch. The venue, The Georgetown University Hotel and Conference Center, had recently undergone a multimillion-dollar renovation and the facilities were stunning. Seating was comfortable; food was plentiful and delicious; parking was easy; wireless Internet access was readily available to all attendees. Cool hi-tech gifts were distributed; event programs were laser-printed in color on high-quality paper; and the schedule was adhered to, with each of the seven well-prepared speakers staying within their allotted time. Attendees had such a great overall experience that – even after a very long day – most of them stayed until the very end of the reception that followed the main event.

At the end of the day, I shared my favorable impressions with MyLegal.com's CEO, Lisa DiMonte. I was shocked to learn that planning had only begun six months prior and this was the company's first event. Lisa told me she believes in doing things right or not doing them at all. She also gave most of the credit to her event organizer – a third party firm hired specifically to handle details and logistics.

IMPECCABILITY

Looking at all the positive statements I associated with this event got me thinking about how we translate our experiences with the businesses we patronize into long-term relationships with those businesses. My observations about the MyLegal.com event, for example, are akin to character traits in a person. Sometimes a trait communicates much more than the single word that describes it. For instance, when someone is described as “sweet,” what might that imply? It could imply that the person is kind, friendly, caring, thoughtful, generous, accommodating, nurturing; even optimistic. When we think of an organization as *impeccable*, we could also say it is organized, thoughtful, detail-oriented, proactive, professional, masterful, precise, engaged, consistent, experienced, and even world-class. Once we have assigned all those traits to a company, it begins to embody them for us. Provided the business keeps meeting our expectations, that perception becomes our reality. If the details that make up our experience with a company are impeccable, the company itself is impeccable.

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Attaining Impeccability

How do you *feel* when you hear the word impeccability? What thoughts or images does it conjure up? Do you embrace the idea of impeccability, or do you feel some resistance? Does it seem too buttoned up or unattainable, in a world where *no one is perfect*? Relax – it *is* possible.

IMPECCABILITY

Impeccable Doesn't Mean Perfect

Think of impeccability as an expression of the highest levels of precision and care intersecting with one another. To achieve it, determine a non-negotiable standard for what you consider to be remarkable behavior, adhere to it, *and* commit to never compromise that standard ... even when others around you are compromising theirs. Yes, no one is perfect and you may falter from time to time. Occasional slipups are OK, provided you have an impeccable *recovery process* in place. However, the first step on the road to impeccability is to determine what it means for your business, and to *craft* a set of goals that will help you achieve it.

In the coming sections, we'll talk about ways to attain – and maintain – impeccability. I'll help you uncover the hidden details in the way you present your company to the world and show you how to deliver an impeccable experience for others. Your clients will know they can count on your firm; you will invoke their trust and rise well above the status quo.

Here are 6 ways to manage the process and make the details work *for* you – instead of against you.

1. Take a Client's-Eye View: At a local restaurant one day, I noticed an employee jumping up and down near the wall. It turns out he was checking for dust on the top of the wall-mounted coat rack. Later, I saw this same gentleman removing wall decorations for dusting. The folks at this restaurant realize a simple truth most businesses completely miss – perception is reality. Think about it. As a patron, when you see dust on decorations, ceiling fans or even in restrooms, what assumptions do you draw about that establishment? Put that lesson to play in your own business: Sit in the client chair and take a look around. Is there dust on your computer monitor? Will a visitor touch chewing gum, or get poked by something sharp as they reach under the chair to scoot it forward? Do they have a direct view of your water-deprived plants? Are your restrooms untidy, poorly stocked and disorganized? Every detail your clients notice – both consciously and unconsciously – helps form their opinion of your company ... *and of you.*

IMPECCABILITY

2. Eliminate Distractions: Landmark Education devotes great attention to its internationally renowned training centers. Its “water only” policy helps keep the session rooms clean. When attendees are on break and the rooms are empty, assistants restore order by arranging chairs exactly one tissue-box-width apart and placing a black Bic pen – cap removed, tip facing the front of the room – under the center point of the participants’ chairs. Why such extremes? One key motivation is to prevent distractions. While my guess is that most people may never notice the precise and intentional arrangements, it would be most distracting for students to return to a room in which chairs are astray, pens are hard to find, coffee stains dot the carpet, and the smell of recently-consumed fast food french fries lingers in the air. Impeccability means avoiding possible distractions such as shabby work shirts, hot salad plates, and dusty or disorganized rooms. You see, once the distractions have been proactively removed, you will have directed your clients’ attention and focus onto what is most important. The elimination of these distractions is an often-overlooked – albeit *essential* – part of creating a remarkable customer experience.

3. Solicit Feedback: Your clients are noticing valuable details that they could be sharing with you. Make it clear that you want to know. Comcast, Starbucks and Southwest Airlines have all actively used Twitter to keep track of “the word on the street.” They know what’s happening in real time, develop solutions, and connect with their unhappy patron(s), often converting them into brand champions. Do you have a system in place for gathering client feedback? I’ve never seen *this* question on a feedback form, but I believe it to be a valuable one: “Was there some small – but important – detail of your experience that cast our company in a positive or negative light?”

This kind of open-door feedback system provides free business coaching for you and makes clients feel smart, important, and valued – especially when they see you sincerely thanking them, implementing positive change, and following through.

IMPECCABILITY

4. Take Criticism Constructively: A friend who owns a local business received some feedback from a client who was about to exit the establishment. After a series of positive, generous comments and compliments the client said, "... but have you noticed that you have a few stained ceiling tiles?" At first my friend was offended. I asked him to reconsider his reaction. If he could look at it objectively, I said, he'd actually find great value in what that client was willing to share. That's because most people wouldn't have bothered – they'd either assume you knew about the flaw and it wasn't a priority, or they'd notice it, but it wouldn't really register with them consciously. Either way, the shortcoming will still color their perception of you – and your business. We should be grateful to clients who are willing to be honest and forthright with us. They're catching something we should have already caught and giving us a chance to make it right ... before more people notice.

5. Put Systems in Place: How customer-centric are your existing systems? I'll bet that restaurant employee (the jumping duster guy) didn't just decide on his own that the wall fixtures needed a dusting. Instead, this is likely a routine duty with a clear schedule of frequency and perhaps even a specific *technique*. (Yes, technique! He's probably required to use a damp cloth – not a dry one, which would only stir up the dust and displace it to another location.) We know plants need water, but are yours getting the proper amount and on a particular day of the week? Is someone checking under your chairs for chewing gum on a routine basis? Does anyone routinely clean your front door; the back of the reception desk or, perhaps most important, the restrooms? Does your receptionist intentionally (and sincerely) smile and make eye contact when people enter? Is there an untidy pile of outgoing packages in plain view?

IMPECCABILITY

6. Make the Extra Effort: When I was in sales, I sent every client a birthday card, every year for 11 years, on time or early. That was about 120 cards each month. Most people never said a word about their card, but some told me how it made them feel and how it helped distinguish me from other salespeople. This small investment of time and money provided a huge return, as just one of many “details” in my clients’ experience. (By the way, I signed each card in blue ink – a detail that shows your clients that it’s almost certainly a real signature.)

It’s A Matter of Respect

Here’s a compelling example to bring the whole concept together and, I hope, provide some incentive for you to embark upon your own quest for impeccability. Let’s compare two automotive repair shops. Both employ courteous, well-trained service professionals. They offer the same convenient hours of operation, are equidistant to your home or work and are exactly equal in competence, convenience and professionalism.

They differ in only one regard: Their customer waiting areas. Shop A’s customer waiting area is clean, organized, quiet, stocked with *fresh* donuts, *brew-on-demand* flavored coffee, *current* magazines and free wireless Internet that you can access from comfy chairs. Conversely, shop B’s customer waiting area has *overcooked* coffee, one remaining *stale* donut, *outdated* and *tattered* magazines and staff who respond with blank looks to your queries about Wi-Fi. It’s furnished with hard plastic chairs, smells of tires and motor oil, and the sound of air-compressed lug nuts being fitted onto wheels is deafening. In other words, shop B’s customer waiting area feels like nothing more than an extension of their garage.

Clearly, shop A knows how to create an impeccable client experience. All things being equal, which shop are you more likely to frequent and tell others about?

IMPECCABILITY

It doesn't matter whether you own a brick and mortar business, you're an online retailer; sole proprietor; hourly employee; product *or* service provider; or *Fortune* 100 company. If you're willing to pay attention to details and manage them in such a way that you, too, create an impeccable experience for everyone around you, you'll stand high above all the rest – and you'll see your efforts translated into dollars.

Achieving impeccability isn't necessarily a simple task, but it's well worth the effort. If you're looking for motivation to take on this challenge, consider this: Providing your customers with a remarkable experience is the ultimate way to show your respect – and gratitude – for their support. It costs you little or nothing, but it can yield immeasurable benefits.

“You’ve thought of everything!”

This chapter has been dedicated to raising awareness about the importance, impact, benefits and payoffs of impeccability. But how can you know when you've reached your goal – consistent delivery of an impeccable client experience? It isn't as though clients are going to make it a point to tell you their experience was impeccable. Well, some might. But remember that so much of what we're talking about is intangible, and often leaves your clientele with little more than a “good feeling” about you. But it's *that* feeling that makes them want to return – and refer others. They may even try to articulate why they feel that sense of loyalty, but have a tough time finding the words. So when you hear clients saying, “You've thought of everything” that's when you know you have it. Well done.

If you are committed to the importance and value of delivering an impeccable client experience, visit www.WhatDoesSteveDo.com now to claim your special offer.