

## Real-world lessons from the hospitality expert

Robert Bosma

*Mind Your Guest, and Mind Your Brand, Hilversum, The Netherlands*

Email: [robert@mindyourguest.nl](mailto:robert@mindyourguest.nl)

This article by Robert Bosma gives an insight in the world of hospitality in the real world and his vision about what hospitality is, how it works successfully and why people find it so important to be treated in a hospitable way. What do companies and their employees need to be hospitable? Read also about the essence of the powerful combination of hospitality, service and quality combined in the Model of Attention and his stories of several practical situations.

**Keywords:** attention, brand strategy, hospitableness, professional, quality, service

### Introduction

“Real-world lessons from the hospitality expert” is a different type of contribution to the *Research in Hospitality Management* journal than the academic papers found elsewhere in this issue. The author has over 25 years of international experience in the fields of brand strategy, marketing and creative direction at advertising agencies and other businesses. In 2010 Robert started his companies Mind Your Brand and Mind Your Guest. He extracts the unique promise of brands and companies, and develops and helps to implement their unique manner of delivering hospitality, service and quality. In this process, companies become more successful in the relationship with their customers, who become more loyal. As a brand and hospitality strategist, Robert advises businesses, hospitals, restaurants and hotels in the Netherlands and abroad with his extensive vision of hospitality and by helping them to implement the “Model of Attention®” he has developed.

### The connect effect

Robert believes in the success of “the connect effect” – the positive effect when companies and their employees are connected to the values of hospitality, service and quality, share this internally in their organisations, and give their utmost in performing services for their customers.

Why is offering hospitality so important? Why do some companies succeed better than others in offering hospitality?

From the day we were born and were lying in our cradles, we needed four basic things to survive: food, drink, hygiene and attention. Growing up in prosperous surroundings, we are aware that things like food, drink and things for daily hygiene can be bought. But what about attention?

### Attention sensor

Attention is one of our basic needs. It is something abstract. It's like a sensor scanning for attention. Our personal “attention sensor” goes on at a very early stage of our existence and remains active for as long as we live. Everyone wants his or her own form of attention. At home, at school, going out with friends, at work – everyone wants to be seen and heard. Throughout our whole lives, our attention sensor is active. Attention is not for sale in a store, although there are places where people think they can pay for attention, for example in restaurants, hotels, airlines, wellness centres, and certain professions where they offer special kinds of attention.

People don't stand in front of a restaurant thinking, “Will they be hospitable?” No, they assume that they will be hospitable, because that is what most people expect from restaurants. When guests are not completely satisfied with the food in a restaurant, but the hospitable treatment they received was good, the restaurant might get the benefit of the doubt. On the other hand, when the culinary level in a restaurant is excellent but the guests have not been treated in a very hospitable way, they will certainly not come back again.

Giving attention by offering hospitality is not a trick to bind people, but is on the same level as giving someone food when they are hungry or giving them water when they are thirsty. The need for attention is a basic human need, a need that is gratified by getting or giving (feeding or being fed with) real attention. So, offering hospitality is not giving something extra. It's the ‘Vitamin H’ for mankind.

### The Model of Attention®

The Model of Attention (Figure 1) is a structure of mathematical sets, divided into hospitality, service, and quality. The model shows the difference between these three subjects. Someone can be very hospitable, without giving any service or quality.

On the other hand, one can give quality and service without being hospitable.

The outcome of offering all three of these powerful components will be that people feel secure, and when people feel secure they want to stay connected to that feeling. The Model of Attention clarifies what people find most important in certain contexts. For guests in a restaurant, for example, getting the right attention in a hospitable manner is important, whereas hospital patients put quality first. The same goes for bank customers – they will go firstly for quality and service. Successful companies offer all three of these aspects of attention. They have a clear vision and mission in offering hospitality, service and quality. It really comes out of the heart of these companies to be meaningful for their employees and customers. Employees and customers will feel secure and want to stay connected with these companies. Even a glimpse of a logo can give them a secure feeling.

**Hospitable: “The intrinsic motivation to make contact with others to make them feel welcome with exclusive attention.”**

This means that during every contact moment, a customer, guest, passenger or patient must feel welcome, not only at the first meeting. When we consider the definition, let us begin with *intrinsic motivation to make contact*. This is actually the basis of giving attention. If someone is not motivated to connect with others, for whatever reason, they will have a tough task working as a hospitable professional. Hospitable professionals are intrinsically motivated every day and every moment to make connections with others. *To make them feel welcome*. In the context of hospitableness, the intrinsic motivation to make contact with others has a goal, namely to make customers, guests or passengers feel that they are welcome, during every moment of contact. Not only the guests themselves are welcome, but also their questions, comments,

complaints, etc. Offer *exclusive attention*. This is the “high school” of being hospitable. If you overact in giving attention, guests will not believe you. If you underperform, customers will feel that they are not taken seriously. Providing exclusive attention is a matter of finesse and craftsmanship. It is the use of the right body language, and the right words spoken in the right tone.

## Service

Service can be defined as *hospitality put into action*. Someone can be hospitable only by using body language. Service is taking the extra step for others. You can give service without being hospitable. This applies in both personal and non-personal contact. For example: a bookmark you get together with a book ordered online. There is no hospitable written letter with it, just the book and the bookmark. The bookmark is part of the service. You did not ask for it, although it makes your order more complete. Or, your shoes have been repaired faster than was indicated, because you told the shoe repairman you needed them for a special occasion. The shoe repairman could stick to his deliver policy. But in this case he changed his repair schedule especially for the customer.

## Quality

Quality can be divided into several aspects:

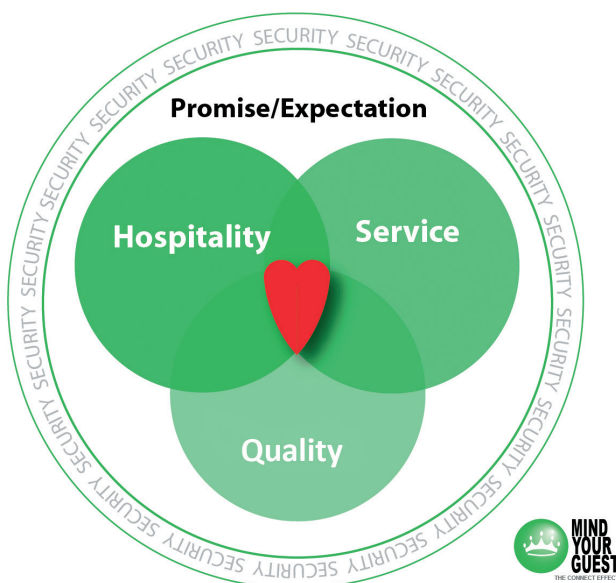
- Quality of the products or services
- Quality of the packaging of the products
- Quality of the knowledge of the people working in the company
- Quality of employees’ communication skills
- Quality of the presentation of the employees
- Quality of the presentation of the company
- Quality overall that the company represents.

The Model of Attention is surrounded by the “ring of security”, because that is what people feel, when they are treated in a hospitable way, with the right kind of service and are getting overall quality. The power of feeling secure is that people want to stay connected with people, brands and companies who act from the philosophy of the Model of Attention. When we look at the famous hierarchy of needs of Maslow, we see that in that model safety comes second. In first position are our biological needs for food, drink and hygiene. But living in prosperous surroundings, people know that they can buy most of their biological needs. What people find most important is security. In my opinion, security and feeling secure come first.

What make people feel secure?

- Family
- Home
- Friends
- People or things that comfort them
- People, brands and companies that are trustworthy
- People, brands and companies that practice what they preach
- Transparency
- Real people
- Real attention.

When people, brands and companies combine all this in their daily behaviour and communication, or better – translate it in



**Figure 1:** The Model of Attention with the ring of security around it (Bosma, 2016)

their own unique way of behaving and communicating, driven by a mission – they will be more successful in forming bonds with people and making customers, guests or passengers more loyal. Hospital patients will feel better also, because they feel more secure with the surrounding advice of the medical staff, instead of seeing them as aloof specialists in white uniforms. By implementing the Model of Attention, people feel secure and want to stay connected to that feeling. When, as a company or a brand, that kind of security is offered, people will want to stay connected to them. This is the magic of giving real attention.

### **“As the twig is bent the tree is inclined”**

When we were little kids we had to learn a lot of things – walking, talking, eating with a knife and fork, riding a bicycle, reading, writing, and being polite, just to name a few things. But at what age in our lives did we learn about hospitality? As a child, we were faced with the subject of hospitality when we were in a restaurant with our parents or during a stay in a hotel. We heard our parents talk to each other about how they experienced the level of hospitality. At a later age, you might be faced with hospitality, for example, when working in a restaurant to support your studies, or work in an environment where hospitality is important.

### **Isn't it odd that we learn a lot of things in our younger lives, while we don't learn anything about hospitality?**

Let's start practising hospitality to children at a very early stage in elementary school. Let them learn to make real contact with themselves and with others. Let them grow into strong personalities who make themselves and others feel welcome, starting with their classmates. When they get older, the way to be authentically hospitable is already in their systems. In every part of life, private and professional, offering authentic hospitality is a gift. It doesn't matter what kind of profession people take up. In every job they will have contact with other people. When they're able to make real contact with others, the goals they want to achieve in life will be reached much more easily. Besides having strong personalities, they will also become strong, hospitable communicators. And the world will be a better place.

#### **Examples from practice**

*Computer says: “No”*

There is nothing worse than when a restaurateur blames his computer for the lack of hospitality. Restaurant computer systems are getting smarter every day. They make it much easier for the restaurateur to control his business. But one of the things you can't put into a system are the guests, and that is what some restaurateurs forget. They forget also that real contact and genuine hospitality can't be programmed.

But what if demanding guests have requests that go against this smart system? What do you do as a restaurateur? Move along to the direction of the guest or hide behind the computer program? One of many examples: I ordered a breakfast at a restaurant. The breakfast was described in detail on the menu including the prize. I decided to take this breakfast, but without the yogurt with granola. “That is possible” the waiter replied a bit agitated, “but you have to pay for the full breakfast,

because the breakfast is put that way in our computer system and I cannot adjust it per guest.” This inhospitable explanation was enough for me. I had the incredible need to have breakfast elsewhere and I didn't want a discussion about that early in the morning. But this poor employee was caught by his system and it blocked him from performing in a hospitable way.

But just between you and me: we as professionals never let it happen that a computer system stands in our way in offering hospitality. Right?

The intelligence in hospitality is in you as a host, together with your levels of service and quality. You are the boss over the system and you don't take a yes or a no for granted. Especially not from a computer system.

#### *Hospitality masterclass in Italy*

From each entrepreneur, anywhere in the world, I learn a lot. Recently I was in Italy with my family. For many, Italy is the cradle of hospitality. During my visit to a historic town just below Perugia I got a masterclass in hospitality. A short story. My son wanted to look for new shoes. While we were looking in at the window of a menswear store, we were hospitably invited by the owner to take a look inside. Because there was more to see, he said. We were touched by the charm of this hospitable host. I watched the whole scene from a distance.

What was really happening? A commercial interaction? Smart selling techniques? What I experienced was 100% attention for the customer. My son was quite overwhelmed by all the attention. After some time, my son said to me he wanted to look further, because this was the first shop we had been into. With a hospitable smile the shop owner said to my son that it was a good idea, because he found it most important that my son should be really convinced about his purchase. The shop owner told me that he saw that my son felt a bit guilty after being extensively advised by him.

“But that's how we do it here. We give every customer 100% attention. Your son is the one who finally decides whether he does or does not buy anything from me. The only thing I can do is advise him very well. Not as a sales person but as a friend.”

This special masterclass was a gift. And for you as my friend, I give this masterclass story to you.

#### *Online drama – House for sale*

The name of the online mega store Bol.com stands for Bertelsmann Online, founded in 1999. The German company Bertelsmann is one of the largest publishers in the world and works like a well-oiled logistics machine. When Bertelsmann decided to sell more products than only books online, it was a logical step, based on their online know-how and experience on logistics. Now, Bol.com is one of the largest online stores in Europe. But now they know that their strength can also be their weakness, because when things go wrong in logistics, the process can go very wrong also in handling customer satisfaction. Read a true story about a Barbie doll house.

- Day 1: A customer at Bol.com ordered a drip tray to go under her washing machine. However, the delivery service PostNL delivered a huge Barbie doll house. Oops, mistake! Unfortunately, PostNL can't take the Barbie house back, according to the policy of Bol, because UPS is the party that collects Bol's stuff. Sending it back via the post office is not an option for the customer. The package is too big and too

heavy. A pick-up appointment with UPS is made by Bol.com.

- Day 2: The pick-up appointment with UPS was cancelled by email: "It is not possible to retrieve this article. We ask you to send the item back." The customer replies that sending back the Barbie house via mail is not an option. The large package is too heavy. Annoying, is also Bol's opinion. A new pick-up appointment was made.
- Day 3: At the appointed time no one appears. After several phone calls to Bol, the customer gets the telephone number of UPS. There they replied: "One of our drivers was in your street this morning, but now we see that there was a wrong house number on the voucher. We're very sorry." "For a new pick-up appointment you have to call Bol." In the meanwhile the customer goes online searching for fellow sufferers. And there were enough of them. On Facebook and special complaint forums the customer finds stories of fellow sufferers who have also received products from Bol they never ordered.
- Day 4: A phone call from Bol! "We've heard that the pick-up went wrong? What kind of Barbie house do you have now?" After hearing the customer's answer, : "A Barbie Dream House", the person from Bol only can make a new pickup appointment.
- Day 5: Again, the pick-up appointment was cancelled, this time because of technical reasons. Again the customer calls Bol. The lady on the other side of the line wants to make a new pick-up appointment, but the customer says that her holiday is over and that she has to go to work again, so nobody will be at home for the delivery service. Agitated, the customer proposes to sell the Barbie house online. But that is not possible, according to the Bol policy, the lady answered, because the Barbie house is already in the pick-up system. The lady of Bol decides to give the case to the Bol head office.
- Day 6: The head office of Bol is fed up with the Barbie house issue. The customer can keep it for free. The money she paid for the drip tray will be refunded.
- Day 7: For the first time the customer opens the envelope of the packing slip that came with the Barbie house. On the receipt is the name of a gardening company with the order: Cordless Hedge Trimmer. So, who had ordered the Barbie house?
- Day 8: Out of curiosity the customer calls the gardening company. What had happened to them? The gardener had ordered a hedge trimmer at Bol and received a weed burner, he said. After he had returned the burner via mail, a few days later he received two hedge trimmers.  
And there is still someone waiting for their Barbie Dream House.

### *Millions lost*

The Dutch association of online stores says that 0.5 to 0.75% of packages ordered disappear, often through theft or incorrect delivery. In the Netherlands, online shopping market is worth around 15 billion euros annually. So 0.7% comes down to tens of millions euros worth of parcels that are getting lost each year.

And yet most of the deliveries at Bol go well. But it's also important that the customers who receive the wrong packages are serviced well. Giving away a Barbie house worth €424 because of a delivery mistake you can't solve is rather

unprofessional for such an experienced company. It also gives a negative image of the company in how they deal with their customers, money and goods. Not solving this kind of bad experience is a good way to lose a company's customers.

Especially in this kind of situation, a company can make fans of his customers by exceeding in hospitality, after-sales service and quality. Solving a problem gives a company the opportunity to show its best side.

### *Mistake or mistake?*

I want to talk to you about mistakes, in particular, the interpretation of mistakes. Nowadays, the several types of mistakes are mixed up, even by professionals. This also often mixes up the cause and effect of situations during work.

There are two main types of mistake that can be made in an organisation:

- System mistakes: these are errors that are made by the system, the company or the management of the company.
- Behavioural mistakes: these are mistakes made by employees.

For example, a brand new restaurant employee was allowed to take an order for two guests. The guests asked for a glass of good white wine. The employee went to the bar and gave the guests the most expensive open white wine that was available. After serving it, the manager tapped her on her shoulder: "Did these guests specially ask for this expensive wine?" He asked. "No," the employee replied, "They asked for a glass of good white wine and concerning the price I thought this must be a good wine."

The manager responded: "Normally we serve our house wine, which is much cheaper, provided that guests don't ask for another specific wine."

To which the girl responded, "But you also want to make money, don't you?" The manager responded agitatedly: "Next time, just serve the house wine."

Question to you: What went wrong?

Cause: the employee was previously not properly instructed about serving wines – a system mistake of the company. Consequence: as a manager you cannot reject the behaviour of this employee. If she had been aware of the situation, than it would be a behavioural mistake.

Another example: A manager is annoyed because he thinks that the cleaning of the tables and the dirty cutlery is not properly done: "All the dirty cutlery and plates should be put in the appropriate grey bins. Not next to them."

The reaction of the staff: "But then the grey bins must be there.""

Now for you it's easy to fill in what kind of mistake we are talking about in this situation, isn't it?

### *Service as commodity*

Recently I was reading an interview with Roberto Payer, the managing director of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Amsterdam. Talking with Roberto is talking about hospitality, service and quality and how to stand out above the competition with his organisation. This flamboyant host hasn't lost his Italian roots. His vision of hospitality fits him like an Italian suit. Although he says it's getting better in the Netherlands, he notes the lack of hospitality, service, quality and expertise. According to him, many of the people who work in the Dutch hospitality industry lack passion for treating guests in a genuinely hospitable way.

He describes this passion as the optimal balance of giving guests attention without being obtrusive. Asked whether he regrets that many people who work in restaurants and hotels do not see their work as a real profession, Roberto replied, "Yes I regret that very much. Hospitality and service are not commodities in the Netherlands anymore. Also, because guests do not want to pay for it. I still find it a pity that the Netherlands has abolished the fifteen percent service charge."

My question as a hospitality professional is, is that such a pity? Where do hospitality, service and quality begin? In my opinion, it starts with the professionals in the hospitality business. I'm convinced that these professionals have to earn the "credit" from satisfied guests and customers first, and not be "fixed" by the financial extras paid afterwards. People working in restaurants and hotels are lucky, because when they do their best they will be tipped by the guests. But in a demanding job such as a steward, stewardess or purser in an airline company, for instance, or a nurse in a hospital, you won't be tipped at all.

Where I'm concerned, hospitality, service, quality and keeping track of expertise are prerequisites to be successful in the hospitality business.

Only then will they become interesting commodities.

#### *What an experience!*

Suppose, as a restaurateur, you want your guests to adapt to your way of service and guest approach, and that they also like that. In downtown Toronto there is a restaurant with the name: Signs. Upon entering this restaurant the name becomes clear. The person who welcomes you with a big hospitable smile leads you with hand gestures to your table. No word is exchanged, because all the staff members at this restaurant are deaf.

Next to all the dishes on the menu, there are pictures of hand gestures guests can make to order their food and drinks. For some guests communicating with hand gestures is not so easy. No problem, the extremely hospitable staff will gladly help you to convey your message. Of course there is great hilarity when guests make a hand gesture with quite another meaning than intended. The key of this story is that guests really get enthusiastic about the hospitable approach of the employees of Signs.

At Mind Your Guest we teach people from all kinds of companies how important body language is in approaching guests in a hospitable way.

