What’s On My Pillow?

Providing Mint-Quality Hospitality

By Nikki D. Nicholas

As you begin your vacation, you arrive at the hotel, your arms laden with bags, and you cannot wait to find your room. When you get to your room, on the pillow you spy a fabulous, foil-wrapped mint.

How did finding that mint make you feel?

Special?

Appreciated?

Welcome?

The mint represents a high level of customer service the hotel has taken upon itself to provide you. As student programmers who host artists, we must make the same level of commitment to them, enabling them to feel special, appreciated and welcome.

Why would we want to commit to such a level of customer service?

For the artists who visit our campuses, what they do is a job, and as with all people who have jobs, they want to feel a certain level of appreciation and security. Helping them feel appreciated and secure, though, has benefits for you, too. For example, an artist who is not worried about details or other arrangements will provide your campus with a better show because they’ve had time to prepare for their performance without having to be concerned about distractions. They will also share their positive experiences about your campus with other performers and agents, your reputation will be enhanced, and artists will look forward to returning to your campus—all because of the great customer service you provide.

Providing the Basics

So how do you go about creating mint-quality service for your guests? Follow a few basic guidelines and you will be well on your way.

1) Treat artists the way you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed. Keep in mind they are visitors to your campus and you need to respect them and give them space.

2) This is their job. Just as you are not programming every minute of your day, do not expect an artist to be on stage all the time. When they are on stage, they are doing the job you hired them to do. Do not expect them to be "on" at other times.

3) Always ask the artist or agent for the most recent contract rider available. Riders are attached to the performance contract and list any needs the artist may have. What often happens, especially when working with larger agencies, is that there are so many different versions of the rider you cannot always be sure you have the most recent. Make sure you can provide for the performer’s needs or give reasons why you can’t accommodate them. Make sure you pay special attention to any security requirements they may have.

4) Plan for everything. Put yourself in the shoes of the artist and try to anticipate any needs they might have and plan to fulfill those needs. Be prepared to know where the following services are located: dry cleaning, drug stores, discount stores, grocery stores, retail shopping establishments, music equipment stores, entertainment, recreation, hospitals, post offices and cell phone vendors. For example, bands are usually on the road for long periods of time. Know beforehand...
whether your student union building has available laundry services, or where the nearest laundromat or dry cleaner with one-day express service is located.

5) Even with the above in mind, realize that you cannot plan for everything. No matter how hard you try, you will never anticipate every need. When a need you had not anticipated arises, do not become stressed. Instead, quietly meet with your advisor and committee members to decide how to best resolve the problem.

6) Focus on details. Whoever said the devil is in the details was right. Although we may not all be detail oriented, we can hone our skills in that area, and the best way to accomplish this is by visualizing your event from start to finish, making notes of every aspect. For example, many bands will request some type of sports drink for consumption on stage. If they do not ask for specific flavors, you'd be better off buying them light colored or clear products. If someone should spill on stage, it will be less noticeable and less likely to stain clothing or carpeting.

7) Create an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) plan for how each artist who comes to your campus should be treated. Since there are some artists who do not have riders with their contracts, this is especially important. For example, the SOP for my campus is:

- Secure a host.
- Offer each artist a welcome packet. This includes information about our school, a map of campus, information about our department, contact numbers, press or news articles regarding their visit to campus and an itinerary of their stay if they have been booked for an event such as Homecoming, Welcome Week, etc.

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- Provide bottled water for the performance.
- Supply a dressing room or holding room for the artist to relax in.
- Furnish a meal voucher or a meal with the committee before or after the performance.
- Give a thank-you gift.

8) Be yourself, but be professional in your manner, speech and overall appearance. Some artists might feel uncomfortable if you are overly dressed and they are not. The best approach is to go business casual or dress in a manner similar to the artist.

Adding the Mint

Now that you know the basics for hosting artists, you might wonder what are those special mint-quality touches that will make them feel welcome. Here are a few ideas that have worked for our campus.

- When picking up artists from or returning them to the airport, especially if the airport is a long distance from campus, stock a small cooler with water, soda and snacks for the trip.
- If your campus has wireless access, provide a laptop computer so the artist can check e-mail or surf the Web while waiting.
- Make dressing/holding rooms more inviting by furnishing them with fresh flowers (check to see if the artists is allergic, first), a full-length mirror, magazines/newspapers, lamps (for less harsh lighting), bowls of mints and a candle on a candle warmer.
- Some artists will want to try food that is unique to your area. Know the places locals go so you can make appropriate referrals.
- Keep menus in your office from local restaurants that deliver so you can give artists a variety of food choices.
- Let artists know of any special guests who will be present (i.e., school officials, alumni, board members, etc.)
- Make a Hall of Fame wall in your union or programming area. Have artists sign their posters to be included in your Hall of Fame.
- Reserve a designated parking spot with appropriate signage if artists are driving to your campus.
- Get to know local hotel representatives well. They want to keep your business and will often upgrade rooms or send small gift baskets to artists for you.

- Listen to artists to pick up on their interests. This is especially helpful in knowing where to take them to eat or what to give as thank-you gifts. We hosted a lecturer who appreciated the posters we had designed for his visit. So, as his thank-you gift, we had one mounted and framed for him.
- Have available near the venue items such as a small first aid kit, pain relievers, cough drops, antacids, a small sewing kit, stain removing wipes, markers, facial tissue, mints, etc.

Leaving a Pleasant Aftertaste

Many more suggestions and ideas to help you enhance hospitality can be found in etiquette books or on the Internet, or can evolve from your own creativity. Is it expected, or do you have the funds, for you to provide mint-quality service to every artist who visits your campus? While you may choose to provide a higher level of service for an artist who is offering a residency on your campus, you may choose a standard level for a band you have in for the afternoon. The programming team needs to decide what level of service is needed for each artist, but as a good gauge, your SOP plan should serve as a minimum.

These guidelines and ideas are meant to foster a rapport between the artist and programmer and to allow each to fully enjoy their job. How do you think receiving your mint-quality service will make your artists feel?
- Special?
- Appreciated?
- Welcome?
- You bet. In fact, it should leave them with a good taste for miles to come.

About the Author

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