

PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES

Your interaction with the public has several elements. Each element is an important link in the chain that makes up your performance...

...A PERFORMANCE WHICH IS NOTHING LESS THAN AN EXTENSION OF YOU.

A charming and likable you, a fascinating and knowledgeable you, a talented you.

Technology has made the mechanics of business faster and more efficient. What remains the same, however, is the customer's basic desire for polite, attentive, and pleasant human contact. If that wasn't true, they wouldn't make those recorded prompts sound like an actual friendly human.

The intent here is to bring out the best in you for others to see. Your contact with the public can be exciting, gratifying, and fun. It will require your willingness to reach out, initiate conversation and interact with total strangers, knowing that because you're confident and professional, the connection you establish will result in the best possible experience for all.

Nowhere more than here does the Golden Rule apply: "Treat others as you would like to be treated."

I like to use the term "guest" interchangeably with "customer," "client," "public," or "audience." If we think of them as *individual guests*, instead of an anonymous group or a potential sale, the interaction is sure to be more pleasant and positive -- if not downright fun.

In drama, a director will often offer an actor a visual; something to picture or imagine to affect or enhance their performance. Here's a visual that may enhance your "performance" as you interact with guests at the Zoo:

Although you see Zoo visitors every day, imagine that these folks are from the mid-west and have saved for and have carefully planned their trip to San Francisco for over a year. Ask yourself; "How do I make their day at the Zoo the highlight of their vacation and what they talk about most when they get back home?"

Some of the material we'll cover is technique. **Most of it is attitude.**

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

What are the first things our guests see when they come in the gate?

Obviously, a pleasant visual experience makes for a positive impression so care has been given to the landscaping, architecture, and displays.

However: You are probably as much or more a focus as anything -- and although appearances aren't everything -- in a guest service situation, they can definitely help or hurt a guest's experience.

YOUR PERSONAL APPEARANCE AND BEHAVIOR IS IMPORTANT

Some companies and organizations have uniforms, dress codes, and grooming standards which are, generally, for the purpose of having staff members appear professional and congruent with the organization's image. Here are some basics that should be observed in all cases as a matter of professionalism.

1. Grooming and Dress

Hair should be clean and combed or brushed in some fashion.

Uniforms should be clean and not ragged, wrinkled or faded. If a replacement uniform is needed, see your supervisor. If you "layer" to accommodate weather changes, make sure that your outermost layer is presentable. This is really important if you're where guests are observing and taking pictures and/or you're speaking with them.

Employee nametags or badges are required at the Zoo.

2. Personal Behavior

Guests should not overhear personal conversation unless it's light and positive, like the beautiful drive to work. Avoid comments about your overbearing in-laws or your opinions on politics.

Never disparage. While it's OK to say, "We're a little short-handed today." It is not OK to say, "The boss doesn't want to hire enough help." Absolutely not OK are negative comments about your co-workers or organization (i.e., "My supervisor is clueless." Or, "I can't wait to get out of this place.")

Do not take or make personal calls or messages while working. Do so on your breaks.

This is common courtesy and basic work ethics.

MAKE CONTACT

It is vital to establish some kind of immediate connection with the guest. The manner and styles of greeting guests may, out of necessity, vary greatly. For example: How an interpreter would greet a group of guests in an art museum would probably be different from how a hostess would greet a customer at a steakhouse.

Here are some rules of thumb and guidelines that apply to almost any situation:

1. Make a Connection

When a guest or group enters, they become the most important people in the room. Acknowledge them.

If you are performing other job duties or even just walking through the park, look up, make eye contact, and **SMILE**.

Break away immediately, or as soon as it's safe or practical, and greet them.

If you're with another guest, you should at least make eye contact, smile, and somehow acknowledge the new person within one minute.

2. Cell Phone Use

If your job duties include cell phone or walkie talkie use, remember that the real live person in your presence has priority for your attention. (There are exceptions, of course.)

Have an earpiece or have the alert on low or vibrate. Blaring radios and cell phone interruptions can be very distracting so be courteous and keep it to a minimum.

If you must respond to a call, apologize to the guest, break away, complete the business of the call quickly, then return to the guest thanking them for their patience.

MANNER OF SPEAKING **(or “Manners In Speaking”)**

Most of what you'll do to make guests feel welcome will come from your attitude. However, most of the content of your interaction will come from what you say. Communicating effectively has its' technical aspects, but it's largely common sense. It is also absolutely vital.

REMEMBER: All of your knowledge, skill, and experience can be lost to your guests if you lack the ability to communicate clearly and effectively.

“It’s All In How You Say It.”

1. Enunciate

The need to speak clearly increases proportionately with the number of people to whom you are speaking and the distance your voice must carry.

Open your mouth for the vowels and bite off the consonants.
(A page of tongue twisters is in the back of this handbook.)

Emphasize Important or Unfamiliar Words.

Some presentations contain proper names and unfamiliar vernacular. In a string of familiar words which make up a simple informative sentence, there may be an important but unfamiliar term or name. Give these words some extra “weight” by taking a little pause before and after them.

Another method is to slightly over-articulate the word. This will allow the listener to “absorb” the new word and better understand all of what you’re saying.

WARNING: Do this with care and kindness or you may appear condescending.

2. Don't Rush

This really reduces intelligibility and decreases the listener's ability to absorb and process what you're saying even if they *can* understand the words.

3. Project

Be conscious of the number of people to whom you're speaking and how far away they are.

When addressing a group, it becomes even more important to stand erect, breathe deeply, and try to imagine a straight line between your mouth and the ears of the person farthest away. Adjust your volume and enunciation accordingly.

Sometimes standing on something so you can project over the heads of the guests in front, or bringing the group closer will be necessary.

Acoustics and noise may also be an important factor.

If you have to shout to be heard, or if you begin experiencing voice fatigue, a P.A. system or other arrangement may be required.

REMEMBER: Shouting can be a big turn-off to most people. Not to mention that it's hard on your vocal cords

4. Use complete thoughts and sentences.

Instead of saying "Down the path to the left", say "The cafe is down the path to the left." You might even add "Have a fun day!" This is mostly just courtesy and manners. Besides; if you can't be cheerful at the zoo, where *can* you be cheerful?

If fielding questions in a group situation, repeat the question or compose your response so it's a complete answer.

For example:

Don't just say "herring and capelin ", say "We feed the penguins a highly nutritious diet of herring and capelin fish. Today I'm feeding them herring."

5. "Style" Of Speech.

Tone, energy, pitch, and pace can make a huge difference in how what you're saying is perceived.

Try this old acting exercise.

Take a simple line like:

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Say it in several different ways using different "motivations" such as: bored, happy, angry , sarcastic,... etc.

In the majority of presentations and guest service situations, the most common "motivations" are upbeat and cheerful.

However, if your job is admitting patients at a hospital emergency room or if you're conducting a program about an earthquake disaster, a cheerful style would not be appropriate; one of concern and compassion would.

There may be a need for several variations in style within the same presentation. One moment you may be talking about the playful interactions among the chimpanzees within their troop, then a moment later you may be talking about the devastating effect that loss of habitat has had on their population in the wild.

Be mindful of the subject matter and honor it.

Adjust your "style" appropriately.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

Now that you've made contact, the next step is to be able to interact appropriately and with some "Life" and spontaneity.

Ideally we should make the guests feel comfortable, special -- more like individuals --and less like just another number or an anonymous audience member.

To do this, you will need the ability to adjust your "performance" according to the situation and the kind of person the guest is. This takes skill and some practice.

The need to make adjustments can be greater in some situations than in others. For example: A Guest Service Representative at Admissions or staff members at the cafes or gift shop probably won't need to adjust the style and content of their dialog as much as a keeper or docent conducting a program or feeding session at the Zoo. In all situations, however simple or brief, the guest should have a pleasant and connective experience.

There are several ways of learning enough about a guest in a short amount of time to make an appropriate adjustment. It's mostly just observing and thinking on your feet. It's not an exact science. When you're unable to get a reliable reading, be respectful, conservative, and formal. Use common sense and your senses.

1. WHAT DO YOU SEE?

You may learn all you need to know with a quick first glance.

Are they seniors?

You might want to use a more formal and respectful style.

Are they children?

Use laughter and exuberance.

Show them the more visual and interactive stuff.

Are they your age?

Whatever that may be, this is your best and most natural opportunity to connect.

Does the look on their faces suggest that they're serious, shy, confused, or upset?

Again, it might be best to be formal and simple.

Do they appear to be a fun-loving group?

Go ahead and try to participate. But don't compete or "horn-in" if you sense that you're not welcome to do so.

2. WHAT DO YOU HEAR?

Listen carefully: You may learn something useful in the guest's conversation.

The rule of thumb in this section is:

Don't hesitate to ask questions and ask for questions.

Is a foreign language being spoken?

While a language barrier can offer a challenge, guests for whom English is a second language are certainly deserving of our best effort.

Try a very plain and simple greeting that includes a question. Something like: "Welcome, how are you today?" Their response may help determine how much English will be understood. Rarely will there be *no one* in the group who understands English.

Even if only one or two in a group understands English, try not to speak only to them. Look around among the others and make eye contact. They'll appreciate the effort and feel included.

In most cases, it's best to keep the dialog clear, plain, and articulate.

Stay cheerful. The guests should feel as though the interaction is pleasant for you also.

REMEMBER: Smiling is a universal language.

Do you hear an accent or “talk” associated with a specific geographic area?

They may be from Texas or Boston or Minnesota. Go ahead and ask them where they're from and engage them a little (i.e., “Where are you from? Oh, I visited there when I was in college.” “My aunt is from there. I heard about...” or “I love the weather/people/scenery....”

You don't have to act phony to initiate this kind of small talk and it helps an out-of-town guest feel more welcome.

Does it sound as though the guests are repeat customers or have prior and/or related experience?

If by asking or overhearing you learn that someone is a repeat guest or Member, welcome them back. They'll feel special.

If it appears that they have some prior experience or familiarity, by all means acknowledge and involve them. Encourage them to contribute.

(i.e., “I see you're familiar with this artist/Greek food/exotic animals/wine making...It's great to have folks with some familiarity with us.”)

WARNING: In this situation, it's safest not to ask questions that are not easily answered. Don't stump -- and thereby embarrass -- a guest.

Do you hear questions?

Be pro-active. Watch for quizzical facial expressions and ask for questions, but be careful that you don't appear to be eavesdropping or aggressive.

Being aware of, and sensitive to what the guests may want or wish to know is one of the most useful tools you can develop.

KEEPING THINGS POSITIVE

After you've established some kind of connection with the guest, there is the business of doing business. In other words: the basic functions of your position of providing information, conducting a tour or program, merchandising, or hospitality service.

Enabling staff persons to perform these functions in any kind of atmosphere or situation and *always* be focused on providing a pleasant experience and a positive outcome is our goal with this program.

Again: ***"It's All In How You Say It."***

1. Make The Adjustment

People want to be treated as individuals so be ready and willing to appropriately adjust your "style". By using your skills learned in "Who Are These People" you should know enough about your guest or audience to confidently engage and interact.

Make yourself accessible. And make guests feel that their questions and comments are intelligent, fresh and welcome.

2. Stay Engaged.

Once you've established a connection or begun a presentation, your guest or audience should have your undivided attention. Try not to break away but if you must, apologize when you return. If you're handling an animal, obviously, your safety and the safety of the animal is priority.

3. Turning Negatives into Positives

There will be times when you will have to say something like:

"We no longer have elephants at the Zoo."

"The children can't play in that area."

"I don't know the answer to that question."

The idea is to soften or reverse the negative with a positive attachment or alternative.

These would be more positive and complete responses:

"Unfortunately we no longer have elephants here at the Zoo. We found them a new home where they have much more room."

"I'm afraid that, for reasons of safety, the children aren't allowed to play in this area. But there is a great playground for the kids over at"

"That's a good question and I'm not sure of the answer. Let me look that up/ask my associate/direct you to someone who knows."

Strive to make all interaction -- even instructional or cautionary -- positive.

DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULT GUEST

Sooner or later, anyone who works with the public will encounter an upset or dissatisfied guest. It's the nature of Customer Service. Keeping your cool and keeping the goal of a satisfied customer in mind will help you through.

The Customer is ALWAYS Right

You've heard it before and it means that even if the customer is *incorrect*, *inaccurate*, or just plain "out of line". They should be treated so as to feel that their satisfaction is the priority -- even if the misunderstanding is theirs.

THE TRUTH IS: Turning an unhappy guest into a happy one is actually a very good feeling.

The Basic Objectives Are To:

1. **Do all you reasonably can to calm the guest down and assure him/her that your goal is to solve the problem.**

If the guest is visibly upset and/or confrontational, start by apologizing and proceed from the position that the company is responsible and that a solution can and will be reached. It may be helpful to let them "vent." Try to be empathetic and agreeable as apposed to defensive.

2. **Minimize any impact on other guests and operations**

If at all practical, move the exchange away from earshot of other guests. Make sure that if the situation will require extra time and attention, another associate can take care of other guests.

Be flexible and be willing to make concessions. Use common sense in determining if *bending* a policy might "buy" goodwill (i.e., offering giveaways usually reserved for tour groups, not individuals; passes for a return trip; discount on an item in the gift shop, etc.)

3. Assure safety

Know all of your company's policies and procedures regarding these situations

For obvious reasons, it is not recommended to go into a closed room or be otherwise isolated with an irate guest. Conduct the exchange with, or where you can be seen by other associates.

If it's another associate dealing with the unhappy guest, keep an eye out and be ready to help or make the appropriate phone call if one is necessary.

4. Know when to defer to a superior

These kinds of situations will vary. The best way to prepare for these inevitable occasions is to familiarize yourself with your company's policies and procedures and ask other associates about their experiences. Use your best judgement and be safe. Don't pursue the exchange beyond your authority and skill. Go ahead and call for help by offering "Let me get my supervisor, maybe he/she can help you."

REMEMBER: If you remain courteous, earnestly concerned and focused, most difficult guests can be appeased. But be aware that sometimes -- no matter what you do -- they're inconsolable.

REGARDING KIDS

Young guests have their own special energy and behavior so working around them requires specific techniques and sensibilities. Theirs is a sensory world fueled by stimulation. Being around kids can be so inspiring and entertaining it's easy to forget how much attention it takes just to keep them from getting hurt, let alone guiding and supervising them.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when working around kids:

1. **“Check-in” with their parents or guardians**

For a variety of understandable reasons, some parents prefer that other adults do not approach their children. If their adults are not close and easily identifiable, it's best not to engage the child. Exceptions would be, for example; if you're established and recognized as the facilitator of a program or, say, if the child is about to climb into an alligator pit. Except in a situation which would be regarded as a “clear and present danger”;... Never touch the children.

2. **Initiate the fun**

If it appears that some interaction is OK, be the one to wave, smile and make eye contact. If you have a moment, bend down, ask them what animals they saw and wish them a fun day!

Note to Keepers: To the kids you're rock stars so any positive and cheerful interaction will make their visit that much more memorable.

REMEMBER: Use positives instead of negatives.

The child will quickly label you a fuddy duddy or a grouch if all you say is “NO.” Instead of saying, “You can't play on that.” say, “You might get hurt playing on that. Why don't you come over and play on the swings instead?”

DEALING WITH UNRULY CHILDREN (AND THEIR ADULTS)

Some children, for whatever reason, are just more difficult to supervise and control. The difficulty can be compounded when the adults accompanying them are inattentive or uncooperative. There will be times when you'll have to be at the top of your diplomacy game. Here are some suggestions that may help.

1. Try to divert the child's attention in a positive way

Sometimes a child needs just a little something different to occupy their attention. Giving them a chore or responsibility often works.

Example:

"Maybe you could be my helper. I'd appreciate it if you'd hold my clipboard/pass out these papers/count how many kids are here, etc."

Note: Having them supervise other children is not a good idea.

2. Make sure the child understands the consequences

If the child is not responding to supervision it may be necessary to simply "lay it on the line."

Example:

"I told you that playing on the water fountain is not allowed because you could get hurt. If you don't follow the rules, you'll have to go and sit with your Mom."

3. Inform and involve the accompanying adult

When it's ultimately necessary to speak with a child's guardian, it's best to do it in a positive manner and try to recruit them.

Example:

"Hi. I could really use your help. I'm trying to get Billy to understand about the safety rules. He seems to be fascinated by the fountain. I'd appreciate it if you would explain to him that for safety reasons, it's important that he doesn't climb on the fountain."

4. Keep the accompanying adult on the job

Adults are usually required to supervise the children in their charge. However, they may become distracted by reading, conversation, or even...sleeping. On those occasions when they become too inattentive it may be necessary to say something. Again, it's best to keep it positive. Don't approach with something like "Hey, this ain't a babysitting service. You have to watch your own kid." Instead I recommend something like the following.

Example:

"Hi. The kids are all having a great time, but I would really appreciate your help in keeping things under control. If you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on your group over there it would help me a lot. Thanks."

JUST REMEMBER: You were a kid once too.

GUIDES, DOCENTS AND INTERPRETERS

Speaking to a group has some important technical aspects which are specific to what is usually a larger environment and a more formal presentation.

The challenge is to blend these aspects with the techniques we've already covered so you still appear personable and connected, instead of rote or mechanical.

Establish a Unique Rapport

Treat groups like individuals. Use the same observing and adjusting processes we covered earlier.

Make eye contact and smile.

Look and listen for the things that help determine the "character" of the group. This includes asking questions.

Adjust the "style" of your presentation accordingly.

Framework

In a group presentation there is usually some kind of framework such as:

Order of the topics presented

Duration of the presentation

Use of visual aids and demonstrations

Presentations will have varying degrees of flexibility. In any case, no matter how casual or informal, it is important to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, which I refer to as: ACT I, ACT II, and ACT III.

ACT I

When the curtain rises on your presentation or tour, it's important to be somewhat formal and include certain information.

When addressing the group for the first time be sure to:

Introduce yourself and welcome the group.

Give a brief description including content, estimated duration and any rules.

Example:

"Hello everyone. My name is _____ and I'd like to welcome you to the endangered animal presentation here at the Zoo. In the next half hour we'll be bringing out several very special animals for you to see. I'll be telling you about them and their plight in the wild after which I'll be glad to answer any questions you may have. For your safety and the safety of the animals, it's very important that everyone remain seated at all times."

ACT II

This is where the content or substance is (i.e., "the plot thickens"). Even if you're given some flexibility in this area, there are some important items to keep in mind.

Don't become a slave to a script. Allow for the unexpected -- and use it.

The best way to stay fresh with your presentation and sharp with your improv skills is to memorize the topic order, not a verbatim script.

Use your knowledge of the topic and your command of the language to make your presentation. In other words: **Concentrate on what you're talking about, instead of a string of words.** If your employer requires that you adhere to a script, your challenge will be to avoid sounding "canned." It will take some concentration.

Things to watch out for:

Don't let your speaking manner become *mono-tonous*. That is to say, speaking all on one tone. You'll put your audience to sleep.

Avoid repetitious tone or rhythm phrases. This is called being *sing-song* in your delivery. Again, they'll tune you out.

Things that may help:

If it fits the forum, asking questions and asking for questions helps keep you connected. Remember to repeat the question for all to hear.

Try a little humor. As long as it works for you and the group

Include everyone in the group; not just those near the front. Project.

Try to accommodate guests taking pictures.

Pay compliments.

ACT III

When it's time to bring down the curtain on your one-man/woman show, do so formally:

Tell them that it's over. Give your name and thank the group.

Remind them that you're available to answer questions and/or elaborate.

Mention other features of your facility, if it's appropriate.

Example:

"This concludes our presentation. Once again folks, my name is _____, I'd like to thank you for visiting and I'll be glad to answer any questions you may have. A reminder that you can really help the animals and wildlife in general by becoming a member of the San Francisco Zoo which allows you to visit us as often as you like. Ask for information at the Membership Office. Have a great day."

Continue to be visible, cheerful, and proactive at being interactive. This is your curtain call -- an opportunity to share additional information, speak more personally with guests and take a bow.

Walking Tours and Docent Stations

Here are some specifics to remember:

Involve the visitors. Talk with them, not just at them.

Solicit questions and repeat them for all to hear.

Remind them that you'll be available after the formal tour.

Face the group when speaking to them. If you are moving while speaking, backpedal if you can do so safely.

Each stop on a tour should have its' own Beginning, Middle, and End.

Example:

Stop. Gather the group. Face them. Smile. Then start.

Beginning (Introduction)

"Here we are at the Big Cat area of the Zoo where we'll see lions, snow leopards, and tigers"

Middle (Information)

(Interesting stuff about the cats etc.)

End (Closing)

"I'd be glad to answer any questions before we move on to the next stop on our tour."

MICROPHONE TECHNIQUE

Proper use of a microphone is fairly simple, even though it may be a little intimidating to some people at first. With a little attention to technique and some getting used to the big sound, it's easy.

Hand Held Mics

Most hand held mics are made to be sensitive up close and drop off as you pull away. This is to reduce the screeching feedback factor as the volume is turned up or you get closer to the speakers.

Speak directly into the mic, not over the top. Hold the mic about two inches from your mouth. If adjustments are needed, do it with the volume control not by pulling the mic away or putting it right on your mouth.

Headset Mics

These mics are great because your hands and arms are free to gesture and point to enhance your performance. The downside is that the proximity to your mouth is fixed. You can't easily pull the mic away for an off-mic side comment to anyone or a dramatic change in voice level.

Experiment with setting the distance from your mouth and refer to the instruction manual.

Lapel and Lavalier Mics

These mics are generally used in studios and not recommended for use with powerful P.A. systems. They're designed to be sensitive at greater distances and will pick up the sound coming from the speakers...and that is what feedback is.

If you have to use one of these types of mics through a P.A. system in a show or presentation situation, try to attach them where they are as close to your mouth as possible and **stay away from the speakers.**

TONGUE TWISTERS

WHICH WRIST WATCH IS THE SWISS WRIST WATCH?

BRUCE BOUGHT BAD BROWN BRAN BREAD.

NAT'S KNAPSACK STRAP SNAPPED.

SHE SAYS SHE SHALL SEW A SHEET.

SAMS SOCK SHOP STOCKS SHORT SPOTTED SOCKS.

THE SIXTH SICK SHEEP IS THE SHEIK'S SIXTH SHEEP.

TWO TWIN TRAINS TRAVEL TWISTED TRACKS.

DOUBLE BUBBLE GUM BUBBLES DOUBLE.

NO SNOW SHOWS LIKE SLOW SNOW SHOWS.

BEN'S BROTHER'S BIG BLACK BACKED BATH BRUSH BROKE.

SEVEN SLIM SILVER SAPLINGS SWAYED SO SLIGHTLY.

SAY, DOES THIS SHEET SHOP SERVE SHEEP, SIR?

A PROPER CUP OF COFFEE IN A COPPER COFFEE POT.

SURE THE SHIP'S SHIPSHAPE, SIR.

A SKUNK SAT ON A STUMP. THE STUMP THUNK THE SKUNK STUNK. THE SKUNK THUNK THE STUMP STUNK.

PETER PIPER PICKED A PECK OF PICKLED PEPPERS. .A PECK OF PICKLED PEPPERS PETER PIPER PICKED. IF PETER PIPER PICKED A PECK OF PICKLED PEPPERS, THEN WHERE'S THE PECK OF PICKLED PEPPERS PETER PIPER PICKED?