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New Model Year Preview

*RV manufacturers share details
about their 2022 offerings.*

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So! What Did You Expect?

Setting clear expectations have a lot to do with a successful business.



By Chuck Marzahn

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"When a dealer can be relied upon to make orders from the OEM on a consistent, year-after-year basis, that dealer is more likely to gain attention when there's a deal or, like now, when there is a shortage of product."

Clear expectations help. And more than you likely realize.

Obviously, they help with customer satisfaction and loyalty. We usually think about the service department for setting those expectations. The sales and finance departments also have roles.

It's important to manage employee expectations, too. If we take it just one level beyond, we find the importance of a clear understanding with all business partners and stakeholders.

What are expectations anyway?

Maybe you've had a similar experience to mine. When I take my car in for service, they will give me a free car wash. I've come to expect it. In fact, in the odd circumstance when the wash isn't offered, I am somewhat put-off.

How can that be right? It was free, after all.

But, you see, I'd come to expect it. When my expectation was met, I was fine. Not so much when the car wash didn't happen, though.

How do clear expectations help?

Imagine a business where every interaction and transaction is a "one-off" event. Each of those then require full consideration of all aspects.

When you have experienced an event before, your expectation guides your response. The repetition of events and consistency of results allows you to settle into a routine, which is so familiar it becomes almost automatic. That's a key to developing processes.

There's another point of impact: A clear expectation on the part of a customer makes the path to the customer's satisfaction evident. Here's a question: Can you control the customer's expectation?

Managing Customer Expectations

After all, the expectation is held somewhere in the customer's mind, perhaps only as an opinion. There is the way to control it, however.

You control a customer's expectation by managing their experience. When you manage

the experience by means of consistent processes, it gets vastly easier to create and manage expectations.

Lowe's Home Improvement, until very recently, had parking spots reserved for veterans. As a veteran, I enjoyed parking a little closer. I enjoyed the feeling of respect it gave me.

Recently, the parking designation signs were removed. I asked why. It was explained to me that they had been vandalized. Hmm. My expectation resulted in my disappointment because my expectation – having been created by prior experience – was not met.

Do those of us in the dealership business have any idea regarding the number of times we may be disappointing customers by not meeting expectations? As mentioned earlier, you control expectations by managing experience. Consistency and process control are keys.

When doing seminars on customer satisfaction, I regularly poll those attending on their favorite fast-food restaurant. Invariably, the result is McDonald's. Is McDonald's that great? Does it offer high quality?

Not really.

What it does offer is rock-solid consistency. If you order a Big Mac in Botswana, you will be served two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles and onions on a sesame seed bun. That sandwich will taste the same in Rochester, N.Y., or Redondo Beach, Calif. Consistency controls expectation. Expectation, when met, drives satisfaction.

The other component is the process. Do you know the most commonly asked question at Disney World? (Hint: It's not "where are the restrooms?")

It's this: "What time is the 9 o'clock parade?" Before you chuckle too long about that one, consider that it is likely being asked by a parent who – concerned that his kids will have the best view – wants to know where they should be and at what time to see Cinderella's coach pulling up to the Magic Castle.



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The attendant could laugh at the dumb question, or she could give a thoughtful and caring answer to the question the weary guest is really trying to ask. Only understanding and training in processes will get an employee to that point.

Imagine the times at the service counter when you have an opportunity to control expectations. Why would you say, "I'll try to get it covered," while knowing full-well that the repair is not and will never be a warrantable concern?

You set an expectation that it might be covered only to fail to meet the customer's hope later. And you *knew* all along. It is so much better and easier to be forthright. Say what you need to say. Say it up front. Do not set yourself up to fail.

Setting Expectations for First-Timers

We have a lot of new, first-time customers in the industry now. What are you doing to control their expectations?

Are they expecting the service experience will be like getting an oil change on the car? Are they expecting a manufacturer to have each part for every unit available by the next working day? Do they think they can do "drop-in" service?

Do them and yourself a favor. Get a grip on the mindset and expectations earlier than later. I've seen members of our 20 Groups who use a handout for a new customer. It's a FAQ (frequently asked questions) form that is given out as part of the delivery of the new or used unit.

I do not see how the importance and lasting effect of creating expectations that are reasonable and attainable could be overstated.

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So many issues we face with customers on the service drive and in the showroom are set up by misstatements that create false expectations. If you have a customer who, as they leave the service

desk, is unclear as to the scope of repair, time frame for completion or cost, you are inviting failure to meet expectations. If you don't bother to create an expectation with each customer interaction you will surely pay the price with dissatisfied customers.

Both sales and finance have a role in setting expectations. Sales should not create unreachable expectations. If you are promising top dollar for a trade, you have created an expectation. If you quote a rate before getting to the finance department, your customer has an expectation that may or may not be met.

The finance department should never use the phrase "bumper-to-bumper" when selling an extended service contract. You can also create an unachievable expectation by what you don't say.

I'll confess here that my Toyota finance manager sold me a prepaid maintenance package. I assumed (expected) it to cover "maintenance." What I found later was that it only covered oil changes. You'd think, of all people, I'd have known better.

Employees & Partners Have Expectations, Too

It's not just the customers' expectations that should concern you. Employees have expectations, too.

Managing expectations has a lot to do with contentment. Do your employees know where the guardrails are? Do you have a policies and procedures manual? If so, is it reviewed regularly? Have you recently talked with any employee about the company mission? Employees who know where they stand, and that they stand on solid ground, are more likely to continue working for you.

Consistency without drama makes it easy to engage in business. It goes a very long way to heading off problems.

That leads us to business partners and the effect of a clear expectation in that arena. It works in both directions. I tend to do business with companies and people who perform consistently.

It used to be that a salesman wouldn't gain my attention until he tried to sell me his product on more than a few occasions. I didn't want to waste time dealing with a salesperson who wasn't going to show up on a regular basis.

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Parting Thoughts on Customer Expectations

How does a customer know when they are satisfied? A customer is satisfied when they perceive that their expectations have been met. It's a rough road to control perception. Given that it exists in the mind of the customer, it's really hard to grasp. It is easier to control their expectation. And we do that by managing their experience.

In the busy-ness of the season, we have a good time to step back. There's so much going on at once that we won't have to look far or wait long to see an interaction that creates an expectation. We have oodles of chances to watch and listen to the interactions that happen with customers. I know it's super busy, but now might just be your best chance to make an impact. **RV**