

Twelve Fundamental Lessons from the Cruise Industry



A recent cruise of the Baltics on the Regent Seven Seas Explorer with my wife was an eye-opener. As a hotelier, in particular with luxury properties, I have accrued a high standard for service excellence garnered from hundreds of stays across the globe over the past four decades in the industry, and the cruise met all expectations.

Hence, it is no wonder that the cruise industry is thriving, particularly within the premium segment. But is the comparison really fair? With guest-to-staff ratios of one-to-one, few hotels can match the equivalent 'people power' to implement the same brand standards. Moreover, with a completely captive audience, cruise management can all but eliminate variables such as outlet utilization.

Despite these key differences, I've identified twelve fundamental points that provide excellent lessons for hoteliers to consider in their approach to guest services.

1. ***Anticipate then personalize the guests' needs.*** On the ship, we were asked upon arrival many questions. An example was what type of water we liked. The result was a nonstop supply of San Pellegrino. I do not know of one landlocked property that has ever asked us what our water preference was.
2. ***Act on flaws.*** Mid-cruise, there was a questionnaire where I mentioned that the sound on the in-suite television was lower than normal. They replaced the set the next day. Hoteliers wait until

after the stay is complete to offer a questionnaire which is often too late to mitigate scorn let alone resolve the guests' issues.

3. **Use your CRM.** Everywhere we went we were greeted personally. With 700 passengers, this is a daunting task. If we were a walk-in at one of the onboard restaurants, asking our suite number pulled up all of our data. Arriving at a restaurant with reservations meant that we were warmly welcomed by name.
4. **Cleanliness everywhere.** Several cruises have been plagued with diseases that spread rapidly amongst guests. Thus, the focus on cleaning was intensive in the public areas, both as 'hygiene theater' as well as a preventative measure. A behind-the-scenes tour of the kitchen (pictured above) revealed miles of shiny stainless steel.
5. **Multinational staffing.** Whenever engaging staff, I asked what country they were from. The responses revealed an exceptional representation; I personally counted over 20 different nationalities. The hospitality industry exists as a global village with service transcending all cultures. Hotels need to recognize the opportunities in foreign workers, both to buoy our labor markets and to offer new perspectives on life itself.
6. **Exceptional maitre d'.** With the exception of a few Michelin-starred restaurants, I have rarely seen this position so aptly managed and revered. Many hoteliers underrate the position, which in my mind is a major error.
7. **Keeping guests busy.** Our next-day newsletter arrived at turndown. This is a great opportunity to upsell guests. What can you sell to capture more revenue at this prime moment when guests are most susceptible to splurge?
8. **Flawless room service.** Nowadays, we tend to underestimate the value of great room service, instead opting to drive traffic to the restaurant in order to better control the meal experience and perhaps increase the average guest check. In-room dining is nevertheless a tremendous tool when applied in the right situations.
9. **Quality table linens.** If you are using cloth napkins that are anything but 100% cotton, it is time for an upgrade. Yes, they cost more to launder and starch, but they provide a luxury impression. Even in the informal settings, such as the poolside BBQ, quality linens were present.
10. **Better pillows.** The battle of the most comfortable bed seems to be abating. Now is the time to focus on pillows. There were two types offered on this cruise, and both were better than we have at home, or in my experience, hotel properties.
11. **Smiling staff who understand their guest service role.** All the staff appeared happy to greet guests. The lesson here is simple; if any member of your team does not want to be on property, there is no place for them.
12. **Public washrooms.** I often gage a property based upon its public areas because their regular cleaning is a hallmark of SOP enforcement. On our boat, all restrooms were flawless with plenty of terrycloth hand towels. They also had a back-of-door tissue dispenser to use for the door handle,

something hotels should add immediately.

It's important to recognize that many of these so-called lessons would be extremely costly to implement at a hotel. The challenge we face is that luxury hotel guests are also luxury cruise guests, and they don't emotionally distinguish between the two – a room is a room, no matter its geographic position. Not fair, you might say? Too bad, do better!