

Zen & The Art of Legal Networking

INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL LAWYERS NETWORK

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Disney's Approach to Business Excellence - An LMA Recap

As you know if you've been following my [Twitter stream](#), or checking Zen in the last couple of months, last week, I attended the Legal Marketing Association's Annual Conference in Orlando.

Tuesday morning, the conference business sessions officially kicked off with our keynote from Jeff Williford from the [Disney Institute](#), who talked about Disney's Approach to Business

Excellence. When he began by telling us that he'd be speaking for 90 minutes, I think the audience was worried, but the presentation was so engaging and informative that the time really flew. And although his presentation was about how Disney creates a truly magical experience here, there were a lot of parallels for the legal industry - we're also a service industry after all! Any of the particularly important points that relate to law firms will be in bold throughout the post.

He told the audience that Disney employs more than 60,000 people from 65 countries, with 10% of those being interns, and warned us that his presentation on Disney's approach to business excellence would be like drinking water from a firehose. But he did say that Walt Disney reminded everyone in 1955 that "it all started with a mouse."

Part of Disney's philosophy is to change the language that they use for everything they do - so "customers" are "guests," "employees" are "cast members," and they can be "onstage" or "offstage." They have a "chain of excellence" with four parts:



1. Leadership Excellence
2. Cast Excellence
3. Guest Satisfaction
4. Financial Results/Repeat business

Jeff went through these four points to break them down further.

Leadership Excellence

It all starts with leadership excellence - **Disney believes that if their leaders take care of their people, they will, in turn, take care of their guests.** They know that their strongest marketing is all of their customers, and that inspires them - an intent to return is an intent to recommend. Marketing supports the experience, and the experience is what brings you back.

Woven through everything they do at Disney is creativity. Walt Disney once said "Every child is born blessed with a vivid imagination" and as you get older it goes away. Just like a muscle, the imagination grows flabby if not exercised. Jeff challenged us to color outside the lines - find out what makes us excited and inspired. He also dared us to take notes in crayons at our meetings, saying "We all need to be pulled back to a time when we were imaginative."

Disney has two fundamental beliefs - that everyone is creative and that your ideas are separate from your identity. Jeff suggested that we think inside the box, and then expand it. Disney has four sides to their "box:"

- Vision: What to be
- Mission: What to do
- Customer: Who
- Essence: What to feel

Disney tries to meet their guests at their emotional level - their staff will be excited at park entrances, but more mellow at exits. They estimate that they have 60 chances a day to make an impression on you - making the right one helps to build relationships. Each one of those impressions is important because even one bad one will outweigh 59 good ones. **How are you meeting your clients at their emotional level?**

Disney's first marketing triumph is when they changed "Mortimer Mouse" to "Mickey Mouse" - Walt Disney's wife pointed out to him that when you say Mortimer, your face looks unhappy. But "Mickey" forces you to smile! It's that kind of attention to detail that has made Disney so successful.

Jeff talked a bit about some of Disney's projects, including their cruise line. It ended up being a "successful failure," as he called it, at first because they had partnered with another cruise line and just had their characters on board. But once people saw their characters, they thought the entire cruise was run by Disney. Because Disney had no control over the guest service, it wasn't successful to begin with. But Disney Cruise Lines recovered when Disney took over the guest experience.

Jeff mentioned that Disney never used to do weddings - but because people wanted to get married here, they would have "stealth" weddings. The wedding party would hide what they were wearing, go into the Magic Kingdom with the officiant and guests, and try to get their wedding finished before security would stop them.

This taught Disney an important lesson - **you have to listen to your clients because they will usually tell you what they want** - did the guests really want to get married at the castle, or did they really want a fairytale wedding? That's how Disney ended up offering fairytale weddings.

This speaks to Disney's overall philosophy of the continuous improvement process - **listen and learn, measure, act, re-measure, recognize & celebrate, and share. This cycle is always happening and Disney is always asking themselves what they can add that their guests want.**

Jeff pointed out that your role as a leader is to listen to your cast, your employees. **If people are complaining that it's a hassle to do business with you, there's a problem with your process.** Listening and encouraging to your employees really pays off for you in figuring this out.

Jeff also said that sometimes "helping" your employees isn't really helping - ask them what's needed before you jump in. He recommended involving your people in decision-making and giving them flexibility - for example, empower them to make decisions. It obviously works - there are a little over 300 cast members here who are celebrating 40 years along with Disney.

Every leader is telling a story about what he or she values, Jeff said. **Are the people back at your office saying what you want them to say? We can see what is important to people based on their behavior - you are showing people this through your behavior. Are you leading by example? Because your team is watching.**

Jeff challenged us to think about what the title of our stories would be. This will help you identify what's important to you. We judge ourselves based on our intentions, but others are judging us based on our behavior.

Think about what your vision is for those things you can control - your team looks to you for that. **An effectively communicated vision creates a shared purpose, inspires passion, sets direction and conveys value. Walt Disney always pushed his people to move forward, to keep doing the next thing. How do you inspire your team to do something they've never done before? It's your job as a leader to inspire the "cast" cast to get excited about what you're doing.**

Jeff encouraged us to design our organizational structure for success by implementing effective processes for getting work done. Disney does this, and they also explore everything so they know what's going on in their own organization. How do they do this? They go out into the parks, listen, talk to employees and clients - Walt Disney did this and that's often how he found his next idea.

And, not surprisingly, my favorite line of the day was **"The most important thing you can do is manage your relationships."**

Cast Excellence

Jeff talked about having a successful corporate culture, saying theirs at Disney is by design, well-defined, clear to all and goal-oriented. He asked us to think about our corporate cultures and whether it's what we want - internal branding is important. Communicate your culture up front and early. **If you communicate your culture up-front, others can make the decision if they want to engage with you or not. For example -** Disney doesn't allow anyone with visible tattoos or mohawks to work here, and they communicate that early so people can self-select out.

How are you communicating your culture to potential hires? What are your firm's non-negotiables? Can people self-select out? Do people really know who you are before you apply? Jeff said that at Disney, one of their non-negotiables is friendliness - if they have two equally qualified people, they will hire the nicer person. Did you smile during the interview? No matter what job you have at Disney, you'll come into contact with somebody. So they hire attitude versus aptitude - similarly, clients hire attorneys they know, like and trust.

Disney has four key strategies for selecting their cast:

1. Communicate your culture.
2. State non-negotiables up front.
3. Treat applicants as guests.
4. Hire attitude versus aptitude.

Once they've hired someone, Disney conducts an orientation (they call it "traditions") for all of their people to show them what they're all about - do you do that at your firm? Those in the classes are from all positions at Disney - everyone takes the same classes. Disney also does a cast member survey every year and has monthly meetings with them - how often do you meet with your team?

Disney's key strategies for communication include:

- Soliciting information from everyone

- Showing individuals how they contribute
- Meeting diverse communication needs

Jeff says it's essential to find your key messages and repeat them. Ask how teammates want to be recognized - this can influence their experience, and subsequently, the guests'.

Their key strategies for care are:

- Treat employees like customers
- Promote a supportive environment
- Recognize employees

Leaders go out into the parks and look for cast members doing something right - they then recognize those employees. **How can you do this within your own firm? This makes employees feel as though they are a part of the success - and they are.**

Jeff showed several videos during his presentation, but one with cast members had a employee comment "Every day I am privileged to have a small part in making someone's dream come true." **Jeff said that even in the legal profession, we "create magic" - how are we making someone's dreams come true?**

Guest Satisfaction

Disney's strategy is to exceed their guests' expectations by paying attention to every detail of the delivery. Paying attention doesn't cost money, just time. **There can be big wows (like building a new rollercoaster), but paying attention to the small details changes the experience - it's easier to do 100 things 1% better than to do 1 thing 100% better. When you link all those little wows together, you create a big wow.**

How can you do this? Know and understand your guests - figure out what they expect. For example, most people come to Disney in groups of four, so they build new things with that in mind. Disney sends out a guest survey 45 days after the stay - why? Because by then, you've gotten the bill and can accurately tell them your perceived value of your stay. Otherwise, "You're so loaded on magic and pixie dust, you just hand over the money."

Disney isn't the cheapest ticket in town, but they don't apologize for that - the question they want answered is do people find value in them. Can your clients say the same?

Jeff told us that everyone needs to know the answers to three questions here at Disney - the most popular ones. They are "Where are the restrooms?" "Where's Mickey?" and "What time is the 3 o'clock parade?" This third question got a laugh, but Jeff pointed out that we have to

identify the question behind the question - in this case, it's really "Where should I be standing to get the most out of the experience and at what time?" **Figuring out the question behind the question is the opportunity to build your relationship.**

Jeff emphasized that it's also important to know what the positive stereotypes about your company are, and how you can build them up, as well as what the negative stereotypes are and how they can be mitigated. Disney is proactive about overcoming negatives - to do this, they have to notice the small details. Jeff told the story of Disney giving guests a piece of candy to see where they would throw the wrapper - it was about every 25 steps. So they put a trash can every 22 steps - empowered guests to help with keeping the park clean. It's something small, but it makes a big difference.

Disney has a common purpose - to create happiness by providing the finest in entertainment for people of all ages everywhere - and this defines their goals, aligns their purpose with customers' expectations and communicates that to the employees. They build time into their employees' schedules so that they can create a "magical moment" every day for a guest. Paying attention to this relationship pays off at that moment and every time that moment is recalled or recounted. **Can you build time into your schedule to interact and build relationships, and exceed expectations by doing so?**

As part of Disney's approach to business excellence, they have four quality standards:

- Show
- Courtesy
- Efficiency
- Safety

Disney uses these four quality standards to help them make decisions every day. The most important of these is safety, because as Jeff said "a dead guest is not a returning guest." They will drop show, efficiency or courtesy for your safety and theirs. Number two is courtesy, three is show and four is efficiency.

Jeff asked us to discuss amongst ourselves the brands to whom we are loyal and why. He then asked us what the commonalities are among those companies and summed them up by saying that when you've built a relationship with people, they'll forgive minor inconsistencies.

Financial Results/Repeat Business

Disney approaches their guests as "Special entertainment with heart." Jeff broke this down by saying that what Disney does is "entertainment," how they do it is "special," and their underlying value is "heart." **He asked us to think about the service we provide, how we do it, and what our underlying values are. This will help us to figure out what our brand promise is - this isn't a jingle or slogan, but the promise we make.**

Our stories live within our clients and the stories they share with others, and the brand lives within the clients who are loyal to us. Ask yourself - what are the tragedies - Bambi's Mom - what are the heartwarming experiences - Cinderella's wedding." Disney wants to know at all times what people are saying about them, so they monitor everything everyone says about them. Jeff reminded us that we can too, through Twitter, Facebook, etc.

Jeff pushed us to think about how we're communicating our brand promises to existing and potential clients, reminding us that our clients are looking at us and watching us.

Throughout the presentation, he gave us a number of calls to action, which left the entire group feeling inspired - but it's not just about the marketers. Combined with what the general counsels said the following day, we should all be working as firms and colleagues to offer the best service to our clients and help create those "magical" moments. It may sound hokey, but making our clients feel special is what will keep them returning to us time and time again.

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