

Hotel Lessons Learned Growing Up In Kennedy Craft Shop - By Doug Kennedy

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Funny how the older we get in life the more we come to appreciate our parents. I for one feel particularly blessed to have been born unto a family of entrepreneurs. Although my mother Barbara passed away more than 15 years ago, the wisdom she imparted upon us kids was enough to last a lifetime. Although my mom taught me many things about life in general, such as always maintaining a positive attitude and believing in yourself, she also taught me a lot more about the real-world of business than I could have ever learned getting an MBA.

You see my mom like many others of her generation gave up her professional career as an executive secretary when she started having babies. When the youngest of her four children went into grade school, mom decided it was time to fulfill her lifelong dream of operating her own business. Having been particularly good at working with her hands and selling her arts and crafts since her childhood, she quickly realized there was more money to be made in selling craft and art supplies and teaching classes, versus actually making things to sell. Thus was born the concept of the Kennedy Craft Shop in Lexington, Kentucky.

This was no ordinary retail store, Kennedy Crafts was really more like a social networking club where one was sure to bring any out of town visitors. But the real draw wasn't was simply the craft supplies and classes, it was the authentic, genuine, and warm hospitality everyone received personally from my mom Barbara Kennedy, who soon became known locally as Mrs. Craft. She new our real business was all about the relationships and connections we made, and not about the products, which especially in the case of craft supplies could be purchased elsewhere for less. Mrs. Craft somehow made a connection with every customer, ranging from the flower children who purchased macramé, tie dye and candle making supplies to the summer camp teachers to the elderly grandmothers who purchased decoupage supplies. Each customer was made to feel special, I cannot tell you how many women I saw walk in that store claiming to be one of Mrs. Craft's 'oldest,' 'best,' or 'favorite' customers!

This customer service philosophy really paid off for my parents, as Mom's little business she started in our house soon moved to a local shopping center, albeit the smallest retail space in an end unit at the back of an arcade. Yet within three years we'd moved to a larger location in that center, and also taken over the retail spaces in both sides. By the five year mark my dad George was able to leave his job as an Electrical Engineer to come into the business and start a wholesale craft supplies division.

My own career started at age 9 on the day Kennedy Craft Shop opened and I immediately became fascinated with the family business. I liked meeting the customers, who often brought their kids in to visit me, re-stocking the shelves, and other standard retail tasks such as inventory day. But Saturdays - our busiest days - were my favorite of all as I especially liked working the electric cash register, which I could actually reach thanks to the wooden stool my Dad made. For the next 11 years until age 20 I worked in that little craft shop, watching Mrs. Craft in action daily and not knowing that the business experience I was getting was going to later propel my own entrepreneurial endeavors. In looking back now so many years later I can clearly see how the same principles and philosophies my parents built Kennedy Craft Shop on have helped me throughout my career, whether as a bellman, front office manager, and for two decades now as an owner of hotel training companies. I hope my readers can benefit in some small way from my sharing of these lessons learned:

Hotel Lessons Learned:

- **Get to know 'the story' behind the customer.** My mom Barbara went beyond just memorizing names to really get to know her customers and their various stories. She knew which women were having problems at home, where they were planning to go on vacation this year, and how each of their children were doing in school. Likewise, we in the hotel business need to do a lot better job of not only asking 'How was your trip in today?' but also at actually caring about the responses we hear from today's over-stressed and over-scheduled guests.
- **Walk the storefront window.** Each Saturday morning when I opened the store with my mom the first thing she would do was to check-out the front window from outside to make sure it created an inviting first impression. Hoteliers need to not only check their curb appeal and lobby housekeeping, but also to focus on any and all 'first impression makers' such as trade show booths, website home pages, call center representatives, and telephone communications. (See below.)
- **Welcome every customer before beginning a transaction.** If you entered our store and weren't greeted with 'Welcome to Kennedy Crafts' the only reason would be that you were instead welcomed by name.
- **The telephone is another window to the outside world.** From 1970 to 1982 I guarantee you that every call to Kennedy Crafts was fielded properly, with an enthusiastic greeting, a name, and most of all a genuine conversation to follow. Although we hoteliers spend a small fortune each year to make those phones ring, much more could be done to make sure every call represents our hotel's '30 second commercial,' whether a call for directions, a sales inquiry, or even a cold call solicitation from a local vendor who just might one day become a customer.
- **Take (reasonable) customers at their word.** Long before author Tom Peters made famous the liberal return policies of Neiman Marcus, Kennedy Craft Shop would believe any customer's story about lost receipts - even if we never carried the product before! By the time their return was processed we'd be ringing up additional items up front anyway! How many repeat hotel customers have been driven away forever due to a dispute over a vending machine refund or local phone call that

didn't answer but was charged anyway?

- **Employees are family.** At the start, it was literally true that all the employees at Kennedy Crafts were family, as both of my brothers, my dad, and my only sister also worked there! But as we continued to grow and after we had already hired all the available neighbors and friends, mom's uncanny way of connecting with others carried on to our new-hires who all became friends of our family that outlasted the business. One thing I've noticed - the hotels that have the most fun employee holiday parties also seem to have the most friendly hotel staff!

- **Eye contact.** Although it's been many years since I last saw them, I remember vividly that it was my mom's magical and charming eyes that enchanted each customer as they entered the world of Kennedy Craft Shop. Although they were certainly beautiful on their own, it was the genuine love of people that exuded from them that made so many customers into friends. Too often today's hotel employees seem afraid to look our guests directly in the eye. Yet if we can just hold that passing glance for a three or four seconds, and not be afraid to release that smile naturally occurs, we will pay-forward a bit of authentic and genuine hospitality that will surely be carried on to the next encounter for both parties.

Kennedy Craft Shop continued to thrive into the early 1980's and well into my college years. As Lexington KY continued its fast track growth and a metropolitan city emerged, soon enough we had Wal-Mart and K-Mart craft sections plus Ben Franklin Crafts to compete, yet our business continued its successes. Although their success was modest, my parents were able to sell their little business in 1982 and retire to pursue their own marriage-long goal of visiting all of the 50 states. They completed this journey in 1992 and my dad still survives and has the jacket with the 50-state emblems sewed on to prove it! When my mom passed away peacefully and with her family - about 3 months after visiting the last of the 50 states on their list, I knew she had experienced a life well lived. Although Kennedy Craft Shop eventually was closed by the new owners, Mrs. Craft still remains a legend to many in my hometown to this day. Looking back now on my own career I know I learned a lot from the manager of that little craft shop and hope readers enjoy these lessons learned and find they are still relevant today.

By Doug Kennedy

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