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11-2017

Elemental connections

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Citation

LEE, Silas. Elemental connections. (2017). *Excellence Explored*. 3-5.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/ises_research/65

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ELEMENTAL CONNECTIONS



Silas Lee, Founder of COO Boutique Hostel, weighs in on the role of technology in customer service and how face-to-face relationships trump all.



“I’m very old-school,” declares Silas Lee, Founder and CEO of COO Boutique Hostel, as we quizzically eye our surroundings: edgy black walls, overhead neon lights, metallic room dividers done in the style of heritage breeze blocks.

We are sitting in a corner of the hostel’s bistro — which doubles as an informal lounge area for hostel guests — and it’s clear he senses our scepticism. “This is all a facade. All these designs will come and go. Many hotels and hostels emphasise the technology or design but these only give you instant gratification. I’m always mindful that hospitality is ever changing, and the one thing that never goes out of style is that human touch. COO seems cool and fun, but what we’re trying to do is to get people to sit down, share a drink, and strike up a friendship.”

Silas turned 52 earlier this year. Before he was abruptly retrenched at 50, he was heading the most profitable portfolio of a leading international investment bank. The loss was destabilising: the man had spent 25 years in the industry — he calls himself a “career banker” — and overnight he had become jobless with a family of two young children, bank loans, and a mortgage in his name. But despite his lack of experience in hospitality, despite being offered return opportunities in banking, Silas devoted his entire life’s savings into developing COO, an unprecedented hybrid of affordable bunks, luxuriously designed facilities, and, most importantly, a rapidly disappearing *kampong* spirit.

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Silas, COO is premised on “Asian hospitality sensibility.” What is that exactly?

So, in Europe, the communal aspect of hostel accommodations is about drinking and partying — DJs and live music. But that concept can't be replicated in Asia because it's not in our nature. There are designated spaces for letting your hair down, like at music festivals, but not in a context like this.

While our space looks very SoHo — very New York bar — we don't actively push the space by hosting DJs. Our guests enjoy the space, but their primary objective is to explore Singapore. They want to see as much as they can while travelling, so we've branded our hospitality differently.

How would you describe COO's service then?

I have two words — human touch. There's this saying: when you pay peanuts, you get monkeys. We don't believe that. We always aim to add little human touches to everything we do.

For example, most hostels close their check-in counter after midnight so guests have to check themselves in if they arrive in the middle of the night. We provide 24/7 front desk service, and just like they do at hotels, a guest relations officer personally leads each guest to the room.

Yeah, many reviews describe your service as friendly and helpful. Do you have a training process?



You know, service isn't just about what the customers want; it's also about how to sustainably meet these needs, and sometimes the things they want can be difficult to achieve operationally. Finding

that balance is how you improve your service. Once you implement those types of solutions, you hear fewer customer complaints of the issue because the team knows how to react when they're faced with the problem. They can even learn to anticipate the problem.

We're a small team and close to one another, so we use instant feedback and informal dialogue instead of a structured training programme. I talk about issues with the staff almost every day, and they give me direct feedback from their operational perspectives. Together we analyse feedback from reviews to immediately improve our processes.

Not every issue starts off as a service issue. They sometimes begin as an operational issue, but we realise the solutions to these operational difficulties often become a service plus for the customers. When we developed the COO brand, we also developed a brand bible, which contains information about everything from how we address our customers to our uniforms. We've updated the bible with all these learning experiences, so after just a year of



operations, I can proudly say about 80-85% of our SOPs are well run. The best part of all this is the service culture is embedded in the staff because it's been a joint effort.

That's such an achievement, wouldn't you say? So many business owners have difficulties with manpower.

To me, the biggest battle is the battle of the heart — your team has to buy into the business philosophy. I think we've won that. It wasn't always like this, though.

We started with many misunderstandings, but both sides took the time to explain our own perspectives. I'm mindful of the fact that I don't have hospitality experience while some of them have been working in the industry for years. By talking things through, they could better understand what guests expect while I could see the constraints they were working with.

The worst thing a business owner can do is to ignore their staff's comments. We recently had an issue where we started receiving enquiries through Facebook.



Our team works all day but still had to answer these queries late at night. They told me how it was beginning to be a problem, so we talked to some NUS students who had developed a chatbot programme. We worked with them to programme the chatbot with automatic responses to questions we typically receive on Facebook. Now the team gets to sleep peacefully at night while customers get immediate answers to their queries.

Are you a proponent of using technology in customer service?

So much of the argument for technology is to increase productivity, but that's only one side of the equation. A lot of us forget about the other side: how does technology affect your value proposition to your customers? You must understand the staff's productivity gain is often the customer's loss because they now have to perform tasks the staff used to do.

I don't want to be critical, but I think service is really about human connections. I used to visit this Japanese restaurant all the time, but I stopped after they automated their processes — from queuing to ordering — because I think automation adversely affected the wait staff's attitudes.

Sure, technology is the way forward, and I am committed to streamlining our operations for our staff, but the more I do that, the more I want to emphasise the human touch of COO. This is something I always tell my team. I believe the power of technology is to take away mundane work so that staff can perform value-added responsibilities like paying attention to customers. The reason we incorporate automation is to free up their time so they can chat to guests, make trip recommendations, find out how their stay is going. Because at the end of their trip, guests won't remember how comfortable the bed was or how nice the space looked. They're going to remember the person they connected with. ♦